

Political Organisation of Labour in India.

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It is a welcome sign of the times that, in the aftermath of the decomposition of the nationalist revolutionary Parties, a more than academic interest is being taken in the political organisation of labour in India. It is a testimony to the slow understanding by the Indian intelligentsia of the fact that labour, meaning thereby the masses of workers and peasants, holds in its hand the master-key to the solution of the problem of Indian freedom. After the successive débâcles of Gandhism and Swarajism, it is indeed high time that the fact is recognised by the revolutionaries of India. But it seems, it is as yet too early to expect freedom from ideological confusion, even in the case of those in whom confusion does not proceed from the unconscious bias of class-interest or class-affiliation.

We remember the abortive attempt in the beginning of last year by Lala Lajpat Rai, and Messrs. Chaman Lal and Joshi to form a **Labour Party for India**. Since then, Lala Lajpat Rai has drifted into the absorbing entanglements of the Hindu Sanghatan movement, and has recently entered the Legislative Assembly as member of the eminently capitalist Independent group. Nor do the others appear to have taken any further steps to renew the attempt at giving a political form to the increasing (class-)consciousness of the workers of India. Dewan Chaman Lal remains a pillar of the Swaraj Party and Joshi, a kind-hearted liberal, horrified at the idea of class struggle. But other attempts have been made here and there. Recently there has come into existence on the flank of the orthodox Sawajist position a "**Labour Swaraj Party**" in Bengal with an organ of its own called the **Lungal** (The Plough). We do not know who form the rank and file of the Party nor do we know what its programme is. (Often there are political parties in India, whose membership does not extend beyond their leaders, and which have not very often a programme to call their own). But the name — **Labour Swaraj** — is significant.

On the other side of India in **Bombay** a **Socialist Party** has been trying for some time for a foothold, if indeed it has not taken a false step into oblivion by this time. In the industrial province of Bombay, Socialism would be a somewhat belated flower, but a flower very racy of the soil.

Apart from these efforts, the proletarian party of the near future, so much in the mind of the Indian "Labour Leaders", is consistently spoken as a "**Labour Party on the British model**". This scheme has been promoted by a number of representatives of the British Labour Party who visited India recently. Of this number Mr. Oswald Mosley, Labour M. P. was the pioneer; he was followed by Graham-Pole and Dr. Rutherford. They did not go with an official mandate from the Labour Party, their mandate may be described as a "moral" one. Their efforts in India were seconded from England by utterances of Colonel Wedgewood, Ex-Minister of the MacDonald Cabinet, by resolutions of the Labour Party Conference and the Independent Labour Party. The missionaries of British Social-Democracy in India had an initial difficulty in the shape of the **Indian policy of the MacDonald Ministry**. They served up the stale, but always curious apology that the British Labour Party was in office but not in power, when Mr. MacDonald swore hard that he was going to keep British Imperialism intact whatever he might do with the capitalists at home, and when Lord Olivier sanctioned the infamous Bengal ordinance. If there were anything else

than demagogic humbug in the profession of the British Labour Party to meet the very moderate demands of the Swarajists, then Mr. MacDonald would have logically kept at least the status quo in India intact during his office, in waiting for the more favourable opportunity of a tenure of power. The actual policy followed by the MacDonald Ministry with regard to India would be followed by any Labour Ministry, whether or not it combines office with power.

But the job of the Labour MPs. was a different one. If they toured India it was not only with the purpose of convincing the Swarajists that dominion status is to be had for the asking from the British Labour Party "in power". What they wanted was to take a hand eventually in the political organisation of India Labour. It sounds quite harmless and inoffensive, almost laudable. It was indeed as such that they presented their sudden preoccupation with the internal situation developing in India.

It was Major Graham Pole who took himself the most seriously. He spoke of establishing a permanent liaison between the British Labour Party and Labour organisations in India. He promised presumably on behalf of his Party to send organisers from England and to help in the launching of a Labour Party for India. In his further anxiety to provide for an appropriate ideology for such a Party, he even suggested the formation in India of a branch of the Fabian Society; so that in the near future the ponderous opportunism of the Socialist philosophy of Messrs. Sidney Webb and Philip Snowden may keep company in India with the indigenous supineness of Swarajism and Swarajist labourism.

It is in the striking changes wrought in the relation between the British Metropole and the Indian Colony since the war, that one finds the "categorical imperative" of the economic law which has pushed the British Labour Party out of its official isolation from the problems of Indian labour. The class-conscious British proletariat, extending its hand to the workers of India, is indeed an example of proletarian world unity for the common fight against exploitation. But the class-conscious British proletariat working for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism is one thing, and the British Labour Party, led by Messrs. Ramsay MacDonald, Thomas and others, as a constituent of the imperialist political system at the Metropole is quite another.

Now, this imperialist system in its economic aspect has grown out of its primitive stage. If the attraction of raw materials to the Metropole has been the preeminent function of pre-war imperialism, it is not so now. The classic relation of India to England as a reservoir of raw materials and a market for industrial products has ceased. India emerged from the shock of the war as a country on the way to rapid industrialisation, though that industrialisation is bound to appear in the beginning rather as an industrial preparation of raw materials for export, than as manufacture of raw materials on the spot. But the one is only a step to the other. The home-market in India for the absorption of indigenous manufactures is being prepared by a system of "discriminate protectionism", while the basis of all intensive industrialism, namely, the iron industry, is being pushed forward by a system of generous bounties. The preponderating role in this industrial transformation is that of finance from the British Metropole. Imperialism becomes thus more and more synonymous with "export of capital".

The effect of this export of capital will be enormous in the internal economy of England; it will be revolutionary in that of India. In any case here is a great change in the process of exploitation of labour in England and India in the interests of British capital. The unorganised labouring masses of India, thrown in the maelstrom of intensive industrialisation, will now be used to keep the industrial proletariat of England in its proper place, as a class of hapless wage-slaves. The transformation of India's raw materials into industrial products will now be increasingly done in India, instead of in factories of England. Not the entire industrial production of England will be susceptible to this change, because India as a source of raw materials is one of several which England draws upon. Particular areas, namely, the centres of textile industry in Lancashire and Dundee will be the first to be affected by lower wages and unemployment.

In consequence of this, it becomes impossible for labour politicians in England, to retain their continued leadership of the British proletariat, more and more subject to the developing contradictions of capitalism. A political Party of the exploited which sees in the process of exploitation not the sharpening of

the class struggle leading ultimately to social revolution, but only a maladjustment of the relation between Labour and capital destined to disappear by a series of "reforms", is the substantially exact definition of the British Labour Party. And such a Party becomes untenable as a proletarian Party in the post-war circumstances of capitalist development. To such a Party and to its leaders, the tendency of British capital to absent itself from London, with its social sequences both in England and India, does not mean an extension of the field of revolutionary alliance of the British and Indian proletariat, for the destruction of imperialism. It means to them an extension of the field for the application of their reformist tactics.

The India of the plantation coolie and the agricultural labourer could very well be left out of the operation of their "reformism". But the India of the industrial proletariat is a different matter. It introduces a terrible disequilibrium in the economy of the Empire, it opens up new revolutionary possibilities. Now a revolution is the last thing that Mr. Mosley and Major Graham Pole and their colleagues at home care for. They would do anything, call the British Empire a Commonwealth or a Federation of "free nations", but they will not accept the possibility of revolution overthrowing the Empire. Hence the call for a political organisation of Indian labour on the model of the British Labour Party. As in England so in India, they will attempt the tutoring of the working classes to a belief in a system of compromises and palliatives. The raising of wages and the shortening of working hours, beyond which the programme of the British Labour Party hardly ever goes, except momentary lapses into schemes for nationalising this or that industry — will become ends in themselves instead of means to the larger struggle against the whole system of exploitation. Organised Indian labour, demanding higher wages and a better standard of life, will have the tendency of neutralising the effect, on industrial conditions in England, of the export of British capital to India. Thus by meeting the legitimate and initial demands of a growing industrial proletariat in India, an Indian Labour Party inspired by British Social-Democracy will tend to stave off the day of the final reckoning with Imperialism.

But such a political party cannot and does not meet the fundamental demands of a colonial proletariat striving for emancipation. The raising of wages, the shortening of working hours, the securing of better housing conditions — all these and much more in the daily life of the workers — are indeed parts of the fight of the proletariat against its exploiters. But they are not the whole fight; and much of these can be had by the purely industrial organisation of the proletariat in trade unions, of course seconded by a proletarian political Party. A political party, by its definition, fights on the political plane, which means it fights, puts itself in opposition to, the State — the State as the repository of the power of the exploiting and dominating class. A fight against the State is in the last analysis a fight for the seizure of political power. And the fight for political power is the revolutionary encounter of opposing social forces. The revolutionary marshalling of the forces of the exploited millions is not in the programme of the British Labour Party. We know that its highest "revolutionary" achievement up till now has been the capture of "office" and not "power", that too with the silent sanction of the Bourgeoisie. An Indian Labour Party with the same programme will not even achieve office by any long chance. That we are on the eve of a revolutionary encounter in India, as in all other colonial countries, is beyond question; it is further proved by the very appearance of reformism on the scene, because reformism in its essence is counter-revolutionary, and a counter-revolutionary tendency can logically appear only when the revolutionary tendency has clearly defined itself. The revolutionary tendency defined itself as early as 1921 when the Indian workers with their sure proletarian instinct brought the non-co-operation movement to its logical collision with the State by burning down at Chauri-Chaura the police station, the symbol of the power of the State. The Chinese workers with an equal sureness of instinct showed in Shanghai last year that the interval is very short indeed between the appearance of economic grievance and the gravitation of the masses towards a revolutionary encounter with the forces of oppression and exploitation. Twenty years ago in St. Petersburg, before the Tsar's winter-palace, the Russian workers on strike had shown the same instinct, when they had presented a political programme, and thus staged what Lenin called "the full-dress rehearsal of the revolution of 1917". Major Graham Pole was giving a futile warning against the overwhelming process of an

inevitable historical development when, during his tour in India, he said: "labour in India should be careful not to ally itself with Communism, though it might be proclaimed that it was bound in its turn to domineer over the world".

The political party of Indian labour cannot then be of the type represented by the British Labour Party. Indian labour has to organise itself into a mass party of workers and peasants — a party, which, while carrying on the day-to-day fight against the capitalist and the landlord, will adapt itself more and more as an instrument for the revolutionary overthrow of imperialist domination and class exploitation. The reformist illusion of "constitutional" advance will have no place in its tactics. But its tactics will take due note of the actual socio-economic structure of India, from which it will be its task to detach whatever other elements of revolt there may be, and lead them to the inevitable clash against imperialism. The national bourgeoisie of India have abdicated the leadership of the struggle for political liberation. They have given up the fight against imperialism for imperious reasons of class-interest, and are now ready for "responsive co-operation" with it. But the economic processes of imperialism not only create an industrial proletariat out of the labouring masses of India, but also perpetually pauperise the middle classes. It is the historical rôle of the revolutionary political party of the Indian proletariat to lead all these forces to the battle for freedom. A Labour Party on the British model will not be such a party of the Indian proletariat.