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The British Left Wing Movement Today

The Present Situation of the English National Minority Movement

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THE period of capitalistic decline, which is the marked characteristic of the present period, has brought changes of policy and tactics in the Trade Union Movement in England, which ten years ago would have been thought impossible.

The one-time happy-go-lucky toleration of all elements within the unions is giving place to some of the worst features of continental bureaucracy. It had been the boast of the trade union leadership in this country that acute differences of opinion could exist within the movement without engendering personal animosity between those who stood on the right and those who stood on the left; that within the broad structure and constitution of the unions there was scope for the full expression and propagation of what were known as "advanced opinions."

Before and during the war there existed in the important unions what were known as Vigilance Committees, Shop Stewards' Councils, Unofficial Reform Committees, Amalgamation Committees, etc. These, while being nominally attacked, were never subjected to the suppression and disruption that characterises the attack of the existing leadership on the National Minority Movement.

Old Leadership Fails

As the capitalist offensive has developed in intensity, forcing the leaders and unions into conflicts on a mass scale, the old leadership of the Trade Union Movement has shown more clearly than ever its inability to realize the implications of the new phase of class struggle in the post-war period.

As a result, since 1921 there has been a steady succession of defeats in struggles involving the fundamental questions of wages, hours, workshop conditions and trade union

rights and practices. This has led to dissatisfaction which expressed itself with the rise of the Minority Movement in a relentless exposure of the leadership responsible for such a situation.

When the British Bureau of the Red International of Labor Unions was established in January, 1920, its first task, of course, was the popularisation of the principles for which the R. I. L. U. stood. It was not until 1924 that serious attempts were made to link up into one organization, the National Minority Movement, under the direction of a common leadership, all the left-wing and advanced elements that were in existence throughout the Trade Union Movement.

Right Wing Starts Oppression

The bureaucracy in 1924 did not see in the Minority Movement an organization that called for any great hostility on their part, and the late General Secretary of the Trade Union Congress, Fred Bramley, benevolently declared in the *Daily Herald*, in reply to an article on the "Red Peril": — "I would urge those who represent advanced minority views inside the unions, to seek a remedy for their grievances through the proper use of trade union rules and opportunities." (June 26th, 1924).

At our first National Conference, when we brought together for the first time all the elements previously scattered throughout the multiplicity of unofficial committees outlined above, it was still possible to receive messages of good will from such reactionary leaders of to-day as George Hicks, Ben Turner and others.

However, as our groups became well-organized and the Minority Movement, developing its power and influence, began to express itself in a variety of ways, the official bureaucracy

began to reverse their tactics. At first they contented themselves with issuing instructions to their union branches forbidding the use of any union finance for affiliation purposes, in connection with the Minority Movement. This method failing, instructions were issued to the branches that no correspondence from the Minority Movement was to be read out and no delegates appointed to attend our conferences. The failure of these tactics is best seen by quoting the figures of delegates attending our conferences since 1924. In 1924, 270 delegates attended our Annual Conference; in 1925, 683 delegates; in 1926, 883 delegates; in 1927, 718 delegates. The latter figure in our opinion whilst showing a decrease, in view of the intensified hostility of the bureaucracy, represents our greatest achievement. It was the phenomenal success of this last conference which caused the General Council to attack the Minority Movement so vindictively at the Trade Union Congress in 1927 at Edinburgh.

Suspension

There is no further doubts as to the course the struggle is taking to-day. In the early part of 1927 the National Union of General & Municipal Workers suspended five members of the Minority Movement from official positions in this Union, because they attended a conference organized by us in connection with the formulation of a programme of special activity in this union. In addition, five other branches were suspended from participation in the administrative affairs of the union, and all finance withheld from them, as the Executive hoped that as a result of these branches being unable to pay any unemployment and sickness benefits, they would be forced to withdraw from all connection with the Minority Movement.

The Executive Committee of this Union went even further: they issued a document which all members of this union who are candidates for official positions must sign before they are allowed to go forward for election. The document is to the effect that the candidates are neither members of the Minority Movement nor the Community Party, and do not agree with the policy advocated by these organizations.

Our members, of course, were instructed to refuse to sign such a document, and to state openly their adherence to our principles.

This was followed by an attack from the General Council on all those trades councils

affiliated to us. The significance of this attack cannot be understood unless a few particulars are given regarding the General Council and its relation to the trades councils.

Eyes On Trades Councils

It was due to the pioneering work of the old British Bureau of the R. I. L. U. that working class attention was first focussed on the importance and potentialities of the local trades councils. Two national conferences were held under our auspices, with the object of showing how the local trades councils could become the general staff of the whole working class movement in the localities, and creating an agitation for the acceptance of their affiliation to the Trades Union Congress.

At the last three Trades Union Congresses the minority opposition has raised this issue, each time to be defeated, but the General Council in 1924 took steps to organize a National Conference of Trades Councils under their auspices—this step being taken as the result of our pressure. Since then they have regularly held an annual conference of trades councils and a Joint Consultative Committee of the General Council and local trades council representatives has been established.

One of the marked features of our Minority Movement conference has been the large attendance of trades councils, all the more important ones being represented; 22 of them actually affiliated to the Minority Movement.

The General Council on January 26, 1927, issued a document to all trades councils in the country intimating that no trades council would be allowed to participate in the coming annual conference of trades councils to be held in April 1927, if they were in any way identified with the Minority Movement. The three principal officers of all trades councils had to sign a document the decisive clause of which read as follows:—"We declare we are not affiliated to the Minority Movement."

The Yellow Dog Contract

In passing it is pertinent (in view of the document-signing process that is now the favourite manouver of the reformists) to draw attention to a document issued at an earlier date, by another organization. On July 8th, 1834, the Master Builders of London issued a document which all building trade workers had to sign before they could obtain employment. The chief point of the document was:—"We

declare we are not members of a trade union." One of the bitterest struggles in trade union history took place to get that infamous document withdrawn, and it is fitting comment that the existing leadership of our Movement to-day resort to exactly the same tactics as did the most brutal section of the capitalist class in the early days of British capitalism in their endeavours to smash the growing forces of British trade unionism.

The Minority Movement is confident that just as the capitalists were defeated then, so shall the existing leadership to-day be defeated.

The latest union to adopt a policy of disruption is the National Association of Printers and Assistants (NATSOPA) who in their rules have a clause which specifies that any member who has misappropriated finance or committed a breach of trust shall not be eligible to become an official of the union. This rule which originally aimed at keeping out financial defaulters and persons convicted of criminal offences, is now being made to apply to any person who is a member of the Minority Movement, and these are automatically disqualified from standing for any office in the union.

These are the signs which are the best tribute to the influence and strength of the Minority Movement. It was a member of the General Council, A. Conley, who at the Bournemouth Congress in 1926 in defending the General Council's policy against the Minority Movement said:—"If the General Council had agreed to this affiliation, within a short time the Minority Movement would become the majority." And at the Edinburgh Congress, J. Walker, National Organiser of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, said:—"The Minority Movement is a misnomer, because after all is said and done, supposing Mr. Pollitt and the other members of the Minority Movement are successful—and you people had better be careful not to allow them to be successful—be-

cause like Othello you will find your occupations gone if they become a majority."

Yes, despite our mistakes, we go from strength to strength; wherever trade unionists have the opportunity of registering their choice between the reformist leadership and the revolutionary leaders springing from our ranks, there is clear evidence of what the workers require. In the Fifeshire coalfield, after four ballots, the Communist and Minority Movement nominees were elected to two vacant posts as miners' agents, and to five seats on the Scottish Mineworkers' Executive. In Larnarkshire, nine Communist and Minority Movement nominees were elected to the Scottish Executive—out of a quota of eleven, and the Communist nominees for three official posts of the Scottish Mineworkers' Union were all elected—our candidate beating Bob Smillie. In each case it was a clear fight between the revolutionary workers and the reformists.

Reactionaries Will Split

What does the above situation indicate as the next line of attack from the bureaucracy, for every day there are increasing signs of an intensified hostility? I am confident that the reformists will endeavor to force a split in the British Trade Union Movement in those areas where our candidates have been successful for official positions.

We must note very carefully the new industrial peace campaign now being carried on by the General Council and the tremendous capitalist offensive that with the introduction of the Trade Union Act is about to take place. Already the textile workers of Lancashire and Yorkshire are in the thick of a fight on wage reductions and a lengthening of working hours. The German Iron & Steel fight on the question of lengthening of working hours will have repercussions on the metal industry in this country, and a new period of intensive class struggle is opening up before the British working class.

A new eight page pamphlet, "The Federal Anti-Strike Law", will be issued by the Trade Union Educational League as No. 21 of the Labor Herald Library series, and will contain the answer to the arguments of the American Bar Association and Matthew Woll for a revival of the Kansas Compulsory arbitration Law in a worse form and on a national scale. This pamphlet contains the devastating criticism of the new slave law which the national secretary of the T. U. E. L. was prepared to deliver at the American Bar Association's open hearings but was prevented from speaking as soon as the chairman of the Bar Association committee ascertained the nature of his address.

The pamphlet will sell: single copies, five cents; in bundles up to 100, three cents, 100 to 1,000 two cents, over 1,000 a cent and a half. Order from Trade Union Educational League, 2 West 15th Street, New York City.