

# The Sudan Scandal

**A**T the end of their first six months of office we find the British Labour Government—despite its pacifist affiliations—busily engaged in upholding the Empire, by force and arms. Aircraft are busy in Trans-jordania and Iraq, and warships and troops are being dispatched to the Sudan. Something very near to an ultimatum has been dispatched to Egypt, and the outcry from the City against the Treaty with Russia and from Fleet Street against the withdrawal of the prosecution of the *Workers' Weekly* gives place to unstinted praise from the *Times* for the “firmness” of the Government stand over the Sudan.

Thomas Johnston, editor of *Forward*, who is regarded by many as the leader of the Left-wing of the Labour Party in Parliament finds himself in an awkward predicament. He it was who first drew public attention to the “scandal” of a loan guaranteed to the Sudan Government by the British Government. He protested that it was a use of public money for the advantage, first of the financiers who negotiated the loan, and, secondly, of a syndicate of cotton planters who were granted a monopoly for the development of cotton growing in the area. Incidentally, he also charged Mr. Asquith (who had busied himself to secure the support of the British Government for the scheme) with having a family interest in the scheme, and the Tory Government with being interested to secure a fat contract for a stout supporter—Lord Cowdray.

The “scandal” blew over at the time, but subsequent developments have given the Egyptian Government a standing that they did not then possess, and they are using it to protest against the separation of the Sudan from Egypt, and the exploitation of its resources in such a way as to seriously menace the economic stability of Egypt itself.

Reminded of his former stand, Mr. Johnston shifts his front. The scheme which he denounced has been inherited by the Labour Government. Faced with the protest of the Egyptian Government and a mutiny of an Egyptian railway battalion, used for railway construction in the Sudan, the British Government “takes a firm stand” and Mr. Johnston ranges himself on their side.

Mr. Johnston, who is worth taking trouble over since many

regard him as the chief of the "revolutionaries" from the Clyde, and the one who will in time lead the opposition to the imperialism of Thomas, Henderson and MacDonald, has, it would seem, succumbed to the mental distortion which has become chronic in Parliamentary circles since the opening of the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley.

### **THE WEMBLEY SQUINT.**

It is a frame of mind which conceives the British Empire as purely and simply a territorial extension of the authority of the British House of Commons, and its offshoots, the Parliaments of the self-governing Dominions. It is admitted that five-sixths of the adult inhabitants of the Empire have not even the pretence of a Parliamentary vote, and that all but a microscopic fraction of these are whites. It is admitted, too (since it cannot be denied) that of the 470 million inhabitants of the Empire, 320 millions are Indians and that only a few hundred thousand of these have even a consultative vote in the Government of India. These things are awkward, but are easily got into a rosy focus by the victim of the "Wembley squint." In time—"when they are fit for it"—these will have a vote too, and then all will be well. "Under Socialist inspiration, with Home Rule all round and a federated Parliament for the Empire," says Johnston, in a fever of exaltation, "the British Empire might be made the greatest lever for emancipation the world has ever known."

The essential fallacy of patriotic reformism lies in dividing politics and economics into two sharply distinguished categories, with only an incidental connection between them. They do not say "capitalism needeth 'democracy,' 'representative government,' and 'parliamentary institutions,' and, therefore, we have them." They say, capitalism has "corrupted" Parliament, democracy and representative institutions. They do not say "the Empire exists as an expression of capitalism in its final finance-monopoly form." They say (as Johnston is learning to say) how nice the Empire would be if only we could keep the capitalists from being quite so all-pervasive.

Johnston clinches the matter by formulating the whole Sudan question as a question between British and Egyptian Imperialism—with the League of Nations in the background as a final arbitrator. He has no conception of the fact that the Sudan to-day is a totally different thing from what it will be in 10 years time—no inkling of the processes at work transforming the Sudanese from self-governing peasants into first tenant-cultivators, exploited by the Sudan Government and a British syndicate in conjunction,

and finally, into proletarians whose future will be identified with that of the proletarians of all lands.

For him the whole question is simply "shall we break up the Empire?—or shall we thank God that we are not as other men are, and trust that our moral superiority will reconcile the subject races of Africa, Asia and Polynesia to any little inconveniences that arise from "our" exploitation of them?"

### **THE TRUTH ABOUT THE SUDAN.**

As between the Egyptian and British Governments, the issue is quite simple. The British went into the Sudan as the agents of the Khedive of Egypt, flying the Egyptian flag (as well as the British) and in two expeditions (1885 and 1895-98) secured, first, the retirement of the Egyptian garrisons besieged by the Sudanese "rebels," and, secondly, the reconquest of the province for and in the name of the Khedive of Egypt.

Every British soldier who took part in those campaigns received a medal from the Khedive as well as one from the British Government. Kitchener was in command of the army that effected the re-conquest by the authority of (and was paid by) the Khedive of Egypt.

It is true that all through this episode Egypt was a British "Protectorate." True, also, that Egypt was "annexed" during the war. But these facts must be interpreted in the light of the oft-repeated promises of British statesmen, that the occupation was only "temporary" and, that once the claims of the bondholders had been satisfied and the Suez Canal made secure as a passage for British ships, the British would honour their obligations and withdraw. Now the British have (more or less) withdrawn. Egypt is nominally free and independent. Is it strange that Egyptian Nationalists should claim that the whole pretence of withdrawal is made into a cynical farce if the Sudan is finally separated from Egypt and retained as a British possession?

What is the motive for retaining the Sudan? Thomas Johnston and the *Times* are for once agreed. Much antiquarian research has revealed the fact that the revolt of the Sudanese under the Mahdi (1882) was provoked by the brutality and oppression of the Egyptian Pashas. Were it not for the British they would, it seems, go back to their old slave-raiding tricks.

It seems strange that it should be left till now to discover this grave moral dilemma. The British Government invaded Egypt in 1882 and rescued these same Pashas from the popular vengeance of revolt headed by Arabi Pasha. They permitted the sending of English officers (Gordon, Baker and others), to the

Sudan to help establish their rule, and an expeditionary force to rescue them from Sudanese vengeance.

They placed in the Egyptian service military and civil officers who planned and conducted the military campaign that destroyed the rule of the successful rebels, and finished up the campaign by solemnly blowing up the tomb of the Mahdi as a final expression of hatred for all that that revolt implied.

Now we learn that the revolt was thoroughly justified, and to punish the sons of the "slave-raiding Pashas," the British Government proposes to hold the country against the Egyptians at all costs. It seems unnecessary to add that we are assured that the Sudanese are eager for the British Government to remain.

### **THE SYMPATHY FOR THE SUDANESE.**

What has caused this sudden outbreak of sympathy for the once-contemned "fuzzy-wuzzy"? And this equally sudden repudiation of the Egyptian Pashas—who were, by the way, preserved along with the rest of the Anglo-Egyptian establishment by the suppression of the revolt of the Egyptian peasants in 1919.

Johnston knows the answer better than anybody. Up to 1900 the prime concern of British capitalism (beyond the claims of the bondholders and the safety of the Suez Canal) was the Cape to Cairo railway. For this the Sudan was merely a part of the route. From the Cairo end of the line it was part of Egypt, from the Cape end both were part of the Empire. British and Egyptian financial interests were at one.

But after 1900, the British Empire began to face an increasing shortage of cotton very damaging to the prosperity of Lancashire. The U.S.A. was more and more using up its native crop at home, less and less was available for export. Egypt was a suitable land for cotton growing. Egypt became dearer to the Empire than ever.

After the building of the great barrage at Assuan, on the Lower Nile, and the valuable results in cotton cultivation that it made possible, speculation soon hit upon the Sudan and the Upper Nile as the field of a possibly still more profitable venture. There were developed schemes for irrigation and cultivation in the Sudan which culminated in the formation of the Sudan Plantations Syndicate, and the Sudan Loan.

The purpose of the loan was the development of cotton growing by irrigation in two districts of the Sudan. One required a new railway to bring its crop to the sea at Port Sudan. It was built. The other required a dam across the Blue Nile in order to turn the whole area between it and the White Nile into an area

of cultivation under irrigation. This dam is in process of construction. The railway (from Kassala to Port Sudan) was built by the Sudan Government from the loan supplied by the British Government under the Trade Facilities Act. The dam is being built under contract out of the proceeds of the same loan.

British financiers make a profit on floating the loan. British capitalists make a profit on laying the railway and constructing the dam, and at the end of the period the railway belongs for a term of years to a cotton syndicate, the dam belongs to the cotton syndicate, and the peasants have become occupying tenants, exploited at will by, and at the mercy of, the cotton syndicate!

When the British Government talks of "keeping a firm grip on the Sudan," it means in plain words to protect the field of exploitation of a great cotton growing syndicate—regardless of the consequences to the peasantry, whether in Egypt or the Sudan.

### **THE POSITION OF EGYPT.**

The Egyptian attitude to the question is easily explained. There the peasantry are so ruthlessly exploited by the land companies (to whom they are the occupying tenants) that only by an artificial curtailment of the area under cultivation can the peasant manage to bear the enormous rents imposed upon him.

The development of the Sudan threatens this monopoly at its root. The price of cotton will be at the mercy of the British syndicates as soon as the area has been sufficiently developed. What is even more vital—there is no guarantee that the development of irrigation in the Sudan may not cut off the very Nile flood upon which Egypt depends for its existence.

The conclusion is clear. British Imperialism never retreats except to get a firmer grip. British Imperialism has a more deadly hold over Egypt to-day than it ever had, and the clash between British and Egyptian capitalism is part of the process which will sooner or later bring on the end.

It is not a question whether British Imperialism should be preferred to Egyptian. The question is—when will the workers and peasants end both together?

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