

Must the Empire be Broken Up? The Reply to Labour Imperialism

THE British Labour Government on taking office has assumed control not only over the destiny of the British people, but over that of the hundreds of millions of people inhabiting the British Empire. This raises the whole question of Empire in the sharpest possible fashion, and no section of the Labour movement can avoid giving its answer to it.

The answer of the Right-wing contained in the speeches of Mr. J. H. Thomas is simply a reiteration of all the stale apologies for capitalist Imperialism that have been current for the last generation. Mr. Thomas, however, is no more a Socialist than Lord Curzon, and his crude and glaring eulogies of Imperialism have only awakened disgust in the Labour Movement.

The moderate Socialist wing of the Labour Party, the I.L.P., has also been discussing the question of Empire. It does not go over to Imperialism so brazenly as Mr. J. H. Thomas, but by means of a considerable expenditure of Socialist phraseology, it arrives at the same position.

WHAT IS THE EMPIRE?

The typical representatives of the I.L.P. position on Empire are Messrs. John Scurr, M.P. and Tom Johnston, M.P. An analysis of the articles they have been writing recently will show that, in spite of their anti-Imperialist phraseology, their attitude to the Empire is a thoroughly capitalist one. Mr. Scurr states his point of view in an article on Labour and Empire in the *Socialist Review*, for August (an official organ of the I.L.P.).

The article is designed to lay bare the capitalist basis of Empire and to suggest a policy for Labour.

We are met right at the outset with such phrases as—

“If Labour is to control the destinies of this country, it will have to face the fact of the British Empire. A mere gesture of negation is impossible.”

“In so far as Labour will be able to deal with the problem of Empire, will depend the future of the world’s peace.”

The following quotation gives what Mr. Scurr conceives to be the basis of capitalist Imperialism :—

"About 1870 a number of important developments took place in the iron and steel industry. Mass production became the rule, and combines ensued in the metallurgical industry, with the consequence that capital invested in metals, became more important than that invested in textiles. The economic, and, therefore, the political, balance of power shifted from Manchester to Birmingham. Joseph Chamberlain succeeded John Bright. Now the products of iron and steel are mostly capital goods, such as machinery, steel rails, etc., and they require considerable finance. Money capital is exported to undeveloped countries and a change in exports takes place. Instead of goods, such as textiles, which are consumed quickly, constructional goods, railway bridges, etc., are exported. But the textile exporter only wanted people to buy his wares. How they were governed, provided they paid his bills, did not matter. Free Trade and plenty of it was his ideal. When, however, your money is invested in railways and the like in the new countries, it is important that you control the government in order to safeguard your investments. You want a monopoly and Free Trade seems to be a foolish idea."

To our mind this is a one-sided, inaccurate view of the basis of modern Imperialism. It is true that the great Imperialist impulse commenced after 1870. It is also true that the metal industry played a considerable part in this development, but it is positively inaccurate to assert that modern Imperialism is the product of the growing importance of the metal industry alone. Imperialism is capitalism in its final stage of development. Its special feature, from the point of view of the internal situation of the various capitalist countries, is not merely the growing preponderance of the metal industry, but the growth of monopoly capitalism.

Now, a feature of monopoly capitalism is the increasing power exercised by the banks and the big financial houses in the control of the industrial system. This monopoly capitalism is the inevitable result of previous capitalist development. In all countries it seeks to secure exclusive sources of raw materials and exclusive outlets for its products, and just as in the previous epoch of free competition, the individual capitalists competed against one another for the market, their weapon being cheapness, so to-day, the great national syndicates compete against one another by endeavouring to secure a monopoly of the sources of supply. From this struggle results the world scramble for sources of raw materials and outlets for investment.

It must be emphasised that Imperialism is not a particular line of development which capitalist industry has followed in preference to some other line that it might equally well have followed. It is the absolutely inevitable culmination of the previous capitalist development. Empire is simply the outward and visible result of the Imperialist struggle. Apart from serving modern capitalist needs, empires have no reason for their existence. It is impossible to separate Empire and Imperialist

capitalist policy, just as impossible as to separate capitalism and wage slavery.

Two results of Imperialist policy may here be noted. In the first place through its irruption into colonial countries, it creates a native bourgeoisie, and it also breaks down certain barriers which have separated the native people, creating in them a national consciousness which leads to movements aiming at independence.

Secondly, through its unrestrained exploitation of the peoples of colonial countries, the capitalists in the Metropolis are able to more easily concede better terms to a few favoured strata of workers at home, filling them with a sense of Imperialist dignity, and a belief in the inevitability and the advisability of peaceful progress. *The Imperialist corruption of the Labour movement is one of the most important facts to-day, a fact that the modern working class cannot afford to ignore.*

DOES BRITISH EMPIRE MAKE FOR PEACE?

Bearing in mind the fact that modern Empires are the result of the domination of Imperialist states, representing monopoly capitalism over territories in which the capitalists can find spheres of investment and secure supplies of raw materials; that they are as necessary features of modern capitalism as employers and employed, trusts and syndicates, mansions and slums, let us turn to Mr. Tom Johnston's plea for a new attitude to be adopted by Socialists to the Empire, which was published in *Forward*, of July 26th. Mr. Johnston tells us

"it is about time we were clarifying our minds on the British Empire in its relation to Socialist philosophy.

"In some Socialist circles—but these are smaller and fewer than they were a dozen years ago—there is a fixed belief that this Empire is an engine of grab and oppression and that it is and can be nothing more."

If Mr. Johnston is affirming here, that there are more "Socialists" in favour of the British Empire than there were a decade ago, we are perfectly willing to accept his statement. He might have added that there are more "Socialists" in favour of kow-towing to the British monarchy than ever before, and that the capitalist doctrine of "increased production" is now receiving a wholehearted benediction in certain "Socialist" quarters.

All this may be admitted, but it promptly raises the question of whether those developments are of a healthy character, or, whether they are symptoms of the Imperialist corruption of the Labour movement!

He goes on—

"Would the peace of the world be made more secure if this League of British Nations were to fly apart? The question has indeed only to be

put to be answered. Fifty new States, most of them prey for other avaricious Empires, most of them ready for the creation of separate armaments—nay, some of them driven to it. To take one example only, would the scrapping of the British Empire make for peace in the Pacific, or would there be a bloody struggle between Japan and Australia within twelve months' time?"

There is a multitude of mis-statements and fallacies embodied in this short paragraph.

Take the description of the Empire as a British League of Nations. Seven-eighths of the peoples in this British Empire are members of alien races, most of them coloured people, who are held down and exploited on behalf of British capitalism. The adherence of those people to the Empire is secured by the most cruel and vicious military oppression. They are not British, they have no national rights, they are merely a dumb, driven labour force kept in control for the purpose of the most murderous exploitation. To describe such a bloody despotism as a British League of Nations is surely a brazen attempt to hide the essential nature of the Empire.

We know that it is an old trick of the capitalist Imperialists to hide the real nature of the Empire by turning working class attention to the self-governing dominions (Canada, Australia, etc.), leaving the exploited masses of black, brown and yellow men out of the picture. It is with mixed feelings of pain and disgust that we see the same shabby political trick being played in the Labour movement.

Another idea embodied in the above sentence is that Empire is a guarantee of peace. This is revising Socialist doctrine with a vengeance. If true, it certainly involves the duty of all those who desire peace to extend the bounds of our "peaceful" Empire over yet wider tracts of the earth.

There are two great periods of expansion in the history of the Empire. The first was during the period of commercial capitalism in the eighteenth century, when Britain conquered Canada, began to open up Australia, consolidated British power in the West Indies, beat the French in India, and commenced the subjugation of that country. This period was an intensely bloody and warlike one, not only in our struggles with France, but in our efforts to subjugate the native races. It is only necessary to mention the good "pacifists" Clive and Warren Hastings, and pass on.

During this period some of the territory occupied was suitable for the purposes of settlement by the people of British birth (Canada, Australia, etc.).

Following upon this period came the development of indus-

trial capitalism, and a concentration upon the building up of the productive forces within Great Britain, and the securing of markets abroad. The great industrial expansion which took place was aided by the wealth wrung from looting and trading in the colonies in the preceding period. In the early period of the building up of the Factory system, there was a slackening off, but not an abandonment of the expansionist policy.

THE CULMINATION OF IMPERIALIST POLICIES.

From 1870 we enter upon the period when free competition begins to give way to monopoly capitalism, when the need for securing spheres of influence, outlets for investments and sources of raw materials begins to be felt. The scramble for Empire becomes a capitalist necessity. This period is one of the most warlike in human history. Hardly a year passed but there were warlike operations in some part of our far-flung Imperial line. Frontier wars in India, the conquest of Egypt, and later, the conquest of the Sudan; punitive expeditions all over Africa, the South African wars, Imperialist tussles over the decomposing corpse of the Turkish Empire.

Imperialist intrigues in China, and our Indian expansion brings us up against Russia, the Egyptian policy leads to a twenty-years' estrangement from France. Our policy in the Near East brings us up against German Imperialism, the penetration of British capital into South America leads almost to a clash with the U.S.A. over Venezuela. These are but a few of the antagonisms generated during this period.

All the main capitalist countries take part in the scramble for Empire and the growth of armaments and militarism receives great impetus. Here are the figures of army and naval expenditure in Britain during the period from 1867 to 1914.

Year		Army	Navy
1867-8	£17,419,000	£11,169,000
1913-14	£28,346,000	£48,883,000

Most of the territory occupied in this period is quite unsuitable for white settlement. It has been occupied purely for the purpose of exploitation.

We could stop here and say that the facts are conclusive, and that this period of Empire development has been one of the most bloody in human history. We must add, however, that the culmination of this period of Imperialist development in Europe was the world war of 1914-18. That is the final answer to those who hold that the British Empire, or any other Empire, is an agency for peace.

THE NATIONAL MOVEMENTS IN THE COLONIES.

During the world war there came to a head the great awakening of the peoples in the Colonies. Powerful Nationalist movements began to struggle for independence. This did not lead to a large scale military struggle, but it did lead to an intensification of brutal military repression all over the Empire. The war against the Colonial peoples has become continuous. So far from the Empire being an agency of peace it can only be kept in existence by the most ferocious wars upon the struggling peoples under Imperialist control.

Here arises a situation which the Labour movement must face. India is in revolt, Egypt is in revolt, the Sudan is in revolt, and Irak is in revolt. What is to be the attitude of the Labour movement in face of these facts?

Mr. Johnston states—

“There are men in the Socialist and Labour movement who quite sincerely believe that the energies of the organised Labour Party ought to be devoted towards smashing up the Empire, and that the world would be happier were there snapped the loose tegument which binds together some 443 million people who inhabit a fourth of the surface of the earth. For the life of me, I cannot see it. I cannot see how the cause of Socialism would be advanced in the slightest degree were the Empire to split asunder to-night.”

The description of the brutal coercive apparatus of British Imperialism, as a loose tegument deserves the widest publicity. Could not Mr. Leach see that it is transmitted to the herdmen of Irak, via the knights of the bomb, the R.A.F.?

What one gathers from the above paragraph is that the Empire is a loose federation of peoples living amicably together and some crack-brained antiquated Socialists filled with a spirit of destruction are trying to break it up. It is a false picture. The true picture is that the colonial peoples are tugging at their chains. Are we, as Socialists, going to help them to break them, or are we going to rivet them tighter about their limbs? Are we going to be parties to murder and outrage on behalf of Imperialism?

It is not the Socialist cranks who are trying to break up the Empire, but the peoples whom the Empire holds in thralldom. What are we going to do?

WHY WE MUST SUPPORT THE COLOURED PEOPLES.

The Communist declares that Imperialism being the final stage of capitalism, the colonial peoples in revolt and the workers in Great Britain are fighting the same enemy. They can derive increased strength by allying themselves in the struggle. If the maximum force has to be brought against British

Imperialism, then the British workers and the struggling peoples in the colonies must act together. At the same time, the Communists recognise the different strata in the various national movements, and desire to establish such close relations with the lowest stratum of those movements—the workers and peasants as will enable them to carry their struggle beyond the national revolution against British Imperialism on to a workers' and peasants' revolution against all forms of domination.

If the workers in Britain take sides with the Imperialists against the nationalist movement of the colonies and assist in its suppression for the time being, then the Imperialists will most certainly use the power that they derive from the colonies against a workers' government in this country. All those in revolt against British Imperialism must form a united front, or perish.

I.L.P. AND COLONIAL STRUGGLE.

What is the position of our two I.L.P. friends towards the national struggle in the colonies? To Mr. Scurr, the national struggle is non-existent. In his article the Empire is treated as a unit which is likely to exist indefinitely, and a series of proposals are made, which are calculated, in the opinion of the author, to knit the Empire closer together, and improve the material and cultural level of all its inhabitants.

The fact that you can no more have a Socialist Empire than Socialist capitalism is completely ignored.

THE MEANING OF HOME RULE.

Mr. Johnston in the *Forward* for August 9th, criticising Walton Newbold, faces the problem in this fashion:—

“ But he boggles at India and the Crown Colonies and the Protectorates and the mandated territories staying in the Union? Why should there be any difficulty if they have Home Rule and come in of their own free will? Our business surely ought to be to convert the subject colonies into free partners.”

Now, obviously, if Mr. Johnston is in favour of giving the people in the various parts of the colonies the right to choose independence, instead of Home Rule, and if he is in favour of supporting them in this demand, then he is in favour of the break up of the Empire. For it is from that quarter and not from some small Socialist groups that the urge towards the break up of the Empire is coming.

If, however, he is not going beyond Home Rule within the Empire, and is prepared to support the repression of any attempt to go beyond Home Rule, then he is merely lining up with the Imperialists in the new orientation of their policy.

We have already pointed out that there has developed in some of the colonies a native bourgeoisie. This bourgeoisie desires to develop freely without any interference on the part of the British Imperialists. It was very active in the national movements at the outset, but as those movements develop in their full amplitude, the upper strata of the native bourgeoisie, feeling themselves too weak to prevent the movement going beyond the national demands to social demands, begins to shrink somewhat from the struggle.

A section of them show a determination to compromise for the time being with the Imperialists by accepting some form of Dominion Home Rule, or even, as in the case of Egypt, a shadowy independence. The Imperialists are prepared to accept this compromise, provided that the native bourgeoisie is prepared to safeguard the rights of the British Imperialists within the territory, and to hold down the rest of the population. The granting of Home Rule in some form or other is a pure matter of Imperialist convenience. There is nothing Socialist about it.

THE "DOMINIONS."

As for the parts of the Empire like Australia and Canada, which are inhabited largely by English-speaking peoples, it must plainly be recognised that those countries are virtually independent capitalist states, beginning to develop their own manufacturing industries, in fact, beginning to compete with the Mother Country in the markets of the world. If they remain associated with Britain it is because their financial and political interests so dictate, that is all.

When Mr. Johnston talks about the advantages of the State in Britain purchasing Australian goods in bulk, suppressing the middleman and selling them cheaply in Great Britain, he forgets that a similar arrangement might be made with Denmark. It has nothing to do with Empire, and to use it as an excuse for Imperialist suppression is absurd.

THE ANTI-IMPERIALIST FRONT.

The one thing that is necessary is to view the colonial situation in its proper perspective. If one views the colonial struggle as being isolated from the struggle of the workers at home, then one sees things all wrong. They are both phases of the one struggle against capitalist Imperialism, and for the establishment of Socialism.

If the British workers allow themselves to be used against the peoples of the colonies, then the anti-Imperialist front is

broken, and the Imperialists are strengthened. But, if the British workers line up with the colonial peoples in the struggle, then that unity contains within itself the guarantee of victory. It is the duty of the workers in other Imperialist states to carry out a similar tactic. Only by such means can the struggle for emancipation be successful in European countries.

The emancipated European workers will be able to help the exploited classes in the colonies to largely evade the phase of capitalist development by passing from their present stage to Socialism.

The break up of the Empire is not then the fantasy of a few Socialist cranks, but is an essential part of the struggle for Socialism. Whoever refuses the colonial peoples the fullest independence is an ally of the Imperialists, and is as big a danger to working class progress as the union leader who goes over to the employers during an industrial dispute.

The Communist Party is the only anti-Imperialist party in Britain to-day. That is to say, it is the only party which is genuinely struggling against capitalism.

J. R. CAMPBELL.

