An Imperial Year

By R. W. Postgate

THE past year in England, and, indeed, in Europe as a whole, has seen, in the first place, the definite and clear victory of capitalism. The British Empire has done particularly well. The opening of the year saw the ratification of the Irish treaty by Dail Eireann. At the time this was bitterly resented in Conservative circles here: the Carlton Club was buzzing with revolt. But Lloyd George was an abler man than many thought him. The treaty was magnificent business for British imperialism. British interests are far safer under the Free State than under the Black and Tans. The Irish Republicans are killing each other while the British reap the benefits. The weaker the Free State is (so long as the irregulars are kept under) the better for London. With the death of Collins, the last chance of the Free State becoming strong and independent—if there ever was one—disappeared. With the death of Childers, the last chance of the irregulars winning—if there ever was one—disappeared. Because Cosgrave's government is weak, it is cruel. Its executions—little distinguished from murders by now—rush on in an increasing flood. It has done things that Hamar Greenwood would not have done. Each execution makes reunion more difficult, and, after three hundred years of muddling, it looks as if the British governing classes had actually settled the "Irish question" for a while.

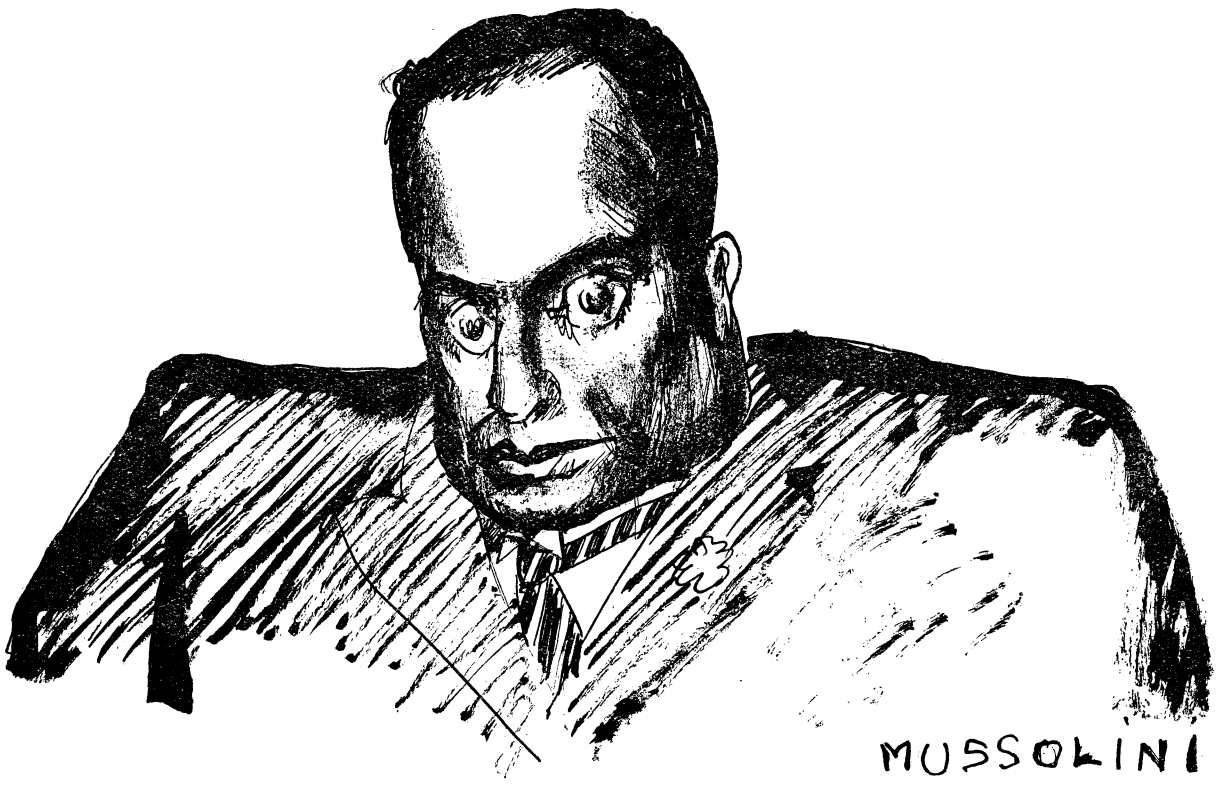
The same in India. The heterogeneous movement that centred round the person of Gandhi had really scared the British oligarchy, and had shaken its foundations. At the beginning of the year the movement came to such a height that it was necessary to consider bringing into action the "big gun" of the Gandhists—mass civil disobedience. Then Gandhi's nerve failed him. He took an obviously insufficient excuse to proclaim the indefinite adjournment of civil disobedience. The Government allowed just enough time for this decision to throw the movement into disorder; then they arrested Gandhi and sentenced him viciously. When last heard of the Indian Nationalist movement had fallen into three quarrelling sections, and the British Raj was settled comfortably back with his seat. In South Africa the peculiarly detestable and detested Rand capitalists who own General Smuts played the Paris Commune trick on the workers. They provoked peaceful, successful strikes into resisting police violence, declared it a revolt, brought in the military, and suppressed the strike with the greatest violence, and are still, at the beginning of 1923, murdering their prisoners.

INSIDE Britain, more victories. The year opened with the imprisonment, without serious protest, of the Communist Party secretary, Albert Inkpin. The unemployed had shown signs of revolutionary feeling in the winter. They had besieged Boards of Guardians and rioted. But now all local funds were exhausted and the guardians had no more to give. When the unemployed tried to bring pressure nationally, Whitehall was barricaded and the Government stood firm. The unemployed had not the power to make a revolution; their organization decayed and their spirit declined.

Employed workers suffered little less. The miners, defeated by treachery in 1921, have fallen in places into the deepest misery. There are villages where an employed miner can only earn eight dolars a week. There are parts of South Wales where conditions are almost those of a famine area. In one place they were so driven down that the unemployed raised a subscription for the employed, and in Reading, where the women biscuit workers are foully oppressed, they organized a strike for them to raise their wages up to the scale of unemployed relief. This year, also, the last big trade unions to hold their war gains lost them in the great engineering and shipyard lockout. There was no pretense here of industrial conciliation and arbitration; an enormous reduction was demanded in one cut and enforced by a lockout. Fifty-four unions, mostly craft, were involved; their policies ran counter to one another; their leaders and members were obviously frightened. The worst were the large general labor unions, whose membership wanted to go back and take the skilled jobs. The best fight was put up by the Amalgamated Engineering Union (400,000 members—used to be the Amalgamated Society of Engineers), which is a craft union of the old type. Its members were bound to it by the high subscriptions they had paid and the vast benefit funds. (The superannuation fund exceeded nine million dollars.) If they blacklegged, they lost what was equivalent to a good bank balance. Moreover, we know more trade union history over here than perhaps American workers do; to most members the union was still "the Society"—the A. S. E. of Newton and Allan in 1852, which had been for forty years the premier society of England and of the whole world. It was ridiculous for the employers to presume that they could fight it. So they hung on for many weeks in a hopeless struggle; they fought in the old respectable way—no mass picketing or big meetings, but each sitting alone in a small house in Plumstead or Greenwich and waiting for the employer to collapse. In the end they accepted defeat. This was the last fight put up by the British trade union movement.

YET though by midsummer British capitalism was victorious over its enemies, it enters the new year by no means comfortable. Its very victory has destroyed it. It has secured a free hand and the internal contradictions of the European capitalist system have landed it in hopeless difficulties. The whole year has seen a series of allied conferences, beginning with Cannes, about German reparations; that is to say, a hopeless attempt to straighten international finances without touching the causes of the collapse. The resignation of Briand and the accession of Poincaré—violently fought by the left wing, which suggested assassination—meant the break up, sooner or later, of the alliance between France and England, and, in fact, as this is written French troops are moving to the Ruhr in defiance of England.

Not only was the alliance which had ruled Europe without a rival broken up, but the great powers of Europe suffered a worse humiliation. They had to go to Canossa. They could not do without Russia, and this year they had formally to



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invite the Soviet to the Genoa conference. Of course, this more than anything broke up "allied unity." The Bolsheviks are in the fortunate position of having something to sell which everybody wants. Once the bar was down, everybody rushed to trade with the "ruined country without resources" —the Soviet government that nobody would touch. Business men of all kinds now hang round the Russian offices in London. A French "radical mayor" has been sent to Russia with plenty of palm oil to do his best to get pickings for French capitalism. Even Mussolini's government of toughs hangs on to Krassin's coat tails and asks for contracts.

The collapse of the coalition and the fall of Lloyd George I have dealt with in a previous article. It is sufficient to notice that they were ultimately the result of the failure of Lloyd George to deal with the Turkish crisis, which was another and more severe check to British imperialism. Again, the "Geddes Axe"—a much advertised scheme of retrenchment under the direction of a *louche* business man, Sir Eric Geddes—is another sign of collapse. Capitalism does not really want half-starved, nearly class-conscious teachers, no technical education and all that these economies involve. The fact is, that the British budget will not balance and there is good reason to believe that the new government will find a way out by reinflating the currency—a system which used to be known as debasing the currency, but we are more polite now.

WITH these difficulties there has come at last a sign of labor revival. The doubling of the number of Labor M. P.'s is one thing; another, the quality of the M. P.'s, who contain two Communists and a further knot of genuine revolutionaries from Glasgow. These have distinguished themselves in Parliament by breaking through procedure and making an uproar just because the unemployed were starving. One of them called attention to the fact that a prominent politician of the Asquith family was connected with what looked like a shameless piece of graft. Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, their safe leader, has apologized for them in public. They will soon know better, he says in this morning's paper, and be perfect gentlemen and observe the traditions of seven hundred years. This leaves a nasty taste in the mouth, still it cannot obliterate the good behaviour of some M. P.'s this last session.

A further hopeful sign may be seen in connection with the unemployed. Like the old Blanketeers a hundred years ago, they have marched this winter from all over England and Scotland down to London. Why? They dont know— no one knows. "To see the Premier." In fact it was little more than a last despairing gesture. They came to die in Park Lane and Mayfair, like the Oriental who starves on his oppressor's threshold. Anyway, the spectacle has at last moved the General Council of the Trades Union Congress, the doddering representative of the employed workers, to some action. Previously, it had steadily refused to acknowledge the existence of the unemployed; now it has at last decided to sit on a joint committee with them. More, it positively arranged a joint demonstration, and on Sunday last Trafalgar Square was packed by a huge audience. Ancient bearded members of the General Council "took the chair" at the foot of Nelson's Column and blinked foolishly while unemployed leaders "under their auspices" talked the most violent revolution.

It is not the dawn yet; not the dawn even of the most cheerless day. But there is some light in the darkness, if it is only a movement of the clouds.