

NOTES OF THE MONTH

Communism and the Left

THIS Easter takes place the 26th Congress of the Communist Party. It would be premature to anticipate its proceedings. The General Secretary, John Gollan, will comment on the significance of its outcome for the broad labour movement and the

political prospect in next month's May issue. Meanwhile there is some reason, in the midst of the pressure of present events, to focus attention at this moment on the role of the Communist Party in relation to the problems which now confront all socialists in Britain.

Our readers in Britain (if we may leave out of account for the moment our readers who buy this journal in fifty-five countries overseas, and whose indulgence we must ask if we concentrate this month on very domestic problems of the still lagging movement in this old once premier country of capitalism) include communists and non-communists. Most of the leading figures of the trade unions and the Labour Party during these past four decades, with the exception of a handful on the extreme right (including a few, like the present Lord Citrine, before they had passed over to the extreme right) have at one time or another contributed to our pages,

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even though their freely printed contributions may have sometimes conflicted with the general policy of the magazine or been frankly criticised. Our aim from our first number thirty-eight years ago has been to promote co-operation and mutual understanding of all sections in the common cause of the working class and socialism.

Therefore, if at this moment a *serious* fresh discussion (not the repetition of jargon, not the familiar accusations and counter-accusations) of the present position and prospect of communism and the labour movement is suggested as desirable and even urgently necessary, there is no question here of a special sectional concern, but of the vital interests of the whole movement.

Dilemma of the Left

Many good friends in the trade unions and the Labour Party, while recognising and appreciating the work of individual communists in one or another sphere of activity, have tended up to the present to query the existence and justification of the Communist Party in this country. They have regarded it as a splinter organisation of the left, cut off from rights of equal participation in the mass political labour movement represented by the Labour Party, and therefore ineffective and mistaken as an organisation, whatever the merits of its individual members. Hence they have preferred to see in the Labour Party the political instrument for the victory of socialism in Britain. Recognising that the domination of the traditional right-wing policy and leadership for the past half century represents an obstacle to this aim, they have seen the path forward through the development of the left, as a kind of constitutional opposition, loyally maintaining separation from the Communist Party, and advancing gradually to a future majority position and leadership which will be able to carry through a legislative programme establishing socialism in Britain. Such has been the general theory of many friends and respected militant representatives of the non-communist left in the Labour Party.

Recent events have begun to throw into question these assumptions more seriously than at any time previously during the half century of existence of the Labour Party. What are these new developments which have created what may be described as a certain dilemma of the left in the Labour Party? Three in particular may be noted.

Blow No. 1: Labour Party Rejection of Socialism

The first is the official rejection of the aim of socialism by the new Labour Party programme. The new programme is not a casual document. It is the outcome of three years of elaborate policy preparation, under the general guidance of Mr. Gaitskell and his associates of the 'New Thinkers' school, with the explicit and avowed objective of jettisoning for ever the traditional aim of socialism in the sense of the social ownership of the means of production. It is true that the word 'socialism' has not been abandoned. Indeed, when it was discovered that the first draft of the pamphlet *The Future Labour Offers You* had forgotten the sacred word, hasty steps were taken to add the present irrelevant postscript at the end to bring it in. But the shibboleth in the new programme is defined in a series of empty high-sounding ethical platitudes ('mutual service', 'true freedom', 'social justice'), equally acceptable to the Tory Central Office, the City, *The Times*, or the Archbishop of Canterbury. The use of the word alone proves nothing. Hitler also used the word 'socialism' to describe his programme (and it was, oddly enough, accepted at face value by the *Daily Herald* editorial 'Hitler's May Day' on May 2, 1933). What matters here is not jugglery with words. What matters is the plain elementary reality of socialism as universally understood by the entire socialist movement from the outset, including the socialist participators in the foundation of the Labour Party, that is, the ending of the class ownership of the means of production, the ending of exploitation, of rent, interest and profit, and its replacement by the social ownership of the means of production. This is the socialism which the Labour Party has now officially repudiated in favour of a theory of a reformed capitalism, with state participation in the private capitalist monopolies.

A New Situation

Thus a new situation has been created. Ever since the nominal adoption of a socialistic aim ('common ownership of the means of production') by the Labour Party in 1918, it could be argued, and was widely argued, that, however contrary the practical policy of the right wing leadership, the ultimate aim of socialism was adequately represented by the Labour Party, and that the Communist Party was therefore superfluous. This avenue of argument is now closed. Of the four national political parties, the Conservative, Liberal, Labour and Communist Parties, the Communist Party is today the only political party which represents the aim of socialism.

Towards New Advance—but How?

It can still be argued, and correctly argued, that this disastrous retreat to mid-Victorian 'Lib-Lab' theories of co-operation with capitalism must be fought and defeated. Assuredly. The reign of Mr. Gaitskell and his 'New Thinker' colleagues is not eternal, and may even prove short-lived. Mass unemployment has already begun to deal these antiquated theories some shrewd blows. We can be certain that the working class will eventually find their way forward beyond the swamp; that the united strength of all the socialist and militant sections of the working class organisations will finally defeat the apostles of reaction. But how? Through what forms? Policy? Organisation? Leadership? Victory is never won by waiting for it and praying for the discomfiture of one's adversaries. Victory in the whole history of the working class movement has always and only been won by organisation and leadership. Where is 'the Left' in any organised sense in the Labour Party capable of rallying the masses and assailing and conquering the entrenched fortress of the right wing domination of the Executive and Transport House? It is here that we come to the second horn of the present acute dilemma of the left in the Labour Party.

Blow No. 2: Demobilisation of the Bevanite Left

The second new development which has brought sharply into the forefront the problems of socialists and those with left sympathies in the Labour Party is the visible demobilisation or individual dispersal into a remarkable variety of directions of the former very active grouping who were associated with Mr. Bevan and came to be described as the 'Bevanite Left'.

Mr. Bevan in the preceding period was the great Challenger from the Left. He had, with the agility which reveals the flair of political genius, resigned from the doomed Attlee Labour Government just in time before its downfall, having previously sponsored the fantastic £4,700 million rearmament programme in parliament in January and then resigning over the consequent health charges in April. He described Mr. Gaitskell, who as Chancellor of the Exchequer had been responsible for introducing the health charges, as a 'dessicated calculating machine'. He forewent his assured position on the Executive as the idol of the constituency parties in order to challenge the massed hostility of the reformist trade union bureaucracy by contesting the Treasurership. He was menaced with

expulsion by the angry Executive Committee, as he had already been expelled before on the eve of the second world war; and he was only saved from expulsion a second time by the support of the rank and file.

Mr. Bevan's Role

Today he has left his unruly past behind him. He sits in the Holy of Holies at the right hand of Mr. Gaitskell (or should we say 'left hand' in the new Duumvirate?) and is elected unopposed to the Treasurership. He has become an Elder Statesman. It is even possible that in his new position he may be able to attempt some significant initiative towards a step forward in foreign policy, provided he is able and willing to loosen the fetters of current official policy of the cold war and nuclear strategy, to which Labour is at present committed. But his role as Leader of the Left is, for the time being at any rate, suspended. What the future may hold, only further development of events and of the internal alignment within the Labour Party will show. There is no doubt that there is overwhelming potential support within the labour movement for any advance from the present disastrous cold war policy. Meanwhile his principal and other colleagues in this temporary Left grouping, like Mr. Harold Wilson and Mr. Robens, had made their peace earlier. Mr. Crossman remains the versatile Mr. Crossman.

Three and Twenty Leaders of Revolt

This is not a new story in the history of the Labour Party. It is an old story. It has gone on for fifty years in one form and another. One grouping after another has sought to present itself as the up and coming left grouping within the Labour Party, which would end the right wing domination, and show the correct path forward as against the mistaken and hopelessly ineffective role of the Communist Party. During these four decades every such grouping has successively disappeared without trace, while the Communist Party has continued to advance, despite the admittedly limited scale so far under existing conditions, not only in numbers and strength over the whole period (a twelvefold increase in membership from its beginning up to the present day), but above all in strength in the basic organisations of the working class which will finally decide the future of the Labour Party.

Forty Years of the Labour Left

Consider the record of the Labour Left during these four decades. There was the role of 'the Clydesiders', whose advent to parliament in 1922 was widely described as the beginning of a new era, and who registered their victory of the Left by ejecting Mr. Clynes from leadership of the Labour Party, and installing the eloquent idol of the Left, Mr. Ramsay Macdonald (worshipped for his partial protest at the imperialist war in 1914, and the universal denunciation by the entire jingo press as a public enemy and traitor during the war) as Leader of the Labour Party. Then came the role of the Independent Labour Party and its 'Socialism In Our Time' programme presented as the alternative to the programme of Macdonald, and offering the policy of the 'living wage' to lead the attack on poverty by the state regulation of wages and prices and thus enable the working class to reach socialism 'not through starvation, but through an era of prosperity'. Then came the role of the Cook-Maxton Manifesto and Campaign. Then came the role of the Socialist League, led by Sir Stafford Cripps until its banning and dissolution. And after the war there has been the role of the 'Keep Left' grouping of back-bench Labour M.P.s (including Woodrow Wyatt) during the Labour Government, followed by the Bevanite Left and its unhappy ending.

Time to Draw the Lesson

This successive repeated experience proves that what is here involved is something more than a question of individuals or individual leaders or the passing over of individual leaders. The uniformity of the successive experience, beneath all the detail variations, establishes the character of a law. It is further worth noting that the successive groupings have tended to diminish in strength rather than otherwise. The Clydesiders were able to change the Leader of the Labour Party. The I.L.P. at the height of its 'Socialism In Our Time' agitation had over 100 M.P.s. The Socialist League led by Cripps united many leading personalities in Labour's ranks, and founded *Tribune* as an organ of the united front. The Bevanite Left included a number of popular figures, and was able to use an effective agitational press organ in the post-war *Tribune*, which, whatever the somewhat erratic confusion of its policy apart from its consistent anti-communism, and despite the slight uncertainty how far its editorial personnel belong to the Beaverbrook stable or vice versa, with apparent interchangeability of editors, has

been edited with professional skill and has had the advantage of millionaire financial backing.

'Victory for Socialism'

Today Mr. Mikardo and others have been endeavouring to gather together a somewhat weakened reflection of what remains of the former Bevanite Left, after the departure of its most prominent personalities, through 'Victory for Socialism'. With the best will in the world to every sincere effort to carry forward the fight for a socialist policy in the Labour Party, it cannot but be recognised that this grouping is so far very weak, probably weaker than any previous left grouping in the Labour Party; has already been called to heel by the Executive, forbidden to build up an organisation, and compelled to promise submission; and is thus reduced to the role of a modest medium for discussion rather than any significant organised force.

How to Rally the Left?

Hence the lessons of this experience need now to be very seriously discussed by all who wish to carry forward the fight for socialism and a left policy in the Labour Party. There is no lack of sincere socialists in the Labour Party, however frustrated they may feel under present conditions. Our postbag from our readers gives abundant evidence of this. But all are seeking to find the way forward, though there is not yet agreement on this. The 'Labour Left' is rather the description of a trend, a mood, an aspiration, of a multiplicity of individuals and policies, awaiting ruefully the permanent defeat which is the destiny of all spontaneous unorganised movements in the face of organisation, instead of the united strength of a common leadership, policy, organisation and action capable of defeating the entrenched machine of the right wing leadership. Nor is the melancholy of this situation overcome by trying to paint rosy colours of hopeful illusion around the existing right wing policy. Oil and water do not mix. What is to be done?

The Communist Party's Answer to the Left Dilemma

The founders of the Communist Party had had abundant experience of these problems of the left fight in the trade unions and the Labour Party already in the stormy years before the first world war and during the first world war. It was this experience which led them to the conclusion that the only decisive path forward from

the morass of transient waves of left emotions alongside the permanent entrenchment of right wing domination lay through the establishment of a political party of the fight for socialism, a political party of a new type (here the experience of bolshevism and international communism helped), not in opposition to the rest of the organised working class movement, but rooted in the industrial working class and the mass organisations of the working class, combining Marxist theory with the daily mass struggle, conducting the fight for socialist politics against capitalist and sectional politics, and thus step by step, through a long and tenacious struggle, breaking the domination of the right wing leadership and policies, and winning the organised strength of the working class and its allies to achieve political power and the victory of socialism.

Experience of Forty Years

That was close on forty years ago. The experience of these forty years, including the outcome of all these successive transient left movements rising and falling and disappearing, has in the opinion of communists proved the correctness of this fundamental conception. This experience has, through all the problems, difficulties, setbacks and admitted mistakes in the course of the political struggle, demonstrated the establishment of an indestructible base in the industrial working class and working class organisations. It has provided the spearhead for the advance of the left fight throughout the labour movement (not least through the creation and maintenance of the only independent daily working class newspaper, the *Daily Worker*, after the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress, with all their finance and millions of members had had to admit failure in this sphere and surrender to the millionaire press lords). Thereby it is creating the conditions for the eventual transformation of the political labour movement.

Ending Bans and Proscriptions

Undoubtedly the affiliation of the Communist Party to the Labour Party in accordance with its original federal basis, as initially proposed by the Communist Party, would have provided the most favourable conditions for the constitutional evolution of the Labour Party to the new stage. The right wing leadership, recognising this, repudiated the old federal basis of unity, refused affiliation, and proceeded to impose extending bans and proscriptions to prevent a democratic settlement of the issues within the organised working

class movement. All the bans and proscriptions have not been able to break the ties of the Communist Party with the organised working class, or the influence of its campaigning and daily newspaper to assist the forward struggle of all sections of the labour movement. But the ending of these bans and proscriptions, and closer common understanding and co-operation of all sections of the left and the Communist Party, is now of vital importance to defeat the menace of existing right wing policies and speed the common victory.

Blow No. 3: Cracks in the Capitalist Idol

The third new development which has brought sharply to the forefront the problem of the path of advance of socialists in Britain today is the new economic-political situation. For fourteen years rosewater illusions were spread of a new magically transformed capitalism. Full employment was guaranteed for ever. Coal production could never overtake demand; and only the narrow parochial bigotry of working miners hindered the influx of the hordes of fascist refugees which the Government and their right wing officials tried to force upon them. The ancient spectres of unemployment and poverty had been exorcised by the new booming prosperous Western imperialist economies. The only remaining problems were spiritual problems of the better use of plenty and leisure; juvenile delinquency; a plea for a little philanthropy for the poor backward countries (who might otherwise fall for communism). Marxist economic theories, to which the moribund, benighted and hopelessly formula-ridden Communist Party still clung, were a pathetic Victorian relic wholly irrelevant to the marvellous new mid-twentieth century capitalism.

The Morning After

All this cheap stale tripe, repeating the old, old fairy tales that are spread during every boom and always find new suckers among the young and innocent, was not only multiplied wholesale by the professional 'Ain't capitalism lovely' sunshine merchants of the millionaire press. It was spread especially by the spokesmen of the Labour Party on all sides. Endless books, pamphlets, study syllabuses and articles were poured out to 'prove' the theory with the aid of transparently spurious official statistics. The right wing revelled in the new theories, and drew the conclusion that it was now time to 'consolidate' rather than to go in for any rash new socialist experiments. Many on the left also fell for the new

illusions, but urged that, while the immediate material problems had been solved, it was still important to go on to socialism. The Communist Party was at the outset almost alone in exposing the economic realities of capitalism, and in particular the realities of imperialist Britain's position in the modern world and the consequences which existing policies would bring (the first explicit warning at the Nineteenth Congress in November, 1945). Today the ball is over. The morning after is here. The 'antiquated', 'discredited', 'obsolete' Marxist theory is once again demonstrated in living practice with remarkable precision. Capitalism is still capitalism, despite all the new frills. The class struggle is still the class struggle. Ask the miners who came to march in London.

Significance of the Anti-communist Offensive

Therefore it is inevitable that the Communist Party now comes into the centre of the picture more than ever. Read any of the recent Court of Enquiry Reports. Read the Report of the right wing dominated E.C. about the Amalgamated Engineering Union, North London District. Listen to the President of the National Union of Manufacturers denouncing all shop stewards as 'largely communist-inspired' and 'an excrescence on the trade unions' whose powers must be curtailed (presidential address to the annual meeting of the National Union of Manufacturers on November 27, 1958). Observe the unscrupulous press attack on a major union, the Electrical Trades Union, the seventh largest in Britain, with one of the most democratic constitutions of any union, while the most openly and notoriously undemocratic unions, maintained by undemocratic means under right wing control, are left free from a hint of criticism by these 'democratic' critics. Note how every trade union election is nowadays blazoned in the big press like a parliamentary by-election, with the entire machinery of the millionaire press and hundreds of millions of propaganda sheets churned out through its agency to mobilise the vote against the communist candidate. Why was 'Iris' formed? Who pays for it? Or 'Aims of Industry' and all the rest of the high-paid troupe?

Anti-Communism in 'Left' Disguise

Another characteristic sign of the times further indicates how the present intensified anti-communist offensive reflects the sharpening of the class struggle, and the consequent fear of the Communist Party and of advancing left trends among the workers. This is

the development of a specialised section of the anti-communist offensive to endeavour to reach militant workers in suitable guise. Alongside the big blast of the open right-wing anti-communist campaign, like a minor shrill accompaniment, there has developed the proliferation of little journals and bulletins, in some cases on the basis of lavish American finance, designed to appeal to and confuse left opinion with ultra-militant slogans to cover the essential content of hostility and venom against the Communist Party and the socialist world—always in the name of ‘true Marxism’ and ‘true communism’.

An Old Story

This is an old story, long familiar in the working class movement. So it was in the Kronstadt revolt, when the White Guards sought to muscle in on the genuine dissatisfactions among sections of sailors by spreading the slogan ‘Soviets without the Communist Party’ to disguise their real aims. So it was with the first Hungarian counter-revolution forty years ago, when the Hungarian Soviet Republic created by the Hungarian people was overthrown by Western arms and replaced by the Peidl Social Democratic Government proclaiming itself the representative of ‘pure democracy’ and ‘true socialism’, only to give place within the shortest time, as soon as the deceptive slogans had done their work, to the bloodiest Horthy Fascism and White Terror, with which Hungarian Social Democracy proceeded to sign an official Treaty of Alliance. So it was with the second and unsuccessful Hungarian counter-revolutionary attempt thirty-seven years later, when once again the slogans of ‘true democracy’ and ‘true socialism’ and ‘true communism’ were used to open the streets to the pogrom merchants, the Jew-baiters, the burners of the books and the trampers of the red flag. Observe today how in the most hotly contested trade union elections a single front is formed from Catholic Action to the Trotskyists behind one candidate, rather like the ill-famed ‘August bloc’ which presaged the victory of the Bolshevik Party, in order to defeat the candidate supported by the communists and the left.

Leading the Fight

In the present sharpened class situation the Communist Party is inevitably in the forefront of the fight. In face of the slump, the mass dismissals, the myriad problems confronting all sections of the workers, the Communist Party does not spend its time in saying

'I told you so'. The Communist Party is the only party to put forward a concrete programme of action to combat the slump, to fight the mass dismissals and redundancy, and to mobilise the organised strength of the workers for the fight. At the same time the Communist Party puts forward its political programme for the defeat of Toryism and for the tasks of a new Government based on the labour movement. Equally the Communist Party puts out its long-term programme for the advance to socialism, and is indeed the only political party to publish a concrete programme, not merely of the aims of socialism, but of the means to achieve it within the conditions of Britain—*The British Road To Socialism*.

Towards New Advance

The special fury of hostility of all capitalist expression, right, left and centre, against communism and the Communist Party at the present moment is thus a sign of the times—a symptom of the deteriorating economic-political situation from the standpoint of capitalism. Violent denunciation of communism and the Communist Party is nothing new. Its music has sounded in our ears for forty years. Predictions of the disintegration and approaching collapse of the Communist Party are nothing new. They have been repeated every year with monotonous reiteration for forty years; and at the end of it all the Communist Party is many times stronger. The present intensified fury is thus not a sign of the strength of capitalism, but of its weakness. A desperate three-pronged offensive was let loose by imperialist reaction, through Suez, through the counter-revolutionary putsch in Hungary, and through the attempt to disrupt the Western Communist Parties. The offensive has failed on all three fronts. After all the battering of the enemy assault, it is significant that the registration figure of Communist Party membership this year (a strict test, since the annual registration is carried out with severe accuracy in the Communist Party, unlike the very loose and unreliable figures of individual membership in the Labour Party) shows an increase—slight, but an increase—on a year ago. The tide moves. We are advancing into new conditions and a new era from the old era of poisoned illusions, into conditions of severe struggle and testing, but also opening the prospect of new advance of the working class, and with it, of the Communist Party. Towards these aims the Easter Congress will make its contribution.

March 7, 1959.

R.P.D.