

ABYSSINIA, FASCIST WAR AND THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

By JOHN A. MAHON

THE outburst of Fascist aggression against Abyssinia has aroused the Labour Movement to an understanding of the need to define and operate a policy towards the world Fascist advance and Fascist war.

The crisis has shown the serious unpreparedness of the Labour Movement for united action in this new type of emergency. The Labour Movement has to decide its attitude to Fascism and War, not to War in general but to the actual War of certain countries against others. In approaching this problem, we must do so with the understanding that we live in days which are witnessing the decisive line-up of forces against capitalism and reaction. We are taking part in a battle between the working-class and the capitalist class, and upon the result of this battle will depend the future of the human race.

The New Stage in World Politics.

World politics are no longer the preserve of rival imperialist interests. Socialism has triumphed in the U.S.S.R. The working-class has become a world power. That is the dominating fact of the present situation which completely distinguishes it from 1914. The Soviet Union is already a greater power than any single capitalist country. But the irrevocable victory of Socialism in a country with the population and resources of the Soviet Union opens up the prospect of unlimited extension. Together with the limitless increase in the well-being and happiness of the millions of workers and collective farmers, who are the Soviet Union, will go the corresponding growth of military and political power. It is no longer the spectre of communism which is haunting Europe, communism is now embodied in 160,000,000 human beings advancing at an unparalleled speed to unlimited prosperity and by the very force of this advance arousing the working class, technicians and professional men and the colonial peoples throughout the world.

The continued advance of victorious Socialism in the U.S.S.R. guarantees the eventual victory of Socialism throughout the world. That is precisely why the danger of capitalist war against the Soviet Union is now at the highest point yet reached. Capitalism is in a dilemma, it

sees the sands running out. Every year that passes sees the relation of class forces changing in favour of the working-class and revolution. To delay the armed onslaught on the U.S.S.R. means to lose all chance for the reaction of a military victory. Therefore, the most desperate sections of the capitalist class are striving with might and main to loose the dogs of war and to gamble everything upon a military adventure against the U.S.S.R. The Fascist powers of Central Europe represent the sharpest expression of the desperation of capitalism. Utterly unable to solve the problems of their own economy they have organised their entire resources for war and war has become a necessity for the continuation of their régime.

In this situation the supreme interest of the international working class is the defence of the U.S.S.R. At all costs the stronghold of socialism must be protected from the destruction which the Fascist powers with the support of the extreme reactionaries in all countries are planning. Only the successful defence of the U.S.S.R. can guarantee the victory of Socialism in all countries.

The Fascist powers realise that their military adventure against the U.S.S.R. has only a hope of success if it is supported by the powers of the west. The Fascist and potential Fascist groups of the ruling class in Britain and France are trying their utmost to give their Fascist allies this needed support. But they encounter a tremendous weight of Anti-Fascist feeling. The experience of France shows that a united Labour movement can transform this anti-fascist feeling into such an advance of the whole people as can both hold off Fascism and open the way to a People's Government. This results in winning the forces of the French Republic away from any alliance with the Fascist powers and thereby greatly strengthens the position of the U.S.S.R. The struggle around the Franco-Soviet Pact and the mass pressure which compelled the French Government to sign this Pact show to the workers of all the democratic countries the road by which the popular anti-capitalist movement can be developed.

The Labour Movement working in this situation has the opportunity to take advantage of all the contradictions existing between the different imperialist powers. The counter-revolution seeks to build unity between the imperialists in order to go forward to attack the U.S.S.R. But the rival interests of imperialism grow in intensity as the situation becomes more acute. The victory of Socialism in the U.S.S.R. has intensified the imperialist contradictions.

By the Versailles Treaty the victorious imperialist powers sought to stabilise their predominance on the basis of the division of the colonies of their enemies and of the Hapsburg Empire. The re-armament of German imperialism has torn up this Treaty. The re-armament of

German imperialism is on the one hand necessary for the attack on the U.S.S.R., and on the other hand becomes a factor increasing the conflicts between the imperialist powers.

The National Government of British imperialism has continually supported Fascism in Central Europe, facilitated the re-armament of Hitler Germany, and sought to direct the expansion tendencies of Germany away from the British Empire and the West towards Eastern Europe, that is, against the U.S.S.R. Any fluctuations in British policy are caused only by the need to defend British imperialist interests against the complications produced by the Fascist re-armament, but the National Government seeks ceaselessly to direct the aggression against the U.S.S.R.

The Fascist aggression upon Abyssinia is therefore no isolated conflict which can be patched up. It is the signal for Fascist aggression everywhere. Whatever steps are taken by the other powers, either to join in the partition of Abyssinia or to oppose Mussolini, the dispute over Abyssinia will be followed by disputes over Memel, Austria, Mongolia. The attitude to be taken by the Labour Movement must be decided not only by looking at Abyssinia, but by looking at the whole plans of Fascist aggression.

The peace of the world, the defence of the Abyssinian people, the future of the small, independent countries, the safety of the U.S.S.R., the preservation of the democratic rights of the Labour Movement in the west, the defeat of Fascism—these are the issues raised for the Labour Movement.

The Divisions in Labour Opinion

In this whirlpool of conflict the working class has the growing possibility of defeating its enemies. Out of the contradictions and confusion of capitalism in decay comes the opportunity of the working class. What is required by the working class to utilise this opportunity?

First, unity of action around a policy of independent class struggle. The working class must be able to take and hold the initiative, as it has done in France. To allow itself to be drawn in the wake of its own imperialist government would be fatal. The working class must increasingly menace and intimidate its own imperialists, threatening them with its own mass action and that of the mass of the people, utilising every chance to expose the war making and fascist tendencies and preparations, isolating the imperialists by all means. For such an attitude, the united front of the working-class organisations is an absolute necessity and the united front means the replacement of the class collaboration policy, which splits the working class, by a policy of struggle which unites the ranks.

Secondly, the united working class requires a flexible policy enabling it to take advantage of all divisions in the enemies' ranks, to increase

Abyssinia and the Labour Movement 623

these divisions, to win new allies, to concentrate at any given moment, every available force against the main enemy.

Only by such means can the Labour Movement defeat fascism and advance to power and socialism.

What is the present state of opinion in the Labour Movement, as shown by the discussions, press and conferences which have dealt with the Abyssinian question? There are three clearly defined tendencies.

First, the official policy of the *Labour Party* and the *Trades Union Congress*. This is a continuation of the whole line of class collaboration. They are moving into a position of complete national unity with the National Government. Following up their support of the Jingo Jubilee and the Home Office circular on air raid precautions, they swing in behind the National Government without conducting any independent class campaign or seeking to challenge the Government with the organised forces of labour. They neglect the tremendous chance to lead the peace ballot movement forward in a real struggle for peace. They make no real preparations for the general election. They take no measures to drive Mosley and his blackshirts out of the towns and villages of this country. All these hesitations and omissions reduce the working class from an independent factor to a mere appendage of the National Government. Instead of preparing the defeat of the Government, the class collaboration leadership is steering towards some seats in a government of "national unity."

At the same time the Labour Party E.C. and the General Council of the T.U.C. have demanded action through the Covenant of the League of Nations against Mussolini. Under certain circumstances, in defence of its own interests, British imperialism may decide to sail under the flag of the League in applying economic, financial and military force to prevent Fascist Italy establishing itself as a power on the Red Sea and the route to the east. The demand for sanctions alone therefore does not represent any class challenge to the National Government. The Labour Party and T.U.C. are not organising any mass movement, any united front which would have the power to compel the National Government to open up a real peace policy, to enter the Franco-Soviet Peace Pact, to lead the League in operating the Covenant in defence not of British imperialist interests, but in defence of the peace of the world and of the Abyssinian people.

Second, there is the policy of the Socialist League and allied groups of pacifists, the policy based on the idea that the working class can remain neutral, can develop mass resistance to war in general. Sir Stafford Cripps is the chief exponent of this line and expresses it in the formula: "In an Imperialist world, imperialist methods will be used. Our reply must be to work for Socialism."

It is true that Sir Stafford at the recent conference in London showed himself very unhappy with this position, and did not defend it with any enthusiasm. But it is a widespread tendency in the Movement.

It attracts first of all those who are downright pacifists and refuse to fight under any circumstances at all. It is possible to respect the sincerity of this point of view, but it is not possible to understand how it is going to aid in the defeat of Fascism. Nor is it possible to follow the exponents of this viewpoint in their claim for recognition of their purity of principles. Purity of principle, prepared to stand by, while an unarmed native people is massacred by all the resources of modern military science accompanied by the organised brutality of Fascism. Purity of principle prepared to stand by while the Fascist powers prepare their position for the assault on the Socialist Republic. Such principles have nothing in common with those of the working-class movement.

It is possible that the Socialist League feels this, for it tries to cover up the real meaning of neutrality by general phrases about mass resistance to war, without defining the particular war. If there is a war against the U.S.S.R., can the working class be neutral? Only if it wants to commit suicide. If in this war of imperialism against the U.S.S.R. one or more capitalist states find themselves in one camp with the U.S.S.R. against Fascist aggression, is that to be a reason for the working class being "neutral"?

The defence of the Soviet Union is instinctively felt by every worker to be a class duty. No one dare openly argue against this slogan in the Labour Movement. But the Trotskyists, with their instinctive scent for the foulest counter-revolutionary filth, are trying to undermine this slogan by saying "Yes, we are for the defence of the U.S.S.R., but not in alliance with capitalist states." This amounts to insisting that the Red Army must fight without any allies as a condition of our support. Otherwise, we shall be neutral. All the Fascists will be pleased with such neutrality.

In regard to a colonial war, the slogan of neutrality can only mean that the working class abandons its natural allies, the colonial peoples. Imperialism could not maintain its domination over the working class at home were it not for its exploitation of the colonial peoples. Imperialism uses the enslavement of the colonies as a means of continuing the enslavement of the working class at home. To free the colonies is an integral part of the freeing of the working class.

And in regard to war between capitalist states? Can the workers be neutral then?

In the war 1914-18 there was a great difference between the pacifist slogan of neutrality, of conscientious objection, and the Leninist-Marxist slogan of "turn the imperialist war into civil war." The pacifist slogans

led to nothing but martyrdom for some individuals and a supply of labour corps for the military forces. To be neutral means to put oneself in the hand of the strongest enemy. But the Leninist slogan of struggle meant the workers should not draw aside but enter the battle, take the arms, prepare to use them for their own class, undermine the imperialist armies and services, organise the Revolution right in the midst of the armed might of imperialism. This slogan led to the Russian Revolution and changed the face of the world.

1935 is not 1914. The coming war will bear a different character.

The realisation that our attitude to the Fascist War on Abyssinia will be defined according to our conception of the approaching European war lies underneath the intense interest and heat being shown in the discussion and it is necessary to face up to the possible developments which confront us.

Here it must be said that the amendment which was carried through the Labour Monthly Trade Union Conference in London without any discussion and which declared that all wars between capitalist states are imperialist wars is not in accordance with the Marxist attitude to war. There may be circumstances in which a capitalist state conducts a war in defence of its national independence. A war of Fascist aggression by Italy or Germany upon the neighbouring independent countries would be a war directed against the national independence of those countries. In such circumstances the interests of the working class would be best served by supporting the struggle of such countries against the Fascist aggression.

Neutrality during such a conflict would simply mean allowing Hitler or Mussolini to extend their territory and to improve their military and strategic position for further Fascist aggression, both against the U.S.S.R. and the Labour Movement in the democratic countries. This can be clearly seen, for example, in the plans of Fascist Germany to attack Lithuania. This aggression is openly spoken of at the Nuremberg Congress of the Nazi Party. If this attack develops, would the revolutionary forces in Lithuania regard it as an imperialist war and raise the slogan of transforming it into a civil war? If they took such an action it could only facilitate the victory of German Fascism; but, in defending the independence of the country the Lithuanian workers and peasants would by no means be abandoning the class struggle, but on the contrary they would find it necessary to increase their struggle against the Fascist and reactionary elements of Lithuania, who are already openly supporting Hitler and would surrender the country to German Fascism.

Of course, the possibility is by no means ruled out of direct imperialist wars between capitalist states. In wars of this type the slogan of transform the imperialist war into civil war correctly defines the interests of the workers

But in no possible case can we find that the position of neutrality can have any other effect than that of handing the working class over to its enemies.

The third tendency advocated at present only by the revolutionary workers is embodied in the slogan: "Mass struggle for the defence of World Peace, for the defence of the Abyssinian people, for the defence of the U.S.S.R., for the defeat of Fascism and for the defeat of the National Government." This policy takes as its starting point the need for concentration of all effort to maintain peace. The working class, both in the U.S.S.R. and elsewhere, has everything to gain by preventing the outbreak of war. Both politically and from the point of view of the loss of human life and suffering it is the working class which must pay the price for war. But the only way to maintain peace is to conduct a mass struggle against the forces which are making for war including both Fascism in Central Europe and the National Government in Britain, which has consistently made possible the establishment and the aggression policy of the Fascist powers.

Such mass struggle requires that the working class and its organisations conduct independent action against the National Government and Fascism, while at the same time leading a mass popular movement directed towards forcing the National Government to put all barriers in the way of the outbreak of war. Such barriers include the support of Britain for the Franco-Soviet Peace Pact and its leadership of the League of Nations for employing all the resources of the League Covenant to maintain peace and isolate the Fascist aggressor.

It is falsely argued that such a policy means unity of the working class with the National Government. The basis for this argument is that in the interests of British imperialism the National Government may propose the application of sanctions against Fascist Italy. This argument profoundly misjudges the position and rôle of the National Government. The National Government is posing at Geneva as the defender of peace largely because of the anti-war feeling shown for instance by the 11,000,000 votes which were cast in the peace ballot. It is seeking to strengthen its position for the coming General Election. It has not the slightest intention of using its weight either for the defence of peace or the defence of the Abyssinian people unless it is compelled to by mass pressure. As long as the peace movement remains what it is now, a mere expression of opinion, the National Government will have the room to manoeuvre and to utilise the League merely as a screen for advancing the interests of British imperialism.

The People's Front in France is an example of how the united working class can develop a popular movement which can force the Government into a corner and limit its possibilities. There is no doubt that Laval

made an agreement with Mussolini, but the mass storm in France was so great that he had to repudiate this agreement and to declare that France would stand by the Covenant. The *Observer* admits that the declaration of Laval was due to the pressure of the left in France. Of course, in making this declaration, Laval did so in a manner which showed to Mussolini his willingness to facilitate the Italian adventure. But had it not been for the mass popular movement he would have been openly the ally of Mussolini. No one with any knowledge of French politics could suggest for a single moment that the People's Front was supporting Laval because it is demanding sanctions against the Fascist aggression. On the contrary, it is only the People's Front that is fighting the Laval Government and opening up the prospect of an alternative Government.

The revolutionary peace policy proposes a whole series of measures directed towards weakening the position of Fascism both in Italy and elsewhere. Such measures require both direct action by the working class and the development of peace movements into movements of action directed against the National Government to compel it to carry forward a real peace policy.

What is the Basis for the United Action of the Labour Movement ?

Do these differences of opinion mean that it is impossible to secure united action by the Labour Movement ? Already, the enemies of the United Front are rejoicing because the Independent Labour Party and the Communist Party have not yet found it possible to come to complete agreement on the issues raised by the Abyssinian situation. Because the issue of sanctions has produced a peculiar line up of forces, this does not mean that the other issues cannot be made the basis of the united action which will lay the basis for as broad a movement as the People's Front in France and can lead up to the defeat of the National Government.

The issues upon which it is immediately possible to unite varying tendencies in the Labour Movement and in other movements can be summarised as follows :

- (a) Proposals directed towards making difficulties for Mussolini.
- (b) Proposals directed towards aiding the Abyssinian people in defence of their independence.
- (c) Proposals exposing the imperialist aims of the British National Government.
- (d) Proposals preparing the defeat of the National Government at the election and the return of a Labour Government.

United Action of all sections on all these points cannot be expected immediately. Each grouping contains some points on which they can act together, even if on other points there is difference. For example

under (a) proposals for financial and organisational aid to the Italian Trade Unions and other Anti-Fascist organisations of the Italian working class would receive the support of all sections, whereas the proposal of sanctions would raise differences. Under (c) the proposal for Britain to conclude a Peace Pact with the Soviet Union on the lines of the Franco-Soviet Pact will receive the support of wide sections, including Liberals and members of the League of Nations Union who could not be expected to come out for a Labour Government.

The development of such forms of united action so that the most powerful mass movement is built up which will bring down the National Government is the main task of the revolutionary movement. While this National Government is in power the working class cannot expect from it any real defence of peace or any real fight against Fascism. If the Fascist war of aggression burst out, it will have been the National Government which made it possible by support of Hitler and Mussolini. The National Government would seek by every means to injure the Soviet Union and give as much support as it dared to the Fascist powers. It would seek to utilise the working-class hatred of Fascism to strengthen the fight of British imperialism against its rivals.

The interests of the Labour Movement and the working-class demand that if the Fascist War begins the Soviet Union shall be preserved at all costs and that military defeat be inflicted on the Fascist powers. But this demands not unity with the National Government and British imperialism but the most energetic struggle against all imperialist policies of such a Government and for its replacement by a Labour Government which can become an instrument in the hands of the mass popular movement for the defeat of Fascism.

Unity of action leading to the united front is therefore the essential requisite for the Labour Movement at the present moment. Partial actions and protests will only be able to attain their ends in the degree to which they contribute to a movement capable of removing the present Government which is the enemy alike of the people of this country, of the U.S.S.R., and of the Colonial peoples.