

# The Road to Labour Unity

## II. The Evolution of The Labour Party\*

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THE Labour Party Executive Memorandum against affiliation of the Communist Party (published on February 20), and the Communist Party Reply (published on March 10) constitute the official expression of the two sides of the case on which the Labour and Trade Union organisations will have to judge in June.

The reception of these two documents by the anti-Labour press is of interest. The Labour Party Executive Memorandum against affiliation has been warmly welcomed and applauded by the anti-Labour press. The *Daily Telegraph* has found it "wise" and "sagacious." Provincial press organs of the big combines and press chains most violently hostile to

Labour, especially in the main industrial areas, have given it loud publicity and congratulatory editorials. Employers have pasted it up in their factories. The Communist Party reply has been received with frigid silence or hostile comment by the enemies of Labour.

From this reception the alert trade unionist and member of the Labour

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\* This is the second of a series of three articles on Labour Unity and the affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party. The first article, "The Problem of Affiliation," appeared in the March LABOUR MONTHLY. The third article, dealing with the role of Communism in the Labour Movement, will appear in May. The three articles will be republished as a pamphlet (price 6d), and orders can already be placed for this.

Party will be able to draw practical conclusions. The enemies of the Labour Party desire that the Labour Party should reject the affiliation of the Communist Party. The reason is obvious. They desire to weaken the Labour movement by keeping it divided. This is a significant warning to all members of the Labour Party as to where the true interests of the Labour Party lie.

Last month, in the first article in this series, we discussed the question of Communist affiliation in relation to the urgent needs of the present political situation—the imperative necessity of unity for victory over Fascism and reaction, and for progressive advance.

This month we propose to discuss the same question of Communist affiliation in relation to the interests and progressive advance of the Labour Party, on the background of its whole development up to the present day. The aim will be to show

(1) That the affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party is in accordance with the genius and traditions of the British Labour Movement in general, and with the historical basis and development of the Labour Party, in particular;

(2) That the application of the Communist Party for affiliation is not, as has been argued by opponents, a tactical manoeuvre for sectional advantage, but corresponds to the consistent Marxist understanding of the development of the British Labour Movement and its best interests;

(3) That the refusal of Communist affiliation during the recent period has represented a breach with the historical basis of development of the Labour Party, and has had harmful consequences on that development;

(4) That the acceptance of Communist affiliation would most rapidly overcome those harmful consequences, and provide the most favourable conditions for the progressive strengthening and advance of the Labour Party.

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The Memorandum of the Labour Party Executive states:—

(1) That "in the last forty years, and in a most remarkable fashion, the Labour Party has steadily extended its power and influence";

(2) That Communism, representing "a policy separate, distinct and different from that of the Labour Party," would be a "continuous embarrassment" to the Labour Party;

(3) That the affiliation of the Communist Party would give rise to the danger of an opposing class

alignment or "violently contending factions" in British politics, and would thus endanger the further advance of the Labour Party.

These three propositions constitute the real political kernel of the document; the rest is devoted to secondary and formal constitutional points, which represent no real political difficulty, and which half an hour's serious negotiation could clear up; or to stereotyped propaganda charges against Communism, which reflect conventional current misunderstanding or misrepresentation of the Communist position.

But in these three propositions is expressed a basic viewpoint which reveals a startling blindness to the plain facts of the historical development of the Labour Party, or of the present position, no less than to the aims and policy of Communism in relation to the central aim of an independent political movement of the organised working class.

Undoubtedly during the past forty years the development of the Labour Party has constituted a major achievement of the British labour movement, and the central fact of the British political situation. The representatives of the Labour Party Executive are justified in calling attention to the great significance of this development. But they are not justified in trying to turn upside down the significance of this development, or in seeking to slur over, behind a generalised picture of steady advance, the serious signs of a certain setback and lost dynamic in the past decade, which should give rise to concern rather than self-satisfied complacency.

Wherein has lain the significance of the development of the Labour Party over the past forty years?

Every historian and political observer, no matter of what school or colour, would agree that its significance has lain precisely in the fact that it has reflected the advance towards independent political activity of the organised workers and working-class organisations, leading wide sections of the people. The development

of the Labour Party in the twentieth century, viewed over the broad canvas of forty years, has reflected the replacement of the old nineteenth-century alternation of Whig and Tory, of Liberalism and Conservatism, of the traditional parties of the ruling capitalist class, by the increasing emergence of the independent political movement (still incomplete, still with many remains of dependence on capitalist politics, or confusions of programme, but emerging, with growing consciousness and stature) of the organised workers as a conscious political force opposed to the older capitalist parties. In other words, it has reflected, not the retreat from class politics, but the advance towards increasingly open class politics, towards the aim of the united class alignment of the working-class and its allies against monopoly capital, with all the consequent "violent contentions" to which this has already given rise and will further give rise. This is the red thread governing the development of the Labour Party, and the secret of its success; whatever has run contrary to this has weakened the Labour Party.

Communism, so far from being in conflict with this aim and development, which has found expression in the Labour Party, is the clearest, most conscious and consistent expression of this aim of the independent political movement of the organised working class against monopoly capital, and therefore has a helpful and indispensable contribution to make within the developing broad movement, represented by the Labour Party.

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This advance of the Labour Party has not been continuous or uniform over these forty years. It has had to contend with many alien influences, which have sought to turn it aside from its role as the expression of the advancing class movement of the workers. These alien influences received clearest expression in the career and philosophy of MacDonald, who remained in fact a Liberal throughout his life, and whose final outcome, as

an open enemy of the Labour Party, revealed, for all to see, the true significance of his philosophy.

In general, it may be said that the success of the Labour Party has been most marked in proportion as it has represented the uniting ground of all sections of the working class in the political field—in accordance with the original intentions of its founders. The weaknesses have arisen where alien influences, opposed to a class outlook and alignment, and the consequent policies of disunity and splitting of the organised working class, have hindered the fulfilment of its role.

Thus it is in the recent period, after the repudiation of the original basis of unity by the rejection of the affiliation of the Communist Party and the consequent policies of extending divisions and bans, operated through a series of cumulative decisions over many years, had begun to take full effect during the past decade, that the problems of a certain setback and loss of dynamic and even tendencies to decline, have made themselves felt.

These danger-signals (interruption of the rising electoral curve of 1900-1929 in the period since 1929; halving of the individual membership in recent years; decrease in the proportion of trade unionists affiliated to the Labour Party) should give rise to careful political review and examination, in place of the ostrich-like complacency of the Labour Party Executive document, with its blandly simplified picture of forty years of "steadily extending influence and power." The adverse facts do not mean that Labour's advance must be regarded as ended or giving place to decline. But they do mean that it is necessary to give careful consideration whether recent policies have not contributed to present difficulties, and especially, whether the substitution of the original basis of unity by the modern policies of disunity has not been a factor hampering the further advance of the Labour Party.

To answer these questions it will be worth while to pursue a little further these basic issues of the development of the

British labour movement, and of the Labour Party, which are more important for reaching a final judgment than the cheap propaganda, jibes and sneers against Communism indulged in by the rest of the Labour Party Executive's document, with the customary waving of the "Red bogey."

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The British labour movement, in its modern form, only slowly developed into the field of independent political activity. After the crushing of Chartism, the first political movement of the working class in any country in the world, there followed the prolonged period of forty years of political slumber, under the ascendancy and triumphant progress of nineteenth-century British capitalism, during which the labour movement developed in the more restricted forms of the old craft Trade Unions and the Co-operatives, tenaciously pursuing their struggles in their limited fields, but within the framework of acceptance of Liberal capitalist political leadership.

The aims of sending workers' representatives to Parliament did not vanish during this period. A long cycle of development, through the London Working Men's Union of 1866-68, the Labour Representation League of 1869-1880 and the Labour Electoral Association of 1886-1895, preceded the foundation of the Labour Party, in its first form as the Labour Representation Committee, in 1900. The Trades Union Congress of 1869 resolved "to support the Labour Representation League to obtain the return of actual working men to the Commons' House of Parliament." By 1885 eleven Labour men were returned to Parliament, and formed a parliamentary Labour group. But these earlier forms did not represent an independent political party of the working class. These Labour representatives were returned as a wing of the Liberal Party; they were the "Lib-Labs." The earlier forms overlapped with the development of the Labour Party. It was not

until 1910 that the last of the Lib-Labs, the miners' representatives, finally merged with the Labour Party.

This was the "Lib-Lab" stage of the British labour movement; and its ascendancy lasted for four decades. During this period it was roundly asserted by political authorities, including the "Lib-Lab" leaders, that Socialism was a foreign importation which could never find roots in Britain, and that, whatever might happen on the Continent, there could never arise an independent political party of the working class in Britain. The foundation of the Labour Party proved the emptiness of these confident assertions, once Britain had entered the period of imperialism and capitalist decline.

Socialist agitation and propaganda developed anew in Britain in the eighties, with the first onset of deeper industrial crisis and weakening of the former capitalist world monopoly. This Socialist agitation gave rise to the beginnings of mass organisation of the unskilled beyond the confines of the old craft unions, and the demand for an independent political party of the working class. The old Lib-Lab leaders bitterly and venomously attacked the Socialists—who, it must be recognised, attacked the old leaders no less violently—in much the same terms as right-wing Labour Party leaders have attacked the Communists in our day. They denounced the project of an independent political party of the working class as disruption and treason to the grand old cause of progressive unity through the Liberal Party.

Nevertheless, after two decades of embittered struggle, including considerable constitutional manipulation by the old leaders to weight the vote against the Socialists (exclusion of the Trades Councils from the Trades Union Congress, invention of the block vote, and restriction of delegates to officials or those working at their trades, thus excluding the principal Socialist agitators) the Socialists finally won the day at the 1899 Trades

Union Congress, and by a narrow majority—546,000 to 434,000—carried their resolution for the establishment of the Labour Party, that is, for the organisation of Labour representation independent of the Liberals and Conservatives. It was a limited first step, but a beginning of a profound historical change. The wheel of history could not be turned back.

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The resolution of the Plymouth Trades Union Congress in 1899 is important to quote textually, in order to establish with absolute certainty, and beyond dispute, the original conception of the founders of the Labour Party, and governing the foundation of the Labour Party, as a union of *all* working-class organisations, without exception, willing to participate, for common political action. The resolution ran:—

That this Congress, having regard to the decisions of former years, and with a view to securing a better representation of the interests of Labour in the House of Commons, hereby instructs the Parliamentary Committee to *invite the co-operation of all Co-operative, Socialistic, Trade Union and other working-class organisations* to jointly co-operate on lines mutually agreed upon in convening a special Congress of representatives from such of the above-named organisations as may be willing to take part to devise ways and means for the securing of an increased number of Labour members in the next Parliament.

In accordance with this resolution a drafting committee was set up, consisting of six representatives of the three existing Socialist organisations (Fabian Society, Independent Labour Party and Social Democratic Federation) and four representatives of the Trades Union Congress. In 1900 the Foundation Conference of the Labour Party was held, with delegates representing half a million workers, and elected a Labour Representation Committee of seven Trade Union representatives and five Socialist representatives. In 1906, following the successes at the General Election, with the return of 29 Labour Members, the Labour Representation Committee officially adopted the title of the Labour Party.

The operative resolution of the Foundation Conference of the Labour Party with regard to policy ran:—

That this Conference is in favour of working-class opinion being represented in the House of Commons by men sympathetic with the aims and demands of the Labour Movement, and whose candidatures are promoted by one or other of the organised movements.

That this Conference is in favour of establishing a distinct Labour Group in Parliament, who shall have their own Whips, and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to co-operate with any party which for the time being may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interest of Labour, and be equally ready to associate themselves with any party in opposing measures having the opposite tendency; and further, members of the Labour Group shall not oppose any candidates whose candidature is being promoted in terms of Resolution 1.

It will be seen that the Labour Party was originally founded as an alliance of Socialist and Trade Union organisations for the purpose of expressing “working-class opinion” in Parliament. It was open to “all Co-operative, Socialistic, Trade Union and other working-class organisations.” The foundation principle was thus *working-class solidarity* in the electoral and parliamentary field and not any special fixed programme or policy. Policy was to be evolved step by step as events dictated and the opinion of the movement developed. There was no question of imposing any special programme or philosophy to exclude any Socialist or working-class organisation. For example, the Social Democratic Federation, which was at that time regarded as an extremist doctrinaire Marxist organisation, participated equally in the foundation of the Labour Party and in the original representation on the Labour Representation Committee, and only later voluntarily withdrew on sectarian grounds (subsequently after its re-organisation, following a merger, as the British Socialist Party, it corrected this sectarian error and reaffiliated to the Labour Party just before the war of 1914 and remained affiliated in 1919-20, when it was at the same time affiliated to the Communist International, without any question of a contradiction to the basis of the Labour Party being raised).

This was the original *all-inclusive* basis of the Labour Party, as a union of all working-class organisations in the electoral and parliamentary field, which was maintained from 1900 until 1920, and was first broken by the refusal of the affiliation of the Communist Party in 1920.

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Marxism had originally elaborated the formula of the Labour Party, that is, the alliance of the Socialists and the Trade Unions for immediate common political objectives, however limited at the outset, as the necessary path forward for the development of the political working-class movement in British conditions. Marx and Engels, who had actively participated in the Chartist movement, after the collapse of Chartism immediately recognised the new stage and forms of the labour movement in Britain. They repeatedly insisted on the decisive role of the Trade Unions and their advance as the key to the advance of the working-class movement in Britain, opposing all the sectarian tendencies which were later rife among the early Socialists in Britain. Marx set the example of practical collaboration in leading work with the principal representatives of the old craft Trade Unions in the General Council of the First International during the eighteen-sixties, and he recorded his conclusion that

All our practice has shown that it is possible to work along with the general movement of the working class without giving up or hiding our own distinct position and even organisation.

Here can be traced already the germ of the principle underlying the proposal of affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party.

Engels wrote in 1881, in an article on the Trade Unions:—

That measure (1867 extension of the suffrage) opened out a new prospect to the working class. It gave them the majority, in London and in all manufacturing towns, and thus enabled them to enter into the struggle against capital with new weapons, by sending men of their own class to Parliament. And here, we are sorry to say, the Trades Unions forgot their duty as the advanced guard of the working class. The new weapon has

been in their hands for more than ten years, but they scarcely ever unsheathed it. They ought not to forget that they cannot continue to hold the position they now occupy unless they really march in the vanguard of the working class. . . .

At the side of, or above, the Unions of special trades there must spring up a general Union, a political organisation of the working-class as a whole.

Here can be traced the first formulation of the conception underlying the foundation of the Labour Party, through the advance of the Trade Unions into the electoral and parliamentary field, in "a political organisation of the working class as a whole." In the later eighties, after the appearance of the first very narrow and sectarian Socialist organisations, Engels further elaborated the formula of an alliance of the Socialist organisations and the Trade Unions as the path of development of a broad political working-class movement in Britain.

Unfortunately, owing to the limitations and weaknesses of the early Socialist organisations in Britain, there were no representatives of Marxism capable of carrying out these Marxist principles and fulfilling the task of organisation of a Labour Party in association with the many tendencies already developing towards independent Labour representation. Thus, the leadership fell into the hands of the anti-Marxist reformist representatives (Fabians and Independent Labour Party) who were still liberal in outlook and opposed to the class struggle. In organising the Labour Party they were, in fact, organising a class movement of the workers in the political field; but at the same time in their philosophy they sought to deny the class struggle and the class basis of the movement they were leading. Hence arose a contradiction which has dogged the development of the Labour Party up to the present, and has given rise to many internal difficulties and problems which to-day clamour for solution.

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What is this contradiction?

In practice the Labour Party as an organisation is based on the class organisa-

tions of the workers. The overwhelming bulk of the membership join through their Trade Unions. They join, that is to say, on the basis of working-class solidarity and unity—which includes, since 1918 the recognition of the common aim of working-class emancipation or Socialism—and not on the basis of some special sectional viewpoint or doctrine within the working-class movement. Herein the Labour Party differs from the type of Continental Social Democratic Party. This was the case in the foundation of the Labour Party, and remains so to-day in respect of organisation. Of 375,000 members in 1900, 353,000 belonged through their Trade Unions. Of 2,485,000 members in 1941, 2,230,000, or nine-tenths, belong through their Trade Unions—that is, through the organs of working-class solidarity.

This class basis was explicitly recognised in the earlier documents of the Labour Party, which spoke of the Labour Party as designed to represent “the general interests of wage-earners.” Thus the Annual Report for 1902 declared:—

There is some danger in action which makes the Labour member representative of one Trade Union rather than of *the general interests of wage-earners*. It is the wage-earner, and not only the miner, the engineer or the railway servant who needs representation. . . . Only in this way can our movement be one for *Labour* representation, and not merely for *trade* representation.

But at the same time an influential section of the leadership, preaching a Liberal-reformist philosophy of hostility to the class struggle, in their entire propaganda and policy opposed this class basis (accepting it in practice only as a sordid financial necessity) and sought to impose instead their special doctrinal Liberal-reformist basis, alien to the class struggle, as the condition of membership, thus cutting across the principle of working-class solidarity.

It is obvious that this policy is disruptive in its effects, destroying, insofar as it is successful, the basis of working-class solidarity, and leading to expulsions and splits. This was the policy especially asso-

ciated with the group of leadership represented by MacDonald, Snowden and Thomas and which led to the refusal of affiliation of the Communist Party and subsequent widening expulsions.

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This contradiction had already made itself felt in the early years before 1914, although it came to a head in the later period. It raised a sharp problem before the international Socialist movement in 1908, when the Labour Party applied for affiliation to the old Second International. The Second International finally accepted the affiliation in a resolution which declared, in a formula of Kautsky, that:—

In view of the standing resolutions of the International Congresses which admit all organisations that recognise the proletarian class struggle and the necessity of political action:

The International Bureau declares that the English Labour Party is to be admitted to the International Socialist Congresses because, although it does not avowedly recognise the class struggle, it actually carries it on; and because the organisation of the Labour Party, being independent of the bourgeois parties, is based upon the class struggle.

The Labour Party Annual Report for 1909 recorded this decision as “very gratifying.” Lenin criticised Kautsky’s formula and proposed an amendment which gave a clear Marxist estimate. He proposed that the Labour Party should be accepted for affiliation on the grounds that:—

It represents the first step of the really proletarian organisations of England to a conscious class policy and to a Socialist Labour Party.

This is an important guide to the Marxist approach to the question of the Labour Party.

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But the contradiction came to the forefront in the years since 1918, and it has centred especially on the question of the affiliation of the Communist Party.

In 1918 the Labour Party, in response to the wide changes opened by the first world war and the general working class and popular awakening in all countries following the victory of the Russian Bolshevik Revolution, went through an im-

portant transformation. For the first time a programme was adopted, recognising the aim of Socialism:—

To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service.

This programme and aim remains the programme and aim of the Labour Party to-day, and is fully supported by Communists and all Socialists, as by all politically conscious workers. There is no basis of conflict here. Membership of the Labour Party was thrown open to individual members. Steps were taken for the advance of the Labour Party as a leading political party.

This transformation reflected in its main character a very great advance of the political working-class movement in Britain. On this basis membership shot up from one and a half millions in 1914 to four and a quarter millions in 1920. The electoral vote rose from half a million in 1910 to two and a quarter millions in 1918, four and a quarter millions in 1922, five and a half millions in 1924, and the peak of 8,364,000 in 1929.

But at the same time this transformation was two-sided. The Liberal reformist policy sought at the same time to strengthen its grip on the Labour Party and to carry through the change to the role of a "national" party in the sense of weakening its class basis. The advocates of this policy sought to turn the Labour Party into a Social-Democratic Party of the post-1918 Continental type, like the Weimar German Social Democratic Party, whose misguided policies and resistance to working-class unity prepared the way for the victory of Hitler. They hoped to establish, through the throwing open of the doors of individual membership to those who were neither Trade Unionists, nor prepared to join a Socialist organisation, a lever against the influence of the Trade Unions and against the class basis of the Labour Party. They showed their

hand when, after the adoption of the aim of Socialism in 1918, they succeeded in 1920 in securing the rejection of the application for affiliation of the newly-formed Communist Party (composed of the previously affiliated British Socialist Party and other groups). This rejection was the first direct blow to the basis of unity represented by the Labour Party. This blow was succeeded by others, as the initial rejection was followed by an extending series of bans and expulsions which injured the development of the Labour Party.

The policies of this leading group, represented by MacDonald, Snowden and Thomas, which dominated the Labour Party in this period, and which in the political field led to the collapse of 1931, in the organisational field found expression in the exclusion of the Communist Party and the extending system of bans and expulsions. These were two halves of a single system of policy. It was the same leading group which put through both.

It is instructive to-day to note the subsequent record of the principal protagonists of the opposition to Communist affiliation and of the system of bans and exclusions, in the great debates on these issues through successive Labour Party Conferences in the nineteen-twenties. In the 1922 Conference, when the principal debate on Communist affiliation took place and when the case for affiliation was argued by Harry Pollitt, then present with full rights as a delegate, the case against was presented by three main representatives: Ramsay MacDonald, W. J. Brown and Frank Hodges. MacDonald subsequently dealt the heaviest blow in its history against the Labour Party by his betrayal of 1931, and passed over to join the open enemies of the Labour Party. W. J. Brown, who lectured Pollitt on loyalty to the Labour Party, passed on to his present disruptive role. Frank Hodges, who lectured Communists on their "slave" mentality, passed out of the Labour Party to become a Director of big business



concerns, including the Bank of England's Securities Management Trust. The Communists remain fighting in the ranks of the working-class struggle. The list could be extended with the protagonists of disruption at subsequent Conferences, like Spencer, who passed on to organise the "Non-Political Miners' Union" in Notts against the Miners' Federation, and many others. This lesson of the subsequent record of the opponents of Communist affiliation should give food for thought to sincere members of the Labour Party to-day.

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The policies of the leading group associated with MacDonald, which dominated the Labour Party in the nineteen-twenties, ended in shipwreck in 1931. But the practical lesson has not yet been learned. The policies of disunity and denial of working-class solidarity, which found expression in the refusal of Communist affiliation and the system of expulsions, are still maintained.

In consequence the nineteen-thirties have seen, in place of the new advance which should have taken place, following the capitalist crisis and the advance of the Fascist menace, dangerous signs of an arrest of the advance of the Labour Party and even of weakening.

It would not be fair to say, in view of the many other factors involved, that since 1920, when the application of the Communist Party for affiliation was first refused, the Labour Party, which up to that year had continuously advanced in membership, has never again touched the peak of membership reached in that year, although Trade Union membership has now reached a new record, exceeding 1920. But responsible opinion cannot fail to take note of the fact that the electoral level of 1929 has not been equalled in the two subsequent elections of 1931 and 1935, or of the significance of the very considerable fall in individual membership in recent years, or the decline in the level of activity, alongside the marked advance of trade unionism in these same

years, or of the general level of political awakening and consciousness.

Further danger-signals have revealed themselves in the recent period in the growth of splitting movements like the Common Wealth Party. The absence of a powerful united labour movement leads to disintegration in the political situation, as the experience of Germany in the years preceding Hitler showed. It leads to the drifting away of sections of backward or disillusioned workers to follow any demagogic leadership which presents itself with plausible slogans, and to the loss of the potential support of awakening middle-class elements who, through lack of confidence in the labour movement, are drawn into channels separate from the labour movement and are thus at the mercy of any cheapjack programme and leadership which seeks to exploit their political immaturity. On the other hand, a united labour movement would not only rally the full strength of the working class far beyond the range of the present organised strength, but would also constitute a magnetic centre capable of drawing together all the progressive forces in a common immediate campaign.

The present situation offers the opportunity, and the urgent need, to end these weaknesses and build anew a stronger basis for a powerful united labour movement capable of fulfilling present tasks. The time has come to heal the breach, to end the policies of disunity, and to find the basis of co-operation of all sections in the common cause. The experience and lessons of these past years, no less than the plain needs of the present, have created a deepened readiness and eagerness among all sections to achieve such co-operation.

This does not mean departing from the true basis and tradition of the Labour Party, or sacrificing all that has been achieved by the efforts of millions of workers through the Labour Party. On the contrary, it means re-establishing the true basis and tradition of the Labour

Party by ending those policies which have done it harm and by re-establishing the Labour Party as the union and alliance of all working-class organisations for the

common aims of the working-class movement and the achievement of Socialism. The acceptance of Communist affiliation would powerfully assist in this.