

# THE MANŒUVRES OF THE T.U.C.

*By HARRY POLLITT*

**T**HE New Year opens with a spate of speeches, articles, and resolutions from reformist trade union leaders, that breathe a great show of resistance to the attacks on the employed and unemployed workers.

What has happened? Have the fruits of Mondism, lower wages, speeding-up, increased unemployment, increased accidents, come home to roost with such force that there has been some change in the fundamental policy of the reformist leaders?

Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no change in the policy of class collaboration; there is a change in the character of the public declarations, in order to cover up the same old policy of helping the capitalists to solve the economic crisis at the expense of the working class.

## *Why these Manœuvres?*

The reformists are learning from all the recent economic struggles just as the workers are learning. It has long been plain to all that the strikes that have taken place since 1928 have been against the whole line of the reformist leaders. But in the strikes of 1932 something new has been appearing and it is this that the reformists have noted, and now manœuvre to destroy. That is, the workers have begun to forge their own forms of leadership and organisation, independent of the trade union leaders.

It is this first beginning, in the building up of authoritative independent leadership and organisation of economic struggles, that is so vital for the whole future line of the fight against the employers' offensive, and is so dangerous for the reformist leaders that it is responsible for the new tone in their speeches, articles, and resolutions.

In spite of all weaknesses, the strikes of the London Dockers, Lightermen, Miners and Cotton workers, the fights of the London Busmen and the preparations now being made by the Railwaymen's Vigilance Movement, all have shown an initiative, a growing revolt of the union branches against the Head Office line and policy, attempts to unite the activity in the factory with the work in the branch, new ideas, new forms of mass action as in the mass picketing in Lancashire, that give the guarantee that, providing the revolutionary workers seize the opportunities that

now lie to hand, a firm basis can be built up, that ensures the successful leadership by the workers themselves of all the strike movements in the future.

It is true that in all these strikes, the workers have not been able to prevent their leaders calling off strikes on terms that have meant worsened conditions and lower wages ; they have not been able to prevent strike-breaking, they have not been able to bring up rapidly the reinforcements and widen the strike areas so as to achieve victory for the workers. But they have shown the way forward, they have exposed as never before the reformist leaders, and they have laid the basis for the swift development of a great mass movement in the factories, and trade unions, that points the way forward to unity.

It is this new phase of the employed workers' fight, together with the mighty movement of the unemployed, as seen in the street battles in Belfast and Birkenhead and in the support given to the National Hunger March, that have acted as the warning signal to the trade union leaders.

Now as the offensive against the workers gathers in intensity, as revolutionary consciousness deepens, as new sections of workers actively participate in the class struggle, these leaders again attempt to retain and strengthen their hold upon the workers, by this shameless demagogic, their platform trickery and cunning, while they do not take *one practical step to give living effect to their words*.

It is therefore necessary to sound a sharp note of warning, so that these "left" manœuvres may not only be exposed, but as a result, the workers' independent fight may be strengthened. It is timely to remind workers of the similarity of some of the speeches being made now with those that were made in the nine months prior to the General Strike in 1926.

Every worker knows only too well what the betrayal of that historic strike has meant in the factories and in the homes. We have to see that such a thing never happens again, for in the present period of daily sharpening economic crisis, a repetition of such betrayals means losses ten times more serious than those which followed 1926.

The recent Twelfth Congress of the Communist Party had before it a wealth of rich experiences on the lessons of recent economic and unemployed struggles, and in particular the part played by the reformist union leaders. In summing up these experiences, the Congress resolution on this point on the Agenda, states :

As the mass struggle advances, and the forms of independent organisation and leadership grow in strength, the trade union leaders, even while they hinder in every way the day to day struggle of the workers, will make increasing "Left" manœuvres in order to maintain their influence and power. (Resolution 12th Party Congress : Lessons of Economic Struggles.)

Is this formulation a "Communist distortion," as is so often alleged? Or is it not being proved true with every day that passes? A number of practical examples will prove this point. Let us take Mr. Bevin, the "Dockers' K.C." He is reputed to be the driving force and leader of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress. These extracts from his speeches at three initial stages of the working class struggle, will sharply reveal the move, stage by stage, from open and fulsome adulation of the employers, to a hinting of resistance to wage attacks and then, after the experiences of the Dockers, and particularly the Busmen to the full stage thunder and declamation of having reached "the bitter end."

*The Leaders' Words—*

When the battle was raging on the question of the Mond-Turner Conferences, this was Mr. Bevin's line:

**Mr. Bevin at Swansea—**

The members of the T.U.C. were now engaged in discussions with a representative group of employers on a wide range of problems. They were asked, "How can you go into conference with people who tried to beat you in 1926, people who have fought you?"

His answer was that he regarded the change of attitude of these people as an indication that Labour had won the first round. (*Daily Herald*, April 30, 1928.)

The workers know only too well what they have lost in wage cuts, how unemployment has increased, &c., since this "change of attitude" on the part of the employers.

When in 1931, the employers were attacking the South Wales miners and the Lancashire weavers, and threats were being made against the Dockers, this was Mr. Bevin's line:

The first big union that can, if its members' wages are attacked, resist that attack successfully, can turn the wages situation in this country and right throughout Europe. (*Daily Herald*, April 20, 1931.)

That speech was used to create the impression that if any members of Mr. Bevin's Union were attacked, he would fight, that he would "turn the wages situation in this country." It did create that impression. But it did not prevent him accepting a wage cut for the Dockers later in the year, without even troubling to take a ballot vote, and when 4,000 London dockers came out unofficially against this cut, calling it a Communist attempt to disrupt the Union.

And now, with the lessons of the Lancashire strikes, and above all, the tousing that he has had from the London Busmen, he comes out in full song at Grimsby to this effect:

The same attack on wages that started one and a half years ago has started again. The employers have made a demand on the railwaymen. If the National Wages Board gives a reduction, and if by any chance it is accepted, then we shall be the next.

The Executive has decided on this occasion that whether we win or lose, we are going to accept the challenge, and fight it out to the bitter end. (*Daily Herald*, October 8, 1932.)

Now we do not rule out the possibility of Mr. Bevin leading a big strike in order to retain his influence and power with the members of his union, but that strike will never be led to victory by Mr. Bevin, for his whole political line is that of reformism, however much he attempts to disguise it.

One simple test of how far such leaders are sincere in their demagogery would surely be their active participation and preparation day in and day out now for a successful railwaymen's strike. For if there is one body of workers who exercise tremendous power, it is the railwaymen. A railway strike would strike a mighty blow at the whole character of the employers' offensive. Taking place in the present situation facing British capitalism, it could force the Companies to withdraw their demands. It would "turn the wages situation in this country and right throughout Europe."

#### *—And Their Actions.*

But where are these steps? What solidarity meetings are the General Council organising? What leaflets are they issuing to the workers urging support for the railwaymen? What working class conferences are they organising to build up support? Stern facts (the facts that are so beloved by Mr. Citrine) show that not a finger is being lifted by any of the General Council leaders, although their speeches are in tune with Mr. Bevin.

On the contrary, when a suggestion was made of a working agreement between Mr. Bevin's union and the railwaymen's union, it was indignantly denied by the former. Later, when another statement appeared that the Transport Workers' Union had made a working arrangement with three big unions in the distributive trades, Mr. Bevin described it as follows:

It is too funny for words. There is nothing in it, so far as our Union is concerned it has never been considered. (*Daily Herald*, December 12, 1932.)

There you have the whole bag of tricks exposed. One minute, "a fight to the bitter end"; the next, when a suggestion has been made that consolidation of the workers' power has been effected, it becomes "too funny for words."

Take a further example, which is even more revealing as showing the character of the manœuvres the trade union leaders will make. The National Union of Seamen is notorious on all the seven seas. Wherever trade unionists gather, whatever their calling, and the N.U.S. is mentioned, the description is always the same: "the Ship-owners' Union."

In December, a Conference of the International Transport Workers' Federation was held in Amsterdam. It was presided over by Mr. Bevin and attended by a delegation from the National Union of Seamen, headed by the General Secretary, Mr. Spence. The *Daily Herald* of December 5 informs us the following resolution was unanimously adopted:

The economic struggles going on between the capitalist countries are causing untold suffering and widespread unemployment, and are leading to attack after attack on the standard of living. Reductions of wages already imposed have proved futile, and have made conditions of trade worse. Attacks on conditions, such as the manning of ships, in certain countries, are, in addition to worsening conditions of labour, endangering safety at sea.

It was imperative, therefore, that further reductions should be resisted by all possible means.

In the early part of 1932 the N.U.S. recommended a heavy wage cut, again without taking a ballot vote. Now, resistance is to be the order of the day!

#### *Dividing the Unemployed*

And so one could go on, giving example after example. But one other will suffice. It is one relating to the General Council of the Trades Union Congress and its proposal to organise demonstrations of the unemployed in the New Year.

We have not space to go into the foul record of the General Council regarding its treatment of the unemployed, how it sponsored the Anomalies Bill, how it tries to split the ranks of the unemployed by asking Trades Councils to form Local Unemployed Associations in opposition to the National Unemployed Workers' Movement, but it makes a disgusting story in the light of their present proposals.

Sufficient to recall that last September at their Congress in Newcastle, they not only refused, on the direct initiative of Mr. Citrine, the Secretary of the General Council, to receive a deputation of the Unemployed, they caused their Congress Hall to be so surrounded by police, to protect them from the unemployed, that one of the Congress delegates was compelled to protest as follows:

The display of force outside this Congress Hall to-day is a disgrace to the whole Trade Union Movement. We have had these displays before—especially at Swansea.

It is not a credit to the Trade Union Movement to see the number of police and "cossacks" parading the streets outside. (F. Rowlands, House and Ship Painters, Newcastle T.U.C., 1932.)

Later, when the National Hunger March was being organised, and while it was winding its triumphant way to London, the Council warned local Trades Councils to boycott the March, and every mean despicable action possible was done to try and place obstacles and difficulties in the way of the Marchers.

Yet the March roused the whole country. It evoked the mightiest response ever seen in London.

The General Council have noted this. They are going to organise great unemployed demonstrations in all the principal towns, and for a central demonstration, delegations of the unemployed are to be brought in charabancs to London, in order to get the right Cup Final atmosphere.

Then the same Council that refused the Unemployed at Newcastle the right to set out their case, are to pray for the right of a petition to be presented at the Bar of the House of Commons, setting out the case of the unemployed.

It is said that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery, and surely these copy-book methods of the General Council are the best indications that the fights of the unemployed, the Hunger March led by the N.U.W.M., have not only received mass support and approval, but have forced the General Council to make their "left" moves in order to attempt to retain their influence and hold in the working class movement. Thus does reformist life and practice confirm the analysis of the Communist Congress.

#### *What Must be Done*

What does it all mean for the workers? It means that the issues which are being taken up by the reformist leaders, resistance to wage cuts, fight against unemployment, must be taken up with redoubled force and energy by the militant workers, and the way paved for the rapid forging of the workers' own independent leadership.

When the reformist leaders speak about resistance to wage cuts and fighting against unemployment, it means that in the factories, the trade union branches, and in the Labour Exchanges and localities, there is tremendous unrest and discontent, there is growing revolt, there are the beginnings of mass movements.

To divert all this into safe legal channels, to disorganise the fight, to keep the workers divided, to surrender the everyday interests of the workers, to help the capitalists solve the crisis at the workers' expense, this is the aim and intention. But it is covered by skilful phrases, by cunning resolutions. By creating the impression "Well, the leaders are going to fight this time," or "at last they've woken up."

Therefore the militant workers, while advancing every issue that comes up in the struggle, by making the most simple and practical proposals of organising and winning the fight, have at the same time to expose mercilessly the manœuvrings of the reformist leaders. Not by general phrases, but in a reasoned way, by contrasting speeches with performances, and taking practical steps to build up the movement for independent leadership. For example, amongst the railwaymen, calling Shop and Depot meetings, rallying every member to the Union Branch meetings, organising militant groups that have the support of the Branches in all the Shops, Sheds and Depots, sending delegates to the Railwaymen's Vigilance Movement, getting Branches to elect delegates to this rank-and-file movement, bringing Clerks, Drivers, Firemen, Porters, Cleaners, Signalmen, Platelayers, &c., all together, raising the problems of strike organisation and leadership, winning the support of local Trades Councils and Trade Union Branches, explaining the actual meaning of the Companies' demands, the profits of the Companies, the past wage-cuts; explaining the experiences and lessons of the Lancashire weavers and spinners' strikes, how their leaders made brave speeches, but executed treacherous deeds, how those strikes could have been won if the strikers had taken the leadership into their own hands, and formed their own strike committees and strike organisations, relating these experiences to what has happened to the railwaymen in the past; how the Cramps, Bromleys and Walkdens have made brave speeches last year, and then signed for wage-cuts, showing how even now when the critical hours of strike preparations are running out, the leaders are taking no practical steps to organise strike action, to organise general working class solidarity, the organisation of financial support, the building of a common understanding with the Road Transport workers, both traffic and passenger, for no blacklegging, &c., &c.

#### *A Militant Independent Leadership*

In this practical and concrete way can the "left" manœuvres of the reformist leaders be unmasked, their influence destroyed, the movement purged from their disorganising and treacherous policy. And the mass energy and initiative, the genuine and honest rank-and-file workers brought forward into the revolutionary leadership of the daily struggle in the factories and in the unions—that alone can give the guarantee for the successful leadership and organisation of the whole workers' fight; that alone lays the firm basis in every industry and union for the development of broad unofficial movements which will be brought together in a common mass movement uniting and co-ordinating the whole struggle under a common leadership of the workers themselves, freed from the present corrupting influence of the reformist leaders, which could take on the form of a mighty Trade Union Militant League, opening up new

paths and victories for the organised and unorganised workers of Britain. And to any worker who is sceptical about whether such a line and policy can be carried out, we will give a concrete example.

The experiences of the London Busmen's Rank-and-File Movement should be carefully studied by the militant workers in every industry. The determination of the mass of London busmen (shown in a 4 to 1 majority ballot vote to resist the Company's terms) was expressed through the setting up of a Rank-and-File Committee, consisting of branch representatives who reported back to the branches and secured confirmation of the Committee's decisions. Funds to carry out a propaganda campaign were raised through the branches ; leaflets, pamphlets, and the *Busman's Punch* were sold through the branches ; speakers from the Rank-and-File Committee addressed the branches ; a most successful series of mass meetings and demonstrations were carried through. Nor was the question of solidarity lost sight of. Leaflets for tramwaymen and Underground workers were distributed, and all trade unionists were invited to the mass meetings ; there was even a special leaflet explaining the busmen's case to passengers, which had a very good effect. And all of this work was carried out by a committee drawing its authority from the garages and branches, who looked to it to lead the fight against the Company *independently of the Trade Union officials, but with the full force of the Trade Union branches and garages behind it.*

The situation is ripe in every industry and union for the development of similar movements of the rank-and-file. In this way alone can the workers build up their own leadership and organisation that can defend their everyday interests, successfully win strikes, and establish a mass authoritative revolutionary trade union opposition.