After the Brighton T.U.C.

by HARRY POLLITT

IT is always an interesting political experience to contrast the deliberations of the Trades Union Congress with those of the Labour Party Conference, and the Brighton Conference was no exception.

Indeed, perhaps the outstanding impression created in the minds of serious political observers was the contrast between the Bournemouth Labour Party Conference, with its victory and illusory atmosphere accompanied by the complete domination of the platform, and the Brighton Trades Union Congress with its sober and serious facing up to acute and urgent political and economic problems and the positive and constructive role of leadership played by the delegates from the floor.

It is not without pride that I say this difference was undoubtedly because of the part played by so many speakers who are members of the Communist Party as well as active workers in their trade union. It also explains why the Morrisons will move heaven and earth to prevent Communists representing their organisations at the Labour Party Conferences, because they realise the difference it would make in the whole job of formulating policy and deciding issues of leadership.

One of the reasons, of course, why a Trades Union Congress essentially takes on a more serious character than the Labour Party Conference, is that the delegates are representing organisations which are daily and actively engaged in the class struggle, delegates who come up every day against problems arising from issues concerning wages, hours, compensation, Factory Acts, factory and trade union organisations and the whole series of new problems arising out of the drive for nationalisation and increased production.

They, at least, and especially those delegations direct from the factories, have no illusions about what the struggle to maintain or improve working-class conditions means in actual practice. They are closer to the workers, reflect their moods and desires, have their fingers on the pulse of working-class opinion where it always expresses itself most freely and with the least reserve—the factories and trade union branches.

This is fully reflected in the report of the work of the General Council in between the meetings of the Trade Union Congress. It may be useful to give an idea of the multitude of problems the Council has had to deal with since the September, 1945, Congress.

Disputes between unions and organisation problems; trades councils; women's issues; compensation; factory acts; problems of production; colonial questions; international issues; war pensions; reconstruction; safety and welfare; regional boards;

taxation; U.N.O.; unemployment; wages and wages councils; arbitration; health issues; nursing profession; national insurance; local government; income tax; industrial diseases; education. And all these heads indicate only a fraction of the problems the General Council has had to deal with.

One of the outstanding features of the Brighton Congress was the constructive character of many of the delegates' contributions on the various items in the General Council's report, and more and more this report becomes one of the most important features of the work of Congress.

The whole position relating to the scope of the issues the General Council has to deal with raises some new problems also for discussion, which we will touch upon in the concluding section of this article.

One has to take this background into account in trying to assess the significance of the Brighton Congress, otherwise one fails to realise the full import of its decisions and what they mean in terms of warning to the Government.

There was a serious realisation at the Brighton Congress that new pages in trade union history are about to be written, that a new phase is opening in the relation of modern trade unionism to the new problems of organisation, direction and control arising from the developments associated with the nationalisation of some industries, the existence of working parties in other industries and the general new conception of State guidance and planning in regard to industry as a whole.

This attitude was reflected in the careful attention given to certain parts of the presidential address of Mr. Charles Dukes, who quite rightly laid a special emphasis on this side of the situation.

All of us concerned with the whole future development of trade unionism in the new conditions have a lot of hard thinking to do on the new questions which are now on the agenda for speedy solution.

One got the impression at Brighton, listening to the debates, or in conversations in the lobbies, that however the Labour Government may think nationalisation is to be limited both with regard to its scope and its direction, this is certainly not in the minds of the active trade unionists in industry.

And one's strongest impression in relation to this point was the concern felt about the whole future perspective of British industry and trade. When George Isaacs, M.P., mentioned the preparations of the Government to meet "a coming slump," there was not only a gasp among the delegates, who were thinking of the pledge given at the General Election of a policy of full employment, there was an obvious clear recognition of where the danger of the Government's present foreign policy is leading—to the isolation of Britain, a weakening of its economic position, and because of its dependence on America, the danger of being drawn into the vortex of an American economic crisis, about which even the *Daily Herald* on November 2 had to issue a serious warning.

Mr. Isaacs unconsciously helped to strengthen the opposition to the Government's policy concerning Anders' Polish army in Britain; Greece; Spain and foreign policy as a whole, and in particular our participation in an Anglo-American bloc directed against the Soviet Union.

It is also noteworthy that hardly had the Congress terminated than the Prime Minister had to ask the General Council to meet him to discuss the serious economic position this country has to face. He had a tremendous opportunity to do so when he addressed the Congress itself, for then he was addressing the most responsible men and women direct from the workshops. For it is these men who have to drive

policies through in mine, mill, shipyard, factory and field.

He did not do so. Instead, he allowed himself to be manoeuvred by Bevin and Morrison into using the Congress platform for a vicious attack upon the Communist Parties of every country in Europe and for a similar attack upon important trade unions for having resolutions critical of the Government's foreign policy on the agenda.

It was unwarranted and unworthy of the Prime Minister of Britain. It was a speech that no other Prime Minister as the head of the State would be misguided enough to make.

Attlee might very well think over the relationship of forces in Europe, and the need for Britain to form new trading relationships with these countries to counteract an economic collapse in America, before he again makes such a stupid political blunder, for Britain is no longer in a position where it can lay the law down to any country in Europe, with perhaps the exception of Franco-Spain and Royalist fascist Greece.

So far as the Congress was concerned, Attlee's speech missed fire, and the delegate who so forcibly shouted out "Rubbish" was unquestionably expressing the minds of a large section of the Congress. Attlee got his reply sure enough in regard to Greece, Spain and foreign policy as a whole, for the debates and voting on these issues took place *after* Attlee had spoken. Like Isaacs, he too unconsciously helped to stiffen the Congress views on these questions.

Let the resolution of the Electrical Trades Union on foreign policy be placed on record, for despite everything in Congress week that Bevin, Churchill and Attlee could do, it received 2,440,000 votes against 3,557,000; and the unions whose votes are included in this total, represent the cream of the trade union movement in organisation, education and political understanding.

Foreign Policy

This Congress views with serious concern certain aspects of the Government's foreign policy. We note that the policy pursued in Greece has strengthened the hands of the reactionary forces, facilitated favourable conditions for the return of the monarchy and led to the suppression of the progressive forces.

In Spain, the continuation of economic and diplomatic relations with General Franco assists in maintaining a fascist state of society.

In Germany the failure to de-Nazify the country and establish democratic institutions and economic control is in opposition to the agreement reached at Potsdam.

The relationship between the Soviet Union and this country has deteriorated during the past twelve months due to the policy of Anglo-American domination, and the isolation of the Soviet Union, along with the tying of the economy of Britain with that of Capitalist America is in our view extremely dangerous and one that may prejudice the fulfilment of the Government's progressive programme outlined in "Let Us Face the Future." —*Electrical Trades Union.*

The Brighton Trades Union Congress in this formidable minority vote, as in its attitude towards Anders' Polish Army, Greece and Spain, represented a message of hope to the workers of Poland, Greece and Spain that will help them enormously.

There can now be no misunderstanding about what the main demands of the trade union movement are. It wants increased wages, the 40-hour week; more consultation and responsibility in relation both to nationalisation and increased production. It wants a stronger trade union movement in the colonial countries and is ready to play its part in helping forward such movements. It wants the World Federation of Trade Unions to become a mighty world unifying force and it wants the speediest establishment of trade departments of the W.F.T.U. that is possible.

By its reception of the fraternal delegate of the Soviet trade unions, the careful attention it gave to his speech, the Trades Union Congress once again demonstrated its strong desire for the closest possible economic, political and cultural ties with the Soviet Union.

It is ready to back every attack on capitalism that the Government is prepared to organise. There is a restiveness and alarm about the representatives of Big Business who are being given responsible positions in industries down for nationalisation and those that are to have a measure of State control and guidance. This is leading to a dangerous cynicism, which is fatal for any effective drive to secure the all-round increase in production this nation so urgently needs. Nowhere did you find at Brighton that feeling of conviction and elan about nationalisation that you find in other European countries, which Attlee so gratuitously insults. This is all the more dangerous because it is the Trade Union Congress which has always led the fight for real nationalisation.

The recent speeches of Cripps in relation to the capacity of the workers to direct industry and that of Morrison in regard to the profit motive, only confirm the suspicions and cynicism of the active trade unionists in the workshops.

The sooner it is understood that these workers can be won to make the all-out drive for increased production, the better for the nation. But *it can only be done by proving to them that nationalisation means immediate benefits for the working-class at the expense of the capitalist class, and by a complete reversal of all foreign policy and the operation of one in which a Labour Britain is working in the closest co-operation with the Soviet Union and all other progressive Governments in Europe.*

Until these two fundamental approaches are made to the situation, then Attlee can address the General Council and make pious exhortations about production until he is blue in the face, there will not be the response that otherwise would willingly be given. Especially when the shadow of an American economic crisis and its dangers for Britain are so openly admitted by the official organ of the Labour Party and Trades Union Congress—the *Daily Herald.* Let us quote that warning:—

> All those in Britain who are concerned with our national recovery and prosperity will watch anxiously the economic antics which are being reported from the United States. Those antics are a brilliant lesson in how not to conduct a modern economic system. They also carry a pressing warning to this country, both for the immediate future and for the years rather further ahead.
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> While we press on with the World Food Board Plans and the international Trade Conference in London, concrete schemes affecting both internal and external British policy ought to be got ready against the danger of a new wave of depression in the United States.—Editorial, the *Daily Herald,* November 2, 1946.

The whole new situation into which we are now so visibly moving gives a quite new emphasis to the part the Trades Union Congress has to play. Just as in past times, new experiences, events and forward developments of the trades union movement have caused the Trades Union Congress to make adjustments in its methods of leadership and policy, so now a new review has to be made.

In 1921 it was felt necessary to reorganise the old historic Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress, and to have a General Council, elected on a new basis and with a new conception of leadership. At Hull in 1924, for the first time the Trades Union Congress adopted a Charter

setting out for the world to see the aims of British trade unionism.

Since the General Council replaced the Parliamentary Committee, its functions, duties and responsibilities have increased year by year, and there can be no doubt as to the great part played by Lord Citrine, in helping the General Council and the Trades Union Congress to become one of the strongest and most formidable sections of the labour movement of Britain, one that is no poor relation of the Labour Party, but a vital and responsible movement, that has made possible the rise of the Labour Party to power, and helped to formulate policies that Governments have been compelled to recognise.

Earlier in this article I mentioned the multiplicity of issues the General Council now has to undertake and for the purposes of discussion, I would like to make a suggestion about the future role of the General Council.

With the nationalisation of certain industries, the Government are naturally calling upon the trade unions to allow some of their leaders to assume positions of responsibility in such industries. A case in point is the appointment of Lord Citrine and Ebby Edwards to the Coal Board. There are bound to be further appointments of this character.

But the point now arises that with the more responsible and recognised position trade unionism is going to play in industry, does this not also demand a fresh review of the part the General Council itself has to play on behalf of the Trades Union Congress?

If the trade union movement is called upon to let some of its leaders go to organise nationalisation, ought it not also to realise that the work of the General Council itself demands that some of its best leaders should now serve on the General Council in a full-time capacity and not endeavour to carry out their duties as members of the General Council in between their functions as general secretaries or presidents of their individual trade unions.

In my opinion a position has been reached where it becomes impossible for the General Council to fulfil its responsibilities to Congress on its present method of organisation and leadership. You have only to watch the proceedings at recent Trades Union Congresses to see that it is only a very small proportion of the General Council members who are able either to state or defend a case in Congress. An impossible burden is being placed on, for example, men like Sir Joseph Hallsworth or Mr. Allen, now that Lord Citrine has undertaken other work. How can Arthur Deakin, for instance, really do his duty to his union, the General Council and the W.F.T.U.?

I profoundly disagree with the political outlook of so many of the General Council members, as they do with mine, but I do not believe they will disagree with the importance of the issue I am now raising.

We must face facts. However competent the staff work of the General Council may be, this can never be allowed to become a substitute for leadership. For, with the greatest respect, such staffs are in the main drawn from people with no experience in the factories, in the class struggle or the mass movement. The problems now coming up are so vast and important that Congress ought to have a leading core of the very best and most capable leaders the trade unions can give.

Just consider one or two of the new problems. The new role of trade unionism in nationalised industry—the relation of trade unions and working parties—the necessity for a general overhaul of trade union organisation as a whole—trade unions and production—trade unionism and increasing

mechanisation — trade unions and Government legislation—trade unions and the economic perspective.

At once we can see a host of new problems that call for new thinking, a new approach, a fearless facing up to all issues of trade union representation and structure which will inevitably arise.

Can the Congress be content to let matters take their course? If adjustments to meet new conditions had to be made in the 'twenties, why not in the 'forties, when they are more serious, far-reaching and responsible?

If the boilermakers and engineers consider it necessary to have full-time executive committees to look after the interests of their members; if the N.U.R. and A.S.L.E. & F. have executive committees that are in session for weeks at a time because of their problems, why do we allow a position to continue where the General Council as the representative of the whole trade union movement only meets for a day once a month as a whole?

It is an impossible position for Congress and Council alike, as the events will surely drive home before long.

There will be objections to any change, of course. There always are. But now is the time to begin the fight for the changed conception of the General Council that the situation demands.

It will mean that membership of the General Council is no longer the reward for long service in the movement, no longer the subject of vote bargaining as between one trade union group and another. It will demand giving up certain individual trade union preserves, it will call for team work of the highest order, but it will prevent the danger of either Congress or General Council being dominated by one man.

Such a General Council as I have in mind would be elected by Congress, after nominations from the affiliated organisations to the Trades Union Congress. The unions should be prepared to allow their most competent leaders to be nominated. It may be necessary to have a wider Council elected around the leading group of full-time Congress leaders, on the same democratic elective principles previously mentioned.

The strongest possible competition should take place for election on the General Council. It should be looked upon as a scandal that year after year there can be group after group on the Council who are never subject to election. Nominations should be asked for from the factories, from local and district trade union organisations, and be approved either by annual trade union conferences or by ballot vote of the trade union membership.

If nationalisation is to be a success, if the trade unions are to play their vital role in the transition period from capitalism to Socialism, it is more important for the unions to give their best men to the General Council than it is to release them for Government positions. The first is the necessary guarantee that those who take on Government positions will be able to carry out their serious duties with the whole-hearted co-operation of the whole trade union movement.

I believe that, important as are the many decisions the Brighton Trades Congress made, significant as is the turning point, it represents in British trade unionism, salutary as it was in its warning to the Government—a warning that Attlee, Morrison and Bevin only ignore at peril to the Labour Government, even more important are the new organisational and leadership problems that Brighton also raises.

It is in the hope that this aspect of the position will now be adequately discussed that this article has been written, because it is fully realised that in the historic development of the

British labour movement, the trade unions have always played a major part.

They are now called upon to play a greater and nobler part, one in which their initiative and unifying endeavours can do much to make the Labour Government realise in time that the class struggle is still with us, that wages do matter, that shorter hours do count, that increased production must find its reflection in better conditions for the working class, that capitalism must be weakened, that the rich must be forced on to lower standards of living, and that, above all, it is capitalism and not socialism that is the main enemy of the organised working-class.