

“LEFT” SOCIALISM & THE PEOPLE’S FRONT

Notes on the I.L.P. Conference

By J. R. CAMPBELL

We frequently observe the characteristic phenomenon that not a few of the Left Socialists who have become disillusioned with the Social Democrats’ policy of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie, and are moving away from reformism, are frequently inclined to go to the other extreme and become the victims of sectarianism and Leftist excesses. They make the mistake of identifying the policy of the People’s Front with the policy of class collaboration with the bourgeoisie and demand “a pure working class policy,” declaring that the joint struggles of the working class and the democratic sections of the lower middle classes, the peasantry and intelligentsia against Fascism constitutes a retreat from the position of the class struggle.

THE above remarks of Comrade Dimitrov seem as if they were written with the Easter Conference of the I.L.P. in mind. On the relations of the United Front of the working class to a Popular Front, on the problems of the Spanish people’s struggle, on the rôle of the working class in the struggle against war, the I.L.P. was more than self-conscious of its “Leftness.” Running through all the speeches one could almost detect the thought “see how Left we are compared with the Communist Party.”

The writer of this article believes that the I.L.P. gave quite wrong answers to the questions that confronted it, that the Left phraseology that was used so lavishly during the Conference, simply concealed a failure to grapple with the problem of what the working class must do in the present phase of the class struggle. The resolutions of the Conference were not a guide to action but a guide to abstract criticism—of the Communist Party.

The crying defect of the resolutions of the I.L.P. conference is that they proceed from general principles instead of from a concrete many-sided analysis of the existing situation.

Here, for example, are a number of basic quotations from the Conference resolutions :

The I.L.P. recognises that Fascism is capitalism in its extreme form, and that so long as capitalism continues, the possessing and privileged

class will increasingly resort to the methods of Fascism in order to destroy the opportunity of the working class to use democratic liberties in the struggle against capitalism.

The I.L.P. deplores the tendency of some sections of the working class movement to apply to the fight against Fascism methods which create the illusion that the menace of Fascism is separate and distinct from the general economic subjection of the workers by capitalism and consequently that the fight against Fascism can be isolated from the day to day struggle of the workers.

The danger that working class forces will be divided by this propaganda emphasises the necessity to make it clear that capitalist democracy is not the alternative to Fascism and that the working class struggle for improved conditions, aiming at Workers' Power and Socialism, is the basis on which both the failure of capitalist democracy and the menace of Fascism must be met.

This recognition of the nature of Fascism while it requires the sternest resistance to all limitations of civil rights, involves the rejection of policies which aim at lining up the Working Class movement with the “ democratic ” capitalist states against the Fascist capitalist states or with “ democratic ” capitalist elements on a programme of democracy within capitalism. (*Resolution on the “ Fight Against Fascism.”*)

The I.L.P. is therefore opposed to the tactic of the Popular Front which aims at combining the working-class forces with the “ democratic ” elements within the capitalist Parties in opposition to Fascism and reaction. This tactic ignores the fact that Fascism and reaction are inseparable from capitalism and can only be defeated by the overthrow of capitalism. It necessitates disastrous compromises, as shown by the experiences of Spain and France, which provide favourable opportunities for Fascism. It involves a suspension of the struggle for Workers' Power and Socialism in favour of the defence of capitalist democracy. (*Resolution on the “ Popular Front.”*)

In the above formulations and in the speeches at the Conference the fact that Fascism is rooted in capitalism was stressed. This is true. Fascism is the form of political reaction which grows on the soil of decaying monopoly capitalism. The menace of Fascism can therefore only definitely be liquidated when monopoly capitalism has been overthrown. But these generalisations are not a sufficiently complete guide to the daily conduct of the struggle of the working class. Such political action is only possible on a basis of the evaluation of all social forces and not on the basis of a generalisation, however correct.

It is true that Fascist tendencies are everywhere developing amongst the capitalist class. But the growth of Fascist tendencies amongst the capitalist class is one thing and their expression in a powerful mass movement is another. Even if we grant that the growth of Fascist moods amongst the capitalist class is inevitable, it is not inevitable that millions of non-capitalists (petty bourgeoisie and backward workers) shall be won for Fascism. Our concrete task, on the basis of a sober examination

of the situation, is to pursue a policy that wins those elements as supporters or allies of the Labour movement in the struggle against Fascism, and in most countries the working-class movement must be united itself before it can influence other sections of the people.

The capitalist class are under no illusions as to the danger of working-class unity. The whole vast propaganda machine at their disposal is used to prevent working-class unity as long as possible. When this fails their aim is to isolate the working-class from other sections of the people. In a whole series of countries a united working-class would still be in a minority. It is therefore necessary to win the intermediate strata of the population for the anti-Fascist struggle. For the working class to neglect the petty bourgeoisie or to pursue a policy of "come to us on our terms" is to pursue an idiotic tactic of self isolation. But if the workers desire to co-operate with the petty bourgeoisie they must fight for the demands of the petty bourgeoisie alongside their own, co-operate with petty bourgeois organisations, and allow those organisations a voice in the conduct of the struggle. And that is the People's Front.

The I.L.P. and Spain

How unreal many of the criticisms of the People's Front are, is seen in relation to the Spanish struggle. Here the Fascist movement, supported by Hitler and Mussolini, is menacing the majority of the Spanish people. Not only workers' organisations are in peril, but all democratic organisation, all modern culture. If Franco wins there will be a reactionary régime in Spain compared with which the worst of Nazi barbarism will seem like "sweetness and light." And for the simple reason that Franco is heavily supported by the Fascist powers, his defeat will not be easy. Surely the sensible thing is to unite every element hostile to Franco in the struggle to defeat him, and the common basis on which to unite is the defence of the existing democratic governments, in which the organisations of the workers have preponderant influence.

But this which appears to us as stark commonsense, is a crime and a betrayal in the sight of the I.L.P., which raises a hysterical clamour to the effect that capitalist democracy is hardly worth defending, that non-working-class democrats are unreliable allies, that the real issue is Socialism versus Fascism.

All those high sounding phrases can be expressed more concretely in the propositions: (1) Franco can be defeated by class-conscious Socialists alone, without the assistance of the peasantry or the town petty bourgeoisie; (2) Or while we need those elements, we are prepared to accept their co-operation, but only on the basis of our programme. When one remembers the fact that the working-class is in a minority in Spain, that the peasantry had not the revolutionary tradition that it had in Russia, the folly of these tactics is more than evident.

To justify this ridiculous standpoint sham Socialist arguments are employed. We are told that if Fascism grows on the soil of capitalism it can only be finally defeated by the abolition of capitalism. This is true, but unhelpful. For the problem in France and Spain, the problem that is arising elsewhere, is what to do in countries where the majority of the people is anti-Fascist but not yet Socialist, in order to defeat the immediate Fascist attack, and in the process win masses of non-Socialists to see the necessity of overthrowing the capitalist system itself.

What the opposition to the People’s Front amounts to is this. That it is wrong for Socialists to combine with non-Socialist democrats in a struggle against a Fascist rebellion which threatens both. We know of no conceivable argument in favour of this policy, which is simply a result of applying formal logic to premises which ignore the real situation confronting us to-day.

Another popular argument of the I.L.P. Conference was that the Popular Front meant the abandonment of class struggle for class co-operation. Really one would have thought that the civil war which the Spanish Popular Front is engaged in at this moment is a sufficiently acute form of class struggle to suit even the most energetic revolutionary. It should be noted that while “ Left ” Socialists are arguing that the People’s Front is dangerous because it stifles class struggle, the Right Wing is shrieking that the People’s Front by intensifying the class struggle leads directly to Civil War.

So far from stifling the class struggle, the development of the Popular Front has altered the relation of class forces in favour of the working class. In less than a year it took Cabellero from jail and made him Prime Minister of Spain. It was not because the development of the Popular Front was stifling the class struggle, it was because it was gradually stifling reaction that the generals resorted to arms.

Here, however, an interesting point arises. One of the charges against the Left Republican Government that arose out of the election in February, 1936, and that was supported by the People’s Front organisations in Spain, was that it should have immediately given Morocco its independence and have cleared every pro-Fascist officer out of the army. Here again is a refusal to consider the concrete conditions. Are not some of our extremely “ Left ” comrades embracing the fundamentally Right Wing proposition that a parliamentary majority gives complete control of the Army and Navy. Remember that in the first days of the new Government, the working-class movement was just beginning to re-emerge from illegality. The Workers’ Militia had not been formed. An immediate attempt to dismiss all Fascist officers could have precipitated a military rising at a time when the workers were less prepared than in July, and when, remember, there was still a Right Wing Government in France.

Surely it was essential to allow the workers' organisations time to re-form and to proceed by way of undermining the extreme reactionaries. The Left Republican Government was undoubtedly dilatory in carrying out this line, but to talk as if it was a Government which had full control of the army and could cleanse it without difficulties—is to betray a faith in the efficacy of Parliamentary majorities understandable amongst Right Wingers but strange when it is found amongst "Lefts."

Surely, one must look at the Popular Front movement in its growth. To speak of a development that has brought the workers' organisations in Spain out of illegality into the position of power they hold to-day, as involving a betrayal of the class struggle, can only be explained on the ground that certain "Left" Socialists are harbouring the strange delusion that the class struggle means the working class versus the rest of society. This conception is ludicrous. The class struggle can best be waged seriously when the working class isolates the capitalist class by winning large sections of the petty bourgeoisie to the side of the workers, and that is the object of the People's Front.

One of the most revealing incidents of the Conference was when Jennie Lee said "there might come a time when we would be glad even of the existence of a Popular Front Government. Loud cries of 'no' roused her to a slashing attack on those whose only care was the saving of their own souls." (*New Leader*, April 2.) In other words, the shouters prefer the risks of a Fascist victory to an alliance with non-proletarian elements to resist Fascism. This is the negation of the class struggle and of all serious politics.

Throughout the discussion on the People's Front it is assumed that this is an alliance of a static character. This is entirely wrong. The People's Front is an alliance between the working class and the petty bourgeoisie, but the specific weight of the working-class movement in the alliance can change in the process of the development of the struggle. Indeed, it is the duty of the working-class parties to see that it does change. Before the Fascist rising in Spain there was a Popular Front. To-day, there is a Popular Front, but the influence of the working-class in this Popular Front has increased enormously and the outlook of large numbers of the middle class allies of the workers has undergone a significant change. The People's Front must be regarded, therefore, not only as a form of co-operation between the working-class and the democratic middle class for the purpose of defeating fascism, but also as a form of co-operation in which the workers, in the course of the struggle, transform the outlook of their allies. It may be that in certain countries a specific Government arising out of the People's Front will prove unequal to its task and will collapse. It is true that opportunist mistakes have been committed in the building up of the People's Front. This is liable

to happen in all forms of alliances for immediate purposes. It could take place, for example, just as well within the framework of a United Front alliance. It may be that in some countries the original form of the People’s Front alliance will break and the alliance will have to be reconstructed on a new basis. All forms of alliances in which a revolutionary party co-operates with non-revolutionary elements need constant vigilance, but that is no argument against the alliance, it is simply a proof that real life is often more complicated than Left socialist schemes. What is essential to the People’s Front is that the working-class, having achieved the united front itself, shall, in accordance with the peculiar conditions of the country in which it is operating, seek to win the petty bourgeoisie and to isolate the capitalist class. No one suggests that the fight against fascism can be isolated from the general day-to-day struggle of the workers, as is asserted by the I.L.P. Resolution on the “ Fight Against Fascism.” On the contrary, the People’s Front is built on the basis of a programme of the day-to-day demands of the working-class and the petty-bourgeoisie.

From the wrong conception that the People’s Front policy is one of class co-operation, the Left socialists associated with the I.L.P. hope to break up also the Popular Front in Spain. All the activities of the P.O.U.M. are devoted to the policy of breaking-up the democratic alliance and pursuing a policy of “ the workers alone ” against Franco. That this is precisely what the agents of Franco are striving for, namely, to drive a wedge between the workers and the petty bourgeoisie, and a wedge between the Anarchists and the Communists, is lost upon them.

This can be quite clearly seen in the attitude of the P.O.U.M. towards the problem of creating a united army in Spain. Mr. Bob Edwards, in an article in the *New Leader*, says :

It is stated that the P.O.U.M. are opposed to a unified command amongst the Spanish military forces. This statement is completely untrue, for the past six months the P.O.U.M. have been advocating the unification of the army forces.

The answer to this is that the P.O.U.M. is against the proposals for a unified army which are being put forward by the Government of the Republic and the Government of Catalonia. They are in favour of a workers’ army whose leadership is selected by a Soldiers’ Congress, but which is not under the control of the existing governments in Spain. That is concretely opposing a unified army, for there is no likelihood of the P.O.U.M. proposals being adopted.

Bob Edwards further complains that the Communist Party is putting forward the following slogans :

“ A People’s Army,” “ A Neutral Army,” “ A Non-political Army,” “ A unified command under one Flag ” (The Republican Flag), “ Save the Republic.” All of these slogans are acceptable to the reformist

elements and parties in Spain, thus enabling the Communists to build up a Popular Front of the non-working-class and non-revolutionary elements, a Popular Front which is being used to isolate both the P.O.U.M. and the C.N.T.

In other words, in the middle of the civil war it is regarded as a crime for the working-class to try and win non-working-class democrats as its allies. A great deal is made about the phrase "A Neutral Army." Bob Edwards knows perfectly well that this means not neutrality with regard to Franco or Fascism, but that the army will be neutral as between the various political parties of the alliance. The alternative to that is the P.O.U.M. army, an Anarchist army, a Communist army, a Left Republican army, in short the continuation of the chaos existing on the Aragon Front at the present time.

What is bad about the alliance with non-Fascist democrats to fight Fascism, we are not told ; we are left to assume that the Left socialists consider that it is better to be defeated under the socialist banner than to win under the democratic banner. People who are not victims of Left phrases will, however, choose the latter, because in the struggle of the democratic alliance the workers will have the opportunity to transform their allies and that will prove to be the quickest way to a socialist victory in Spain after all.

Another complaint of Bob Edwards is as follows : " the winding-up of the workers' guard patrol and the substitution of what is called an internal security force." Here again we have the same situation as in the army. Has every political party to have its own private police or is there to be one police in Catalonia controlled by the Government in which the working-class organisations have the control ? Surely the latter. Is it not clear that the gravest injury can be done to the united struggle of the Spanish people against Fascism by arbitrary actions of workers' patrols associated with particular political parties or Trades Unions ?

The struggle in Catalonia is around the question therefore as to whether there shall be one government or a 100 little governments. It is precisely here, where the P.O.U.M. influence is strongest, that there exists a ruinous situation which if repeated in the rest of Spain would ensure victory to Franco. Look at the positive policy of the P.O.U.M. It is comprised of (1) resistance to the formation of a united army now ; (2) the break-up of the Popular Front ; (3) The driving of a wedge between the Communist Party and the Anarchists. There you have a concrete example of where the rejection of the People's Front leads.

The I.L.P. and War

The struggle against war also occupied a considerable amount of attention at the I.L.P. Conference. Now every Socialist knows that

the war crisis is an expression of the capitalist system. The whole problem, however, is how to get the masses to see the necessity of attacking capitalism as the cause of war. This cannot be done by propaganda alone, but through the experience which the workers acquire in the struggle in defence of peace and democracy. Because the capitalist system is attacking peace and democracy, these are the issues to seize upon in order to commence a struggle that can be developed against the capitalist system itself.

From the point of view of pure propaganda it is necessary to stress that war is an expression of the capitalist system, that every government so far as it upholds capitalism is supporting a system which generates war, but from the point of view of the every day practical activities of the workers it is not a matter of indifference what policy a given capitalist government is pursuing. It is not a matter of indifference that the British Government, operating within the framework of capitalism, is pursuing a different policy to the French Government, also operating within the framework of capitalism. It is clear that the British Government is pursuing a policy of encouraging the Fascist states in Europe and it is clear that we have to struggle against the day-to-day foreign policy of the Government just as we struggle against its day-to-day domestic policy. We do not say “unemployment cuts are inevitable, therefore we must attack the capitalist system.” We fight against every attempt to cut unemployment relief, link our fight up with our fundamental propaganda, and seek to direct the workers towards attacking the Government itself. So with our struggle for peace. We do not accept the pro-Fascist policy of the Government, we fight for a different foreign policy and direct that fight towards the resignation of the Government.

Not even Left socialists doubt that we should make demands on the Government in relation to its Spanish policy, but when it comes to general questions of foreign policy they believe that by making demands on the Government we are slipping into opportunism.

A real struggle against war does not consist merely in (1) demonstrating that the cause of war is capitalism ; (2) opposing the Arms policy of the Government and opposing the League of Nations. Yet this is all the I.L.P. resolution on war does. It tells us that war arises out of the capitalist system, it advises us what to do in various types of war, colonial, inter-imperialist, imperialist versus the Soviet Union, but it does not tell us what to do now.

A real answer to the war danger means, however, opposing the concrete foreign policy of the Government with one more likely to secure the maintenance of peace, developing the movement around the fight for that policy, and on this basis striving for a change of Government. Unless we do that our opposition is wordy and sterile.

The I.L.P. and the Soviet Union

In the debate on this resolution there was the usual reference to Soviet Russia's foreign policy, which was described as betraying the working class and stifling the world revolution.

It is assumed that this is some new and monstrous policy invented by Stalin, but right from the commencement of the Bolshevik Revolution the Soviet Union sought to take advantage of the conflicts between the Imperialist states. Indeed, it was precisely because such differences existed in an acute form that it was possible for the Soviet Union to defeat intervention and to prevent the building up of a united front of imperialist states. So far from it being wrong to take advantage of the fact that some capitalist countries do not want an immediate war, it is our bounden duty to do so, and any positive peace policy must have as its objective a fight to force the British Government to associate with those countries who do not want an immediate war.

The same considerations applied to the Soviet Union diplomacy in relation to Spain. It is assumed that immediately the Spanish civil war broke out the Soviet Union should have rushed to assist the Spanish people, ahead of Hitler and Mussolini, with arms and with men.

It is clearly the duty of the working-class states to render all possible assistance to the workers struggling in other countries in the world, but to do that it is necessary to consider what is best in any concrete situation. It is no part of the duty of the Government that is seriously concerned with defending peace, to rush in and "damn the consequences."

Right from the start, Franco and his allies have sought to isolate the Spanish people by claiming that their war was not against democracy but against the Reds. The Soviet Union was correct in pursuing a course that made it impossible for the Fascists to maintain their myth of "Red intervention," and so hindered the formation of a capitalist united front directed against the Spanish people. It is folly to take the view when one is dealing with Spain that all capitalist governments are the same. If by capitalist governments we mean governments working within the framework of the capitalist system, then the governments of both France and Mexico are capitalist governments. It would be a very foolish person who would suggest, however, that their attitude in the struggle of the Spanish people has been the same as the governments of Hitler and Mussolini.

The whole basis of this abstract Left policy is a refusal to recognise that Fascist states are the chief instigators of war, with the British Government as their helper. Consequently, there was no suggestion at the I.L.P. Conference for any concrete fight against the policy of the British Government as the basis for its overthrow. On the contrary, the war resolution

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involves an avoidance of the daily fight, an avoidance of the attempt to mobilise the peace forces of Britain against the National Government.

Because the existence of the Fascist bloc and the rôle of the British Government is ignored, some strange things have crept into the I.L.P. resolution. Here, for example, is a prescription for a war situation :

In the event of a war between two capitalist countries, or two groups of capitalist countries (even if a Workers’ State is part of one of the groups), it will be the duty of the British working class to concentrate on the task of overthrowing the British capitalist Government and to co-operate with the workers of other countries in overthrowing their capitalist governments.

Two things can be said about this. First, there is no indication on the part of the British Government that they might co-operate with the Soviet Union against Fascist Governments, as this paragraph suggests they might. If the British Government was prepared to do so, this would be a most important factor in maintaining peace. (2) The one conceivable situation where a British Government would be found co-operating with the Soviet Union would be if a Labour Government was returned to office in this country. Now such a Labour Government would be a Government mainly engaged in administering the capitalist system, i.e., a capitalist government, and yet the prescription of the I.L.P. is that in the event of a Labour government line-up with the Soviet Union in a struggle against the Fascist powers, it would be the duty of the British working class right from the commencement to sabotage the war plans of this government and to do all it could to secure its overthrow. It is obvious that no line can be conceived more calculated to help a Fascist victory on a world scale.

Lastly, we would refer to the resolution on a new International. It is suggested that the Communist International has ceased to be a revolutionary International and that the Communists are now pursuing a policy of class co-operation.

This is said at the moment when Parties of the Communist International are putting forth an unprecedented effort in connection with the struggle in Spain. We will not engage in any ludicrous comparison between what has been done by the splinter parties associated with the I.L.P. and what has been done by the Communist International. We are prepared to have an examination as to what has been done by all the parties associated with the I.L.P. as against what has been done by the Communist Party of Great Britain, and we are satisfied that our Party has done as much as all those splinter parties together. And yet the only justification offered by those parties for the new International is that the Communist Parties have ceased to be revolutionary and are failing to develop the struggle. In the British Labour movement at the present time an unprecedented concentration of reaction is taking

place, mainly directed against the Communist Party, the same is taking place in every other country in Europe, and yet a few feeble ineffective parties are loudly boasting that the Communist International has failed and that they alone can provide the basis for a new International.

Unfortunately, the parties which are propagating the idea of this new International propose to hold a Congress in Barcelona. Such a Congress will be nothing more nor less than a demonstration of splinter parties in favour of the P.O.U.M., which is striving might and main to prevent the unification of the Spanish struggle under one government, one army and one economic plan. Such a Congress is not only a stimulus to division in the international working-class movement but is a stimulus to division in Spain and acts as an aid to counter-revolution in that country.

The only useful resolution passed by the I.L.P. was, in our opinion, the resolution on the Unity Campaign (although the resolution on the Popular Front, envisaging as it does the possibility of the formation of a united revolutionary party outside the Labour Party machinery, is undoubtedly hostile to the underlying idea of the Unity Campaign). Even participation in the Unity Campaign, however, will not save the Independent Labour Party from complete sterility unless the policy of resounding revolutionary phrases is abandoned and a real socialist policy, based on a comprehensive analysis of the actual class forces in Britain and their tendencies, takes its place.

We hope that the Unity Campaign may have an effect in this direction, a little revolutionary practice is often an effective cure for a bad attack of revolutionary phrase-mongering.

[*Note.*—Beginning with the June issue, the **LABOUR MONTHLY** will publish a further series of the specially selected *Letters of Lenin.*]