

LEFT WING LABOUR: Should It Cherish Illusions ?

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In the following article J. R. Campbell, acting Editor of "The Worker's Weekly," who is at present being tried on a charge of seducing members of the Armed Forces of the Crown from their allegiance to the King, deals with M. Philips Price's series of articles on "The Labour Party and Power" which concluded in last month's issue of THE LABOUR MONTHLY.—Editor, THE LABOUR MONTHLY.

IN his first article in February, 1924, Mr. Price, in indicating that the situation of the Labour Government was new as far as Britain was concerned, pointed out that there were some striking parallels and warnings to be derived from recent European history.

The awful examples of the Russian Mensheviks and the German Social Democrats were held up before us.

The Russian Menshevik Party had "found itself faced by class opposition, and instead of using its strategic position as a leader of a class which was aspiring to power it whittled away its programme in the excuse that Russia must be saved from anarchy."

"The German Social Democratic leaders used the absence of a sufficient parliamentary majority for their party as an excuse for abandoning the most important part of their social programme, which alone would have made a beginning in stopping the anarchy in the methods of production and distribution."

The passage of the Mensheviks to White-Guardism and of the German Social Democrats to the messenger boys of General Seeckt was then explained in detail.

Those awful examples are held up before the Labour Party, which is told that by sole control of the administrative machine "We can do much to relieve the unemployed and initiate public works. Yet where shall we get the money from ?"

Comrade Price indicated two alternatives: (1) Inflation ; (2) An appeal to the country on the Capital Levy. The third alternative

was, of course, the *status quo*—to refuse to “do much” for the unemployed and to put off the initiation of public works. That is a continuation of the Baldwin policy, plus some slight administrative and comparatively cheap adjustments of the machinery of the Insurance Act, such as the abolition of the gap, &c.

Price’s first article was written in February and subsequent developments have shown that the policy which he advocated has not even been considered. The Labour Party has continued the Baldwin policy, and the two descriptions of the activities of the Russian Mensheviks and the German Social Democrats given above, which Price proved to end in disaster, can equally well be applied to the policy of the Labour Party.

In his second article Price suggested that the “Budget surplus be earmarked for laying the foundations of a real Socialist policy and the extension of State at the expense of private enterprise at home.”

We know on the contrary that the Budget gave as much relief to the propertied classes as it did to the workers ; that it raised no fresh taxation from the rich and will leave no substantial surplus at all ; that the Government is unable to carry out any policy which involves immediate heavy expenditure, and the path of the Labour Government is littered with broken pledges.

In his third article Price indicates that in his opinion the Labour Party was merely doing the work of the City and armament firms in building the five cruisers. He indicated that it had not even the excuse of parliamentary necessity for doing so, as the Liberals would probably have supported it in a refusal to build the five cruisers. The building of those cruisers was regarded by Price as an Imperialist threat to France.

In the same article we are told that the experts who were at that moment considering the question of reparations were “really the nominees of the Wall Street and the City Banks.”

We are further told that “the Labour Government will be digging its own grave if it permits the British and American banks to float a loan to Germany on the conditions which they intend to exact.”

Since that has been written the Labour Party has not only accepted the report “of the nominees of Wall Street and the City

Banks," but has treated it reverently, actually making the hundred per cent. acceptance of that report a test of the orthodoxy of a Labour Candidate in a bye-election. It is cheerfully digging its own grave, and the grave of the European working class, by eagerly backing the forty million Anglo-American Loan to Germany.

These developments are significant enough, and ought to have convinced Mr. Price that the Labour Government was deliberately treading the road to disaster against which he had warned it.

Yet in his fourth article he expresses a doubt as to whether the Labour Party is going the way of the German Social Democrats. The heart of the Labour Party is, he says, still sound. It has done some things well, it has done other things badly. We must not croak and give up hope.

Now surely we are here discussing the strength of the tendencies which we see operating. Are there increasing signs that the Labour Party is fighting capitalism more energetically, gradually discarding the Imperialist policy of its predecessors, or are there signs that it is carrying out the Imperialist policy of its predecessors ever more energetically, whilst apologising for its inability to do anything for the working class? Surely the latter is correct.

Price mentions a few of the achievements of the Labour Government which he offsets against its criminal Imperialistic record. They are the Budget, the Housing Scheme, improvement in pensions, better maintenance for the Unemployed. Also it might have stopped evictions if the Liberals and Tories had let it.

Pensions and increased unemployment allowances are comparatively small changes, costing very little. Indeed the increased unemployment allowance suggested is more in the nature of a relief to the Board of Guardians and the Parish Councils than it is to the unemployed. The reduction of indirect taxation by the Budget. Well, what of it? A Labour Government, surrounded by a working class in the bitterest poverty, finds itself in possession of a Budget surplus. It gives three-fifths of that surplus to the workers and about two-fifths to the bourgeoisie, and because it does this instead of handing the whole surplus over to the bourgeoisie it is regarded as doing wonderfully well. Its heart is still sound.

We believe that the main test of the Labour Government on the Budget was whether it would tax the bourgeoisie for purposes of social reform and whether it would continue to support capitalist armament expenditure. Before the Budget all the bourgeois Press was anticipating an increase in taxation, however slight. When no increase was imposed they cheered Mr. Snowden's Budget to the echo. As for the great Housing Scheme—even granting its applicability—an acid test of that scheme is which class is going to pay the subsidy for the houses which are being built. The Labour Government has left that question open at present.

Compare that miserable record of achievement in the interests of the working class with the eager pursuit of capitalist policy in the colonies and Europe, and who can say that the Labour Government is not rushing rapidly along the same lines as the German Social Democracy.

After all, declares Mr. Price, the Labour Party had a better record after six months than the German Social Democracy had after four years. There Mr. Price is comparing the Labour Party after six months with the German Social Democratic Party whose policy has been tested and found wanting over a period of four years.

All that we can say with regard to the statement is that in the first six months of office the German Social Democrats were able to show as big results on paper, to create as many illusions as to the possibilities of peaceful progress, as the Labour Party has in its first six months. The hopes raised were illusory as subsequent events showed, and they will prove just as illusory in Great Britain.

In face of the most obvious facts Mr. Price declares that the Labour Party has not hopelessly compromised itself with reaction. It all depends on the blessed word "hopelessly." It has at any rate compromised itself seriously with reaction. How can it attack any capitalist government for participating in an armament race after the five cruisers ramp? How can it logically attack any capitalist government for engaging in acts of brutal repression in the colonies after Mr. Leach's defence of the Irak bombing? How can it accuse any capitalist government of heartlessness in regard to the unemployed when on the approach of the fifth winter of unemployment it is allowing things to drift? How can Labour propagandists

indulge in condemnation of useless, heartless displays of luxury in the midst of grinding poverty when a large section of the Labour leaders have shown themselves only too ready to indulge in such displays themselves? The Labour Party has seriously compromised itself and unless the present leadership is removed the chances of carrying on a vigorous fight against Capitalism are absolutely nil. Does Mr. Price forget the first years of the Coalition Parliament when the Labour Party, heavily compromised by its own war record, was unable to offer serious opposition to the policy of Lloyd George?

Now before discussing what steps can be taken to combat the Imperialist policy of the Labour Government we might pause to ask ourselves what this policy really is. Are we faced merely with the mistakes of a government sincerely anxious for the triumph of the working class, sincerely desirous of winning greater influence for it, or are we witnessing the consistent carrying out of a reformist political policy? Is it merely mistakes of detail which are being made, or is it the whole conception of how to improve the conditions of the workers which is behind the day-to-day actions of the Government absolutely false? We are convinced that the Government's policy results from the consistent application of reformist politics to a given situation, and what the left should be concerned in criticising is not merely this or that point of detail but the whole conception of reformism underlying the practice of the Labour Government. We have to destroy the idea that by co-operating with the capitalists, by continuing the policy of its predecessors, or that by passing a series of small reforms we will be able gradually to transform Capitalism into Socialism. Is this Mr. Price's conception or is it not?

If Mr. Price does not believe in the gradual democratic transformation from Capitalism to Socialism what does he mean by suggesting that the Communists should win the confidence of the I.L.P. left wing by "showing what practical measure which leads us one step towards our end can be undertaken under the present balance of class power both in Parliament and in the workshops as existing at the present time"?

Now if it is suggested that a whole series of practical measures which will lead us one step towards our end can be taken up

and passed by the Labour Government under the present balance of class power then we are in the presence of the most credulous reformism. It is not the business of any serious Socialist to suggest that there is a whole series of first steps to Socialism which could be passed by the Labour Government under the present class balance of power, if it would only sit up and take notice. It is our business to point out to the workers that under the existing balance of class power one cannot do anything for the working class without the permission of the capitalist class, that if the workers want anything done the present balance of class power has got to be altered. It is the business of a real left wing to agitate in the Labour Party for that party to bring forward a series of immediate measures, not in the expectation that the kind capitalists will stand aside and allow us to carry them into operation, but for the purpose of rallying the masses for a struggle to change the existing class balance of power.

Can Capitalism be conquered step by step by parliamentary means? That is the question Mr. Price comes near to raising.

He tells us truly that the period of open storming of the Capitalist fortresses has passed by meantime and then suggests that we must carry on a "guerrilla warfare on the industrial front and the capture by stages of the parliamentary and administrative machinery of Capitalism."

If the suggestion in the latter part of the quotation is that the Capitalist State can be conquered stage by stage and then used in the interests of the working class then we have here a complete reversion to MacDonaldism in theory which will sooner or later reveal itself as a reversion to MacDonaldism in practice.

It may of course be necessary to insist that the Labour Party fight for the various items in its programme. It may be necessary to agitate that it fights for certain immediate aims. It all depends on how we regard those aims? Whether we regard them as reforms which can easily be carried out within the frame work of Capitalism, a gradual accumulation of which will transform society from Capitalism into Socialism, or whether we regard them as rallying demands around which the masses will engage in struggle which will consolidate their forces for the revolution: in short,

do we regard immediate demands as a method of avoiding revolution or as a method of rallying the masses for revolution? It is one thing to ask the Labour Government to bring forward a programme of immediate demands and call the masses to its support in struggling for those demands and so intensify the class struggle; it is quite another thing to suggest that all that is required is for the Labour Party to bring forward immediate demands and the bourgeoisie like the old soldiers "will simply fade away."

Before we talk then about the co-operation of the I.L.P. and Labour Party Left with the Communists for a common struggle within the Labour Party this much has got to be made clear. The Communists are desirous of seeing the Labour Party fighting for certain immediate aims, of rallying the masses in the struggle for those aims, in order that the class struggle may be intensified and the workers prepared for taking power into their own hands.

If any of the I.L.P. left are prepared to struggle alongside the Communists against the Imperialist tendencies of the Labour Government, if they are prepared to struggle in order to make that Government fight for the workers in Parliament, then the Communists are prepared to help them as they would help any other bodies of workers engaged in the same task. But if that same I.L.P. Left spreads the illusion that a more vigorous policy on the part of the Labour Party in Parliament is all that matters, that the State machinery of Capitalism can be gradually conquered and used on behalf of the workers in order to transform society gradually from Capitalism to Socialism, then the Communist Party will very definitely oppose the idea. A more vigorous policy in Parliament may rally the workers' forces and to that extent is valuable, but the final struggle to set up a real workers' Government is not a Parliamentary struggle, not a struggle between a Labour Parliamentary fraction and Capitalist Parliamentary fractions, but the organised struggle of the whole working class against Capitalism.

If that struggle is to be successful then there must be unity of aim and common direction of the decisive majority of the working class at the decisive moment. The Communist Party while willing to co-operate with any other groups within the Labour movement is not going to allow itself to merge its identity in a

formless left block, but is going to preach the need for a revolutionary party to lead the workers in their struggle and is going to endeavour to build up that party from the advanced elements of the Labour Movement.

In fighting reformism in the Labour Movement we will have to criticise individuals and explain to the workers the rôle which they are playing in the social movement. Much as Mr. Price dislikes it, we may have to dub certain individuals "agents of the bourgeoisie" or a simple equivalent if we can find it.

We cannot carry on serious political propaganda at all, political propaganda which really explains the existing situation, without stressing the fact that there is in the Labour Movement an upper stratum amongst the leadership which has been corrupted by Imperialism and which is in all its acts consciously or unconsciously an agency of the bourgeoisie. If we find that that particular phrase conveys nothing to a British worker we will have to find an equivalent, but we must not in order to avoid wounding the feelings of hyper-sensitive persons omit the mention of one of the most important facts in the Labour Movement at the present time.

Now as to our attitude to the I.L.P. Left and the left wing of the Labour Party it is somewhat difficult to lay down general rules because the left is what Robert Burns would have called "a mighty, machty, queer hotch potch," and is not a homogeneous body. One thing may be said to all the non-Communist left, however, and that is that if they are opposed to the present policy of the Labour Party in whole or in part and want to change it then they must oppose it in a more open fashion. At the moment practically the whole of the non-Communist left in the Labour Party are drifting complacently down the stream of MacDonaldism, salving their consciences by occasionally muttering against MacDonaldism under their breath. The attitude of this Left in the Dawes Report has been cowardly in the extreme and the first thing they must learn if anyone is going to take them seriously at all is to display a little political courage.

Secondly, we desire to point out to the I.L.P. Left that so long as it remains associated with a middle-class pacifist wing which is virtually the right wing of the Labour Party all its efforts are being nullified by people within its own party.

However, as there is such a Left the Communists are prepared, while combating reformist illusions, to unite with it on any points on which there is common agreement.

We would suggest on this head that if agreement could be reached on the following points:—

(1) Repudiation of the Dawes Report.

(2) A serious campaign in the Labour Movement to force the Labour Government on this the eve of the fifth winter of unemployment to put the six point charter into operation on behalf of the unemployed.

(3) The organisation of the trade union forces alongside the Labour Government in the struggle for a national living wage.

(4) The Nationalisation of the Mines and Railways and the development of a National Electrical Service not solely in the interests of cheap motive power for the employers, but in the interests of the community as a whole.

(5) The repudiation of an Imperialist Labour policy and the granting of complete self-determination to all the subject races within the British Empire.

If the I.L.P. and Labour Party left is prepared to work, not only in a clandestine fashion within the Labour Movement, but openly upon a public platform to rally the broad masses behind those or similar demands and force them upon the Labour Government then there may be a basis for an arrangement which will bring the left forces within the Labour Party together in a definite pact. If that is what Mr. Price is out for there is a basis for discussion.

If, however, he is out to suggest that the Communists should kindly water down their policy, moderate their criticism and whisper to the active workers within the Labour Movement that after all the Labour Party might be a little more extreme but we must not say so too openly in public, then the Communist Party is standing none of that nonsense: such a Left position either implies gross stupidity in not recognising that it is not only the minority of active workers in the Labour Movement who have to be won over, but the broad masses, or it is the politically dishonest position of men who are unable to square their intellect with their ambitions.