

# The Bournemouth Trade Union Congress

By Earl R. Browder

**A**BDICATION of leadership was the outstanding fact of the Trade Union Congress meeting at Bournemouth, England, September 6 to 11. One year ago the Congress at Scarborough had adopted a militant program against the capitalist offensive and against British imperialism; this year the Congress retreated before the capitalist offensive, refusing even to examine the circumstances of the defeat suffered during the year, and busied itself with discussions on technicalities, tuberculosis cures, etc. With a million miners locked out, in the eighteenth week of struggle, the Congress contented itself with a resolution of good wishes on which all discussion was shut off. Only one proposal for action was submitted to the Congress by the General Council and that dealt with the proposal to establish a trade union university at Easton Lodge; this single proposal of the council was defeated. In all its negative attitudes, in the prevention of debates on vital questions, the General Council had the support of 75 per cent of the Congress. The result was a sterile, unreal gathering, in which the only relief was the constant struggle of the revolutionary elements to open up the burning issues. Confusion, cowardice, tradition, and reaction ruled the Congress. The great British labor movement was left without official leadership.

This, in brief, is the immediate net balance of Bournemouth. It is necessary to examine the separate factors which went into the account to produce such results.

## Churchill-MacDonald Combine to Set Stage.

Winston Churchill was undoubtedly the chief strategist in preparing the Congress. The incalculable factor which menaced the program of the General Council and the bourgeoisie was the possible effects upon the Congress of the desperate struggle going on in the mine fields. The government and coal owners had just failed in their desperate drive in Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire to break the miners' front. The miners were retaliating by a movement to withdraw the safety men. Some sudden new development during the Congress might possibly sweep the delegates from under the control of the reactionary leaders and bring to expression the fighting spirit that still imbues the masses. The problem of how to guard against this danger to the bourgeoisie was solved by Mr. Churchill in collaboration with Ramsay MacDonald; through the instrumentality of the leader of the Labor Party, the miners were tied up in negotiations with the government; Mr. Churchill most astonishingly appeared on the stage in the costume of an angel of peace and good will. The problem was solved by creating the illusion that a settlement was imminent, the Trade Union Congress was warned not to do or say anything that would endanger the delicate negotiations, MacDonald issued daily reports of how

he was "being of service to the miners." The miners were effectively trapped. The little comedy served its purpose well.

## The Relation of Forces in the Congress.

Sitting in the Congress hall throughout the sessions, one received the impression that a small, compact group of right-wing leaders who knew what they wanted, were conducting the Congress through the instrumentality of a majority of muddle-heads, securely imprisoned in the right wing policy but hardly knowing what it is all about and exceedingly fearful of the trade union masses. On the other side were the definite supporters of the Minority Movement. The miners could not be included in any of the three groups; angry, indignant, confused, tied in the trap of the agreement with the General Council, the miners were impotent and isolated in the Congress insofar as using their power was concerned.

The relative voting strength in the Congress of these groups is shown by an analysis of some of the most important votes.

The revolutionary left-wing, led by the Minority Movement, showed its strength particularly on two questions. In the matter of the condemnation of the Minority Movement by the General Council, a motion was offered to reject the report. The vote, with the miners abstaining, was:

|                     |           |
|---------------------|-----------|
| For rejection ..... | 738,000   |
| Against .....       | 2,710,000 |

On the matter of international trade union unity, the revolutionary left wing increased its vote by almost half a million. Jack Tanner, representing the **Amalgamated Engineering Union**, presented an amendment to the unity resolution, declaring for a World Congress, including the Profintern, as the means to unity. The vote on this amendment was:

|                           |           |
|---------------------------|-----------|
| For a World Congress..... | 1,237,000 |
| Against .....             | 2,416,000 |

These two votes registered the highest and lowest strength of the revolutionary section of the Congress.

The minimum voting strength of the extreme right-wing was on the question of international unity. The resolution was very colorless, merely reaffirming the need for international unity and expressing regret that it was not yet achieved. Not satisfied with defeating the amendment by Tanner, calling for a World Congress, the right-wing made a drive also against the resolution, with the result that the vote stood:

|                         |           |
|-------------------------|-----------|
| For the resolution..... | 2,959,000 |
| Against .....           | 814,000   |

It is thus approximately accurate to say that the right-wing had about 20 per cent of the Congress, the revolu-

tionary left-wing about 20 per cent, the miners about 20 per cent, while the confused mass of the delegates without definite orientation represented about 40 per cent. The Congress struggle was between the right and left wings for possession of the center; in this struggle the right-wing dominated, taking the Congress as a whole, while the left-wing won thru on some of the less sharply controversial questions.

## The Equivocal Tone of the Congress.

But if this was a right-wing Congress, still the reaction was forced to take its victory in a negative form, under cover of equivocal declarations and resolutions. It did not demonstrate that the right wing controls the need of the masses but only that they still control the organizational machinery. Ever since May, Thomas, MacDonald, Clynes, Gramp, and other right-wing leaders, have been energetically denouncing the General Strike as a weapon for protecting the workers. But the masses of trade unionists have met this propaganda so coldly, the Communists and the Minority Movement have raised such increased support that the right-wing leaders were afraid to carry their views into the Congress at Bournemouth. In the address of Pugh, as president, reformist and timid though it was from beginning to end, he still found it necessary to say regarding the General Strike, that under similar circumstances "the weapon used by the unions last May will not be left unused," while the only spark of enthusiasm brought into the Congress was in response to his words: "We do not meet in this Congress in any mood of penitence." But these were words designed only to divert resentment away from the actual policy of retreat and surrender now in force; the equivocal expressions throughout the Congress were intended, and were used, as justification for the surrender rather than for the struggle. What is important about them is, that they show the mood of the masses is definitely in the opposite direction than that of the General Council, which is forced to screen itself behind such formulations, rather than such open grovelling before the bourgeoisie as those of Thomas, Cramp, and MacDonald.

## The "American Orientation" of the Right Wing.

In its rapid swing to the right the General Council is adopting ideas and slogans from the bureaucracy of the American Federation of Labor. As always, they are following the lead of the employers in this matter; the "American orientation" was publicly initiated by the "Daily Mail" mission to America. There is now an official governmental delegation to study American methods in labor relations, which includes Ernest Bevin, who is rapidly becoming the dominant figure on the General Council. "Company unions" in the real American style are rapidly introduced into Britain. All this had a definite reflection in the Congress at Bournemouth. The eyes of the right wing are fixed firmly upon that paradise of class collaboration—the United States.

The clearest expression of this fact is in the treatment of the question of wages. In this question is also presented one of the sharpest contrasts between the Bournemouth Congress this year and the Scarborough

Congress in 1925. At Scarborough, Mr. A. B. Swales, then president, said on the question of wages:

"There is a limit to the concessions that the unions can be forced to make. That limit has been reached; union policy will henceforth be to recover lost ground, to re-establish and improve our standard of wages, hours and working conditions, and to co-ordinate and intensify trade union activity for the winning of a larger measure of control in industry for the workers."

In quite a different spirit and form does Pugh deal with the question in his opening address at Bournemouth. A few quotations will show how Pugh paraphrases the Gompers program contained in the Portland manifesto (1923) and the "new wage theory" of the A. F. of L. adopted at Atlantic City (1925):

"They (the new conditions) require from us a new conception of the use and purposes of this Congress, as an Industrial Parliament of Labor . . . for the practical realization of an economic democracy parallel to the power of political democracy. . . ."

"The time has come for us to examine in the light of the new theories, the whole basis and application of the traditional wage policy and methods of determining wages which the Trade Unions have followed."

" . . . A scientific wage policy requires to be thought out in relation to some generally acceptable set of principles . . . Has not the time arrived for us to consider the principle of a basic wage correlated to the index of national production? . . . "

In the speeches of Bevin in the Congress, there was particularly to be heard the "American" note. "Industrial Democracy" was a word often and glibly on his tongue; labor banking and insurance were mentioned as available substitutes for struggle and solidarity. Listening to Bevin and some others at Bournemouth, one could almost believe himself suddenly transported across the Atlantic for a moment; these were echoes from the A. F. of L.

This "Americanization" policy is, of course, impossible of establishment in the British labor movement. The economic foundation is entirely lacking. Not only is Britain a land of low wages in comparison with the United States, but it is steadily declining industrially and politically, while the United States is yet on the upward curve of capitalism. The new policy will, however, serve the General Council well as the basis for new illusions for a few months or a year, while the masses are being sacrificed to the stabilization of British profits.

## Smashing a Tradition at Bournemouth.

The new "scientific wage policy" mentioned by Mr. Pugh, which is to be "correlated to the index of production," is an obscure manner of stating what Mr. Baldwin put into blunt English when he declared that all wages must be reduced. That is the policy urged upon the miners by the General Council. That is what Mr. Bromley published in the **Locomotive Engineers' Journal**, in violation of the agreement made with the miners, in June. In order, apparently, to demonstrate their earnestness in this wage reduction policy, the General Council put forth Mr. Bromley at the Congress as the official spokesman to support a milk-and-water resolution of sympathy for the miners. The miners had protested previously against this hypocritical pretense of Bromley as their supporter, and urged the General Council to name some other member rather than Bromley. The council was determined, however, that no one but Brom-

ley could adequately represent it as a supporter of the miners. Doubtless they were correct in a way; Bromley embodied all the dishonesty, hypocrisy, and treachery with which the council had dealt with the mining situation. Their obstinacy led to the smashing of a tradition of the British Trade Union Congress.

When Bromley rose in the congress to speak, a miner delegate also rose, and demanded that someone else speak instead of Bromley. Immediately the Congress was in an uproar. It was the first opportunity for all the suppressed feelings against the betrayal of the General Strike and the miners to come to the surface. In vain did the gentlemanly Mr. Pugh attempt to restore order; his reading of the rules providing for expulsion of those guilty of disorder intensified the storm. When he ordered the ejection of some of the demonstrating delegates, half the Congress arose and began to sing the **Red Flag**. Above the din rose the strong voice of a delegate, shouting: "You are letting a traitor speak to us. You are traitors, all of you; everyone on the platform." The Congress was adjourned in confusion, after the demonstration had continued half an hour. When, later in the day, Congress reassembled, Richardson of the miners made a statement, saying that the miners felt humiliated by the action of the General Council in naming Bromley to speak on the question but, having made their protest, they were now silent.

This occurrence was without precedent in the previous 57 Congresses of the British trade union movement. It profoundly shocked the members of the General Council, and outraged every one of their instincts of bourgeois decency. Also they were profoundly disturbed. Here was an echo from the rumblings among the masses.

#### International Delegates—Present and Absent.

Of the expected fraternal delegations from abroad, two were absent from the Bournemouth Congress. The sharply contrasting reasons for the absence of each throws a vivid light upon the causes of the division of the international labor movement.

**Frank Farrington**, delegate from the American Federation of Labor, was absent because after he had left America to go to England, it had been discovered that he was on the payroll of the Peabody Coal Corporation, the largest coal company in America, at a salary of \$25,000 per year, at the same time drawing salary from the union at \$6,000 per year. This had proved just a little too much even for the American labor movement to justify, so Farrington's credentials had been cancelled. He had committed the sin which in America is not pardoned; he had been discovered. Still, he was a fit representative of the A. F. of L. bureaucracy.

The other absent delegation was that of the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions. All the capitalist papers in England united in declaring that the General Council was secretly grateful to the government for refusing to allow **Tomsky and Melnichansky** to enter England; nevertheless the Council adopted a formal protest against the exclusion, altho refusing to allow delegates to bring the question before the Congress. The crime of the Russian delegation consisted of representing the eight million unionists who had contributed eight million dollars to the miners in their struggle.

The telegram from the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions was distributed to the delegates on September 9, the fourth day of the Congress. Appended to it was the reply of the General Council, which declared that the telegram "abused the ordinary courtesies expected of fraternal delegates" and that the "General Council has no intention of replying to this ill-instructed and presumptuous criticism." The capitalist daily press took up the cudgels for the General Council and with great headlines and indignant leading editorials attempted to whip up indignation in the Congress against the "intolerable interference in British trade union affairs."

On the whole, however, the Congress received the telegram in a very thoughtful mood. The attempted outbursts by a few delegates received little encouragement and fell flat. Everyone had the feeling, even those who supported the General Council, that this document was the only one in the whole Congress which boldly dealt with the real problems of the British working class. The million organized workers in the Minority Movement, whose voice had been choked off in the Congress by the rule of the General Council, immediately and wholeheartedly identified themselves with the telegram. Arthur Cook declared the following day that he "has a great deal sharper criticism even than Tomsky to direct against the General Council."

From America arrived Mr. Hutchinson, representing the A. F. of L. He apologized for the absence of his colleague, Farrington, which he could not account for. Evidently he didn't like to mention Farrington's little matter of \$25,000 per year. He waved his jeweled fingers about, said that "we in America realize that it is necessary to have capitalists," wished the delegates a jolly time, accepted the gold watch from the chairman, and departed. He was almost as good a representative of American labor leadership as Farrington.

Representing the I. F. T. U. (Amsterdam) was J. W. Brown, one of the secretaries of that body. He made about the same sort of a speech as that last year at Scarborough, but strangely enough, while last year he found himself to the right of the General Council and Congress, this year he seemed almost like a left-winger. He spoke of international unity; he quoted from Tomsky a declaration of the necessity for a single World International, and declared that he supported that view. He said that it was necessary to find immediate tasks upon which unity could find its beginning, laying down a list of eleven such tasks; these included, international financial assistance for strikes and lockouts, and the prevention of international blacklegging. But he didn't say anything about why Amsterdam refused the offer of the Profintern for joint action on these two subjects in aid of the miners' struggle in Britain, nor did he report on what Amsterdam had failed to do alone on these questions.

#### And Where Was the Former "Left Wing"?

The so-called left-wing in the General Council was not evident in the Congress. It had no views on anything. Hicks addressed the Congress twice; first on the question of a certain method of curing tuberculosis, which he recommended to the entire trade union movement; and second, on a question concerning the building trades. On this last point, other building trades dele-

gates denounced Hicks for having split the building trades federation and asked the Congress to take Hicks' resolution off the agenda because it should have been brought to the building workers' organization. This the Congress did, to the discomfiture of Hicks, who was not noticed again until his name was mentioned as one of those re-elected to the General Council. Purcell spoke on international unity; he was against a world congress; he said the I. F. T. U. feels that the split in the world movement is caused by Communist propaganda; that only the British unions were able to overcome that feeling, but the revolutionaries use such bad language that we can get nowhere; he still thought there was a possibility of changing the attitude of the I. F. T. U. and bringing the Russians into Amsterdam; but anyway a world congress would do no good. And that was the "Left Wing" of the General Council.

#### The Real Left Wing—the Minority Movement.

Throughout the Congress there was one group which had a militant fighting policy to offer the British trade unions on every point that was allowed to come before it. That was the group led by members of the Minority Movement. Every resolution on the agenda which dealt with the big problems of the movement, had a Minority Movement member as its sponsor and Minority Movement members as the supporters from the floor of the Congress. They were mostly young men and women, without the long experience of Congress procedure that turns trade union leaders into expert parliamentarians, but with plenty of courage and energy, and the only group in Congress which talked policy in terms of struggle against capitalism instead of surrender to capitalism.

A new line of trade union leaders are being developed for the British labor movement in this group. It included such people as Jack Tanner, of the Amalgamated Engineering Union; Arthur Horner, of the Miners; Elsbury, of the Garment Workers; McLauchlan, of the Iron Fitters; Mrs. Bradshaw, of the Textile Workers; Chandler, of the Railway Clerks; Loeber, of the National Union of Railwaymen; Strain, of the Woodworkers; Tomkins, of the Furnishing Trades; and others. These were the leaders of the delegates who cast 800,000 votes for every revolutionary proposal placed before the Congress.

It is unfortunately impossible to list A. J. Cook as one of the left leaders at the Congress. His principal appearance was for the purpose of calling upon Congress to stop discussion of the betrayal of the miners by the General Council. His ill-advised pact of silence with the General Council did more than anything else to reduce the Bournemouth Congress to impotence and placed the seal of official approval upon the general retreat now

taking place—which threatens disaster to the British movement. In the brilliant struggle of the miners, Cook has rendered some great services; but he has also made many blunders and none more serious than this shameful silence at Bournemouth.

#### Two Left Resolutions Adopted.

Among the generally reactionary decisions of the Congress, two resolutions marking progress must be noted. One of these was that calling for amalgamations among the existing unions along industrial lines, defeating the confusionist "one big union" proposals. The other was the resolution on the war danger in the East, brought forward by the Miners' Federation, which pointed out that the aggressions of British imperialism in China, which are connected with the preparations for war against the Soviet Union, demand united resistance from the trade union movement. Both were adopted by large majorities.

#### British Unions Becoming Ripe for New Leadership.

The Congress made clear beyond question the bankruptcy of the General Council, including all of its former groupings. There is no essential differences between them and all are agents or prisoners of the British bourgeoisie, its social institutions, its ideology. This leadership is incapable of conducting a struggle against capitalism, or even for the protection of past gains.

But the masses are in a militant mood; they wish to fight to protect their standards of living. Already they are beginning to elect to the Congress men and women who stand for a fighting program. The Minority Movement has united a million of such trade unionists already, and other millions are being swiftly brought to the same position.

Out of this situation a new leadership must come to power in the British unions. But this can only be realized out of a sharp and relentless struggle against not only the brazen treachery of a Thomas, but also against the illusion of the so-called "left" that capitulates to Thomas, against the illusions of the "new scientific wage theories" and the Americanized methods of class collaboration, and against all weaknesses in its own ranks.

As the continued decline of the British capitalist economy inevitably forces new struggles upon the British proletariat, so will the new leadership rise to power in the British unions. It will be a difficult and painful process; only the first steps were taken at Bournemouth. These must be followed up swiftly, determinedly. The entire revolutionary trade union movement of the world must study the British problems closely and carefully, and render all possible assistance to the British comrades in their great and tremendously important task.