

LABOUR AND REARMAMENT

By J. R. CAMPBELL

THE debate on the Labour Party attitude to rearmament was by common consent one of the most important in the whole history of that Party. The Executive Committee allotted an entire day to the debate and the principal Labour leaders gave their views at great length.

The resolution which was passed was a compromise resolution, open to the most diverse interpretations. The importance of the arms debate is to be judged not by the resolution which was accepted, but by the clear light which it threw upon the tendencies in the Labour Movement, particularly the dominant right wing tendency.

The resolution was in itself an attempt to reply to the question : " what is to be the policy of the Labour Movement in reply to the diplomatic and military offensive of the fascist Powers ? " ; " what is the reply of the Labour Movement to the charge that, while pressing the Government to take a stronger attitude to the fascist Powers, it is refusing to vote for the armaments which are necessary in order to maintain this firmer attitude ? "

Margate, 1935—For a Negotiated Settlement

Right till the Trades Union Congress in September the Trade Union and Labour bureaucracy had pinned their hopes on the possibility of a general European settlement by negotiation. That was the line of the Trades Union Congress resolution at Margate in 1935, when it stated that :

Congress reaffirms its policy, outlined in 1934 at Weymouth, and declares its resolute faith in a collective peace system operating within the League of Nations, and its determination to take all appropriate action to make that system a reality.

Congress reiterates its demand for practical and adequate measures of disarmament, and for the establishment of an international agreement for the supervision of the manufacture, sale and transport of arms and munitions, and for the suppression of the private manufacture of arms. It calls upon the British Government to take the initiative, through the League of Nations, to convene a new Conference of all nations concerned, in order that this purpose may be achieved.

Finally, the Congress instructs the General Council, in conjunction with the National Council of Labour, to watch closely the development of events in order that, should emergency arise, such measures may be

taken, in consultation with the affiliated organisations, as may be necessary to deal with the situation.

At the London Trades Council Conference on February 24, 1936, Citrine said :

There were important differences between pacts of non-aggression—such as the Briand-Kellogg Pact—and the suggested pacts of mutual assistance, such as is now contemplated between France and Russia. Our policy rested not on a series of such pacts which are little more than pre-war alliances, but on the League.

When the Rhineland occupation took place, a very considerable section of the political Labour leadership took a pro-German line. The occupation of the Rhineland was of course formally condemned, but the main stress of the *Daily Herald*, which represented this section of the Labour Movement, was on “exploring” the genuineness of Hitler’s so-called “peace offer.” On March 16 the *Herald* said :

We return to these considerations because it grows clearer that Hitler can most easily and most effectively dissolve the crisis he has created. He wants a great place in history for his country. He could place Germany in a position of moral leadership of the world by a few words.

These illusions as to Hitler’s “peace” policy were shattered by (1) his refusal to answer the British questionnaire as to his intentions in Eastern Europe, (2) his continued postponement of the date when he would be prepared to meet the Locarno Powers, and (3) the Fascist offensive on Spain. On August 20 the National Council of Labour was forced to declare :

The course of events has shown the Fascist Powers grow more reckless, aggressive and dangerous. That is a portent and a warning that the democratic nations cannot ignore.

At the Trades Union Congress Mr. Findlay followed this up by saying :

If the Soviet Union, France and ourselves framed a pact of non-aggression and mutual assistance, based on the League Covenant, and open to all, it would in his judgment unquestionably preserve Peace both in Europe and in Asia.

Before Edinburgh, 1936—For a grouping of Peaceful Powers

The preamble of the Labour Party Conference resolution put the same idea in a less concrete form as follows :

Further, it is urgently necessary to form in Europe, within the framework of the League, a strong group of peaceful nations, firmly pledged to non-aggression and to mutual assistance against any aggressor, and to a policy of full political and economic co-operation ; membership of such a group, once formed, to be open to all States which are willing to accept the obligations and to enjoy the benefit of membership.

Now having arrived at this point it was necessary for the Labour leadership to answer the questions : “ what has been the attitude of the

National Government towards the growing aggressiveness of the fascist Powers ? ” ; “ what is likely to be its attitude to any suggestions for an all European pact of mutual assistance within the League ? ” The Labour leadership did not dare to face up to the implications of this policy. If it had, it would have been compelled to recognise that the foreign policy of the National Government was entirely hostile to any attempt to strengthen the League on the basis of the co-operation of the peaceful Powers. The Government had made the Naval Pact with Germany behind the back of the League ; it had restrained France when Hitler occupied the Rhineland ; it had repeatedly declared that it was against further commitments in Eastern Europe (and therefore would be against the proposed European Pact of Mutual Assistance) ; at the moment that the Labour Party Conference was meeting it was seeking to blow up the Franco-Soviet Pact ; it was public knowledge that it had brought pressure to bear on the Blum Government not to aid the legal Spanish Government at Madrid.

Escaping the Implications at Edinburgh

It is perfectly obvious that if the policy outlined by Mr. Findlay at the T.U.C. and in the preamble to the resolution at the Labour Party Conference was to be put into operation, it could only be in consequence of a strong fight against the National Government. But the Labour leadership had no perspective of a struggle against the National Government. Mr. Bevin delivered a speech at the T.U.C. which envisaged that Government lasting for another four years. All suggestion of the development of a united front for struggle against this Government had been rejected by the Labour leadership, and at the Trades Union Congress a resolution calling for a peace campaign of all organisations standing for collective security was rejected because it was alleged to be “ an attempt to smuggle the United Front in by the back door.”

The Labour leadership was therefore faced with the following dilemma. The fascist offensive was developing and unless restrained would plunge Europe into another war. As a leadership it rejected not only the united front drive against the present Government, but also any energetic drive against the Government on the part of the forces of official Labour, because every active campaign on the part of official Labour is bound in the present situation, to stimulate the demand for the United Front. Fearing Fascism but rejecting the United Front, the Labour leaders advanced step by step to supporting the National Government as an instrument which might be used against Fascism.

Right Leaders support the Government Arms Programme

So as their fear of Fascism grew, the right wing Labour leaders' desire to huddle behind the Government grew in equal proportion. Already

at the London Trades Council Conference in February, Citrine declared that it might be necessary for the Labour Movement "to support a certain measure of rearmament"—under the control of the National Government, of course. Then Mr. Findlay at the Scottish Trades Union Congress declared :

I was brought up in a Christian household, but I am not prepared to say that I can take the advantages of this country without being ready to defend them if necessary with arms. It will be noted that there is no question here of arms being necessary to defend collective security, but to defend "this country."

In mid-summer the National Joint Council of Labour tried to bring pressure on the Labour Members of Parliament to vote for the arms estimates, but drew back when it encountered strong resistance. At the Trades Union Congress in September Mr. Findlay continued the campaign for support of the Government arms programme and tried to use the strong anti-fascist feelings of the Congress in order to win support.

Would they be true to themselves if they tamely accepted the imposition of a dictatorship of a financial and military autocracy. If they were not so prepared, or if they could not satisfy themselves that by pacifism they could preserve their freedom, he suggested that it was only common sense to procure the best possible equipment for their fighters.

Mr. Findlay was not of course suggesting the "best possible equipment" for the Spanish militia. Indeed he was supporting the policy of an arms blockade. The best possible equipment was for the forces of the National Government—irrespective of the policy that this Government was pursuing. Mr. Bevin followed up Findlay's speech by declaring a few days later that in view of fascist aggression it was necessary for the General Council of the Trades Union Congress to consult with the Executive Committee of the Labour Party with a view to a reconsideration of policy. What this reconsideration involved was clearly indicated in the notes of Mr. John Marchbanks (another General Council member) in the *Railway Review* of September 25 :

It was clearly indicated at the Plymouth Congress that the attitude of our organised movement on the question of war and peace, in view of the growing menace of Fascism, requires to be more clearly defined. The practical question at issue is whether the Labour Movement takes a pacifist view of the situation, or is prepared to say that the dangers are such as to justify the Government's programme of rearmament.

In the minds of the T.U.C. General Council and their supporters in the Labour Party Executive there was no dubiety as to what was necessary. The Labour Party opposition to rearmament was to cease and the Party under the plea of arms being necessary in order to defend democracy was to vote for the Arms Estimates.

Line up with the Government—the Appearance at Edinburgh

When the resolution was published, after long and heated sessions of the Labour Party Executive, it appeared as if this point of view had carried the day. There was of course the usual camouflage, and trimmings, but when the *Herald* announced in glaring headlines “Labour Draws Up New Policy. Efficient Defence Against Aggression” it appeared as if the General Council and their supporters had won all along the line. It was only in the course of the debate that the compromise character of the resolution was fully revealed. The main supporters of the resolution at the beginning of the debate, Hugh Dalton, Lord Strabolgi, and Charlie Dukes, argued on the basis that the resolution meant support of the arms programme of the Government. There is no doubt at all in the writer’s mind, that if this had been the interpretation of a united Labour Party Executive it would still have been carried by a substantial majority for the great mass of Trade Union delegates are alarmed at the growing aggressiveness of the fascist Powers and do not see that support for the arms policy of the National Government means in no way putting a barrier in the path of this aggression, but will result on the contrary in helping forward that aggression.

Those delegates were not helped to arrive at a clear position by the pacifist opposition to the resolution. When Mr. Lansbury declares “They should bring even the dictatorship nations round the table and convince them, not by force, but by reason”: when Lord Arnold attacks the indivisibility of peace and suggests that it would be possible for Britain to pursue a policy of splendid isolation in the event of a war; and when Dr. Salter roundly declared that it was wrong for Parliament to resist Charles I. on the ground that this resistance led to the dictatorship of Cromwell, it became absolutely clear that this type of pacifism was an escape from reality into a land of dreams. Its only effect is to drive trade unionists into the arms of the right wing.

The first breath of Socialist opposition to the resolution came from Jack Clayton of Bury. Clayton gave a detailed analysis of the foreign policy of the National Government and asked:

Does the resolution instruct the Party in Parliament to vote for or against the Arms Programme? If so, what guarantee is there that the arms will be used to restrain the fascist Powers? May they not be used to assist them? Placing arms in the hands of this Government was like placing arms in the hands of a burglar in the hope that he may defend you against other burglars.

This speech brought Morrison up to declare on behalf of the Executive that

We cannot satisfy ourselves that this Government is seeking collective security. We cannot be assured that these arms are for the purpose of defending democracy. This motion does not mean support of the

Government's arms programme. That would imply immediately that you are in general agreement with the policy or absence of policy of the Government in foreign affairs.

Morrison also declared that the resolution meant opposition to the Government arms programme in Parliament although the manner of this opposition would be left to the M.P.s. They would decide whether to oppose by means of token reductions or by voting against the estimates as a whole. At a later stage of the Conference Attlee substantially supported Morrison's interpretation of the resolution.

The Reality—a Compromise of Conflicting Views

At this stage it became clear that the resolution was a compromise between two schools on the Executive. The line of those supporting the General Council was that arms are necessary to defend democracy and that the Government must be given arms in spite of the foreign policy which it was pursuing. As Bevin said in his intervention in the debate :

If I am faced with the problem of arming this country I am prepared to face it. The first thing victorious Fascism destroys is us—the trade unions. We are not the Government, but I want to drive the Government to defend democracy against its will.

The line of Attlee and Morrison was that arms are necessary for collective security, but as there is no evidence that the Government is standing for collective security we cannot vote for its arms programme. The line between the two schools is not so wide as might be assumed. Attlee asked the Government to state its policy. Some strong pressure from the trade union bureaucracy, an assurance from the Government that it was really out for collective security and an all-European settlement, and the supporters of Morrison and Attlee could soon pass into the camp of Bevin and the T.U.C.

The *Daily Herald* leader, written on the day after the debate, was able to tell its readers what the two sets of supporters of the resolution stood for. It was not able to tell them, however, what the resolution meant. There are divergent interpretations, and only struggle will determine which will become the basis for the practice of the Labour Party.

The Arguments used for Support of the Government

In the meantime it is worth noting some of the characteristic arguments which were used in favour of the policy of voting for the Government Arms Programme. The most popular argument in the Union delegations—though not openly brought out in the Conference, went somewhat as follows :

“ We know that the National Government is not a Government favourable to collective security, or to the democratic States in Europe. Nevertheless, Fascist arms are increasing and a Labour Government might find itself compelled to resort to self-defence in the first days of its existence. Now arms cannot be produced at a moment's notice. The arms factories have got to be made ready. It is therefore necessary to support the present arms policy of the National Government in order that the Labour Government will have at its disposal all the necessary means of defending democracy and peace.”

Now what is the meaning of this argument ? Is it suggested that the huge arms programme of the National Government is not sufficient and that British labour must bring pressure to bear upon it to make greater efforts in this direction ?

Is it suggested that if the British Labour Movement refuses to vote for increased arms the National Government will sacrifice its imperialist interests and leave Britain defenceless ? Surely it is evident that the National Government programme envisages not a sufficiency of arms to enable Britain to play its part in a collective system, but a sufficiency of arms to enable it to play an imperialist rôle independent of any collective system. So far from a Labour Government finding itself defenceless, it is more than likely to find itself saddled with an excess of arms over and above what is necessary to participate in the collective peace system.

But the essence of this technical argument is that the Labour Movement should vote arms to the British Government even if it knows that this Government is pursuing an anti-League and pro-Fascist policy. Under the plea that arms are necessary for the defence of democracy, it has to vote arms to a Government which will be prepared to use them for the destruction of democracy.

The preamble of the Edinburgh resolution declares amongst other things :

When an opportunity occurred of vindicating the authority of the League of Nations against the aggressor, the British Government betrayed the League of Nations and Abyssinia and broke its pledge to the electors. The Labour Party can have no confidence in the Government's professions of loyalty to the League.

The present weakness of the League is not due to any inherent faults in the Covenant and the League system, but to the disloyalty of some great powers and the vacillating policy of others.

During the last five years while the international situation has steadily deteriorated the British Government in the Council and Assembly of the League, and at the Disarmament Conference has thrown away opportunity after opportunity of strengthening the League and establishing the foundations of peace.

Yet in face of that characterisation the General Council and its supporters in the Labour Party Executive want that party to vote for the arms policy of a Government disloyal to the League. Surely it is patent to any Labour Party supporter that once the Movement votes for the arms policy of such a Government it is encouraging that Government in its disloyalty to the League. It is making it more difficult to secure a reversal of this disloyal policy, let alone the replacement of the Government which is pursuing this policy.

A Working-Class Peace Policy

What are the elements of a sound working-class peace policy? Firstly we think the winning of the majority of the people of Great Britain for the proposition enunciated in the preamble to the Edinburgh resolution.

It is urgently necessary to form in Europe within the framework of the League a strong group of peaceful nations pledged to non-aggression and to a policy of mutual assistance against the aggressor and to a policy of close political and economic co-operation.

But what is necessary to make this policy a reality? Surely unremitting opposition to the policy of the present Government which opposes such an all-European pact.

Take Eden's speech at the League Assembly on September 25. In this speech the Government is declared to be in favour of a Western Pact. This policy is in direct opposition to an All-European Security Pact such as is envisaged by the Labour Party Executive. It is the policy of a "free hand in the East" for Nazi Germany.

The Government is in favour of "striving for universality" as far as the League is concerned. This is the policy of hindering the co-operation of the peaceful countries within the League which the Labour Party advocates as being urgently necessary, on the plea that the League can only be strengthened by bringing back Germany and Japan. In effect this proposal means resistance to any efforts to strengthen the existing League and to restrain the Fascist Powers.

It was this policy of "striving for universality" that Litvinov had in mind when he said at Geneva:

Can we declare compatible with the principle of equality of nations which is one of the foundation stones of the League, the ideology of a state founded on racial and national inequality and describing all peoples except its own as "sub-human." I would ask the supporters of "universality at any price": Must we sacrifice all the fundamental principles of the League in order to adapt it to the theory and practice of such a State, or must we invite the latter itself to adapt its principles to the present ideology of the League. My reply at any rate is better a League without universality than universality without League principles. (Litvinov at the League Assembly, September 28.)

At this Assembly also, Eden, to the great delight of the Nazis, supported the revision of treaties. This at the moment when every small State in Europe is trembling before Nazi aggression. Clearly the Labour policy of the co-operation of peaceful States demands an energetic struggle against the National Government.

What this Involves

Further, if the Labour Party believes it is urgently necessary to build up a bloc of peaceful Powers it will have to supplement this by revising its policy on the United Front. Co-operation between the Communist Government of the Soviet Union and certain capitalist Powers will only be effective in so far as that co-operation has the support of the overwhelming majority of people in the capitalist States so co-operating. This demands working-class unity on an international scale in order to impose a uniform policy on the various capitalist Governments. It also demands the gathering of the Peace forces in the various capitalist countries in a People's Front in order to defeat the pro-Fascist and anti-Soviet elements in their own country. Unless those in the Labour Movement who are fighting against support for the Government arms plan supplement that policy by supporting the United Front, victory will go to those who are out for a deal with the Government.

For the attitude of those Labour leaders who are for support of the Government's rearmament plans—an attitude which objectively strengthens the forces making for Fascism and War—derives from their rejection of the alternative policy of the United Front. The rejection of the United Front leaves the Labour leadership with only the following perspective : (1) That Fascism in Britain can only be staved off by a policy of moderation, rejecting the United Front, the development of the strike struggles and of mass movements generally ("Fascism is a remote danger as far as this country is concerned, if we only keep our heads and prevent our ranks from being split," Citrine). (2) That the National Government cannot be brought down, and we must wait until its term of office expires (Bevin's speech about preparing for a Labour Government in four years' time). (3) That because British institutions are democratic, the National Government will prefer to co-operate with democratic, rather than with Fascist, Europe.

The whole effect of this policy is to reduce the British Labour Movement to the status of a very junior partner in any imperialist venture or policy the National Government may venture upon, to cause it completely to desert the struggle for European democracy and peace, and by so doing to pursue a course which brings war nearer.

"But democracy must be defended against Fascism" cry the Labour leaders. Undoubtedly it must. But the National Government cannot

act as the instrument of this defence. The fact that the institutions of present day Britain are of a capitalist democratic character is a tribute to the political struggles waged by the British people in the past. It is not a proof that the National Government is out to strengthen the League to defend democracy (either at home or abroad) and European peace. The orientation of the British capitalist class is determined not by their democratic sentiments (if such they possess), but by their conception of what would best serve their imperialist interests. This appears to be at the moment: (1) the development of a Western Security Pact; and (2) a free hand for Germany on the East involving the disruption of the Franco-Soviet Pact. This policy means not the defence of democracy, but its destruction.

What the right wing fails to recognise is that the defence of democracy in Britain involves a struggle on two fronts (nationally and internationally). It means a pact of mutual assistance underpinning the League Covenant and the establishment of international unity. It means the building of a People's Front to defeat the pro-Fascist elements in Great Britain and to replace the National Government by a Labour Government. To reject the United Front and the People's Front is to reject the mobilisation of all the forces in the struggle for democracy and peace.

The Three Pillars of Peace

The three pillars of a successful peace policy are therefore (1) the formation of a peace bloc within the League, (2) international working-class unity, (3) the formation of a People's Front on the basis of the United Front. In the last analysis the official Labour Movement is confronted with the choice of unity of the working class for peace or unity with the National Government for war. And so the fight between the supporters of these two lines goes on.

Mr. Marchbank, we notice, is saying in the *Railway Review*; (Oct. 17) that the National Council of Labour must clear this matter up—in the sense of seeing to it that the resolution is not accepted as a mandate to continue opposing the Government's rearmament programme. Mr. Morrison, on the other hand affirms:

One must always allow new circumstances, but the Parliamentary Party has not yet been asked by the Party Conference to support the Government's competitive rearmament programme and it will remain free to determine, according to the circumstances of the time, whether it will vote against the service estimate *en bloc* or whether it will express its dissension from Government policy by moving token reductions and dividing the House upon them. (*Forward*, October 17.)

Obviously the Labour Party will be politically impotent unless this matter is cleared up. Equally obviously it is not the business of the National Council of Labour to clear it up, but a special conference, based

on the fullest consultation with the working class, with full expression in voting and speaking of minorities in trade union delegations. If that were done the disastrous policy of making the Labour Movement the appendage of the National Government could be decisively defeated and a really constructive Peace Policy capable of rallying the majority of the British people adopted. Until that is done, Labour's Foreign Policy is a "babel of tongues"—a fact that can only help reaction, Fascism and War.

SOLD OUT !

THE October issue of the LABOUR MONTHLY was completely sold out almost before the month was half gone by. This means that there was an increased sale for the October issue of no less than two hundred and fifty as compared with September. The increased demand came from every direction, showing the widening interest in all sides in Labour politics—particularly of the Left Wing.

EDINBURGH results are provoking controversy everywhere. This number contains three articles treating of its various aspects. Professor Laski's article will undoubtedly arouse great interest particularly amongst Labour Party members.

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