

Chamberlain Over The T.U.C.

BY J. R. CAMPBELL

THE BLACKPOOL TRADES Union Congress met in the midst of the European war crisis and its proceedings were dominated by that fact. It met conscious of the rôle that the British Government had played in the development of this war crisis.

Peace and democracy are on the lips of the Government, declared Mr. Elvin in his President's Address, but War and Fascism are in their hearts, if deeds are to be their judges. . . . The betrayal of Abyssinia by this country and France forms one of the blackest pages in African experience. . . .the culminating act of betrayal by our own Government of the safety of British citizens with Spain in carrying on legitimate trade has strengthened the hands of the assassins. . . . Is Czechoslovakia to be the next sacrifice? If not, why Lord Runciman's visit to that country?

When these words were uttered by its own president, there could be no excuse for any delegate misunderstanding the rôle of the British Government, yet throughout the main debates of the Congress it became clear that the reactionary Right Wing section of the leadership was prepared, in the interests of co-operation with Chamberlain, to seek to explain away this rôle and to reduce the Labour Movement to an appendage of the pro-Fascist Chamberlain Government. This was seen in the attitude of this section in all the main debates of the week.

On the other hand there was a growing militant section which, while desiring to see a strong Peace Front barring the way to the Fascist aggressors, recognised that a necessary element in the struggle for such a Peace Front was a determined drive against the National Government. It can be said that, while on some key questions the Right Wing scored a victory, they were compelled in others to make concessions to the growth of militant feeling.

The first clash occurred in connection with the conversations which the Trades Union Congress General Council had with Chamberlain on the question of speeding up rearmament. What was the basic issue here? No one questions the right of the Trades Union Congress to discuss questions of arms with the National Government. Indeed the trade union movement has the clear duty of interesting itself in the objects for which the Government proposes to use the arms. The Trades Union Congress is interested in the conditions under which the workers in the munitions industry are employed and must be prepared

to discuss with the government of the day with a view to their improvement. The attempts of the reactionary Right Wing to represent their opponents as people opposed under all circumstances to conversations with the Government were simply an attempt to cloud the issue.

The key question that Citrine in his opening and concluding speeches evaded was as to whether the particular conversations opened between the Trades Union Congress and the Government were calculated to advance the interests of the working class politically or industrially, or whether they were calculated to help Chamberlain to carry out his reactionary policy directed against the interests of the British people.

Why did Chamberlain call the Trades Union Congress General Council into consultation at all? It was perfectly clear from Citrine's speech that Chamberlain had no concrete proposals for the acceleration of the arms programme, and neither had Inskip when he met the Engineering Unions. If acceleration of production was the aim of the Government, its leading members were strangely bankrupt of proposals. The aim of Chamberlain was, however, quite different. His government was deep in crisis. The dismissal of Eden had been followed by the invasion of Austria and had called forth a deep revolt amongst Government supporters. The whole country was resounding with the cry, "Chamberlain must go." When Chamberlain invited the Trades Union Congress to meet him he was concerned not with increasing arms production, but with buttressing his shaken prestige. Had the Trades Union Congress declared that the whole policy of the Government was undermining the defence of the country, that it was surrendering important strategic posts to the Fascist aggressors in Spain, that by refusing to work for the formation of a Peace Bloc it was refusing to use its arms for the reinforcement of peace, and that any discussion of the acceleration of the arms programme with a government pursuing such a policy would be fruitless, such a stand would have rallied the democratic forces in Britain, brought hope to the harassed democrats in Spain and would have been an important blow against the Chamberlain group of pro-Fascist reactionaries. But in the midst of a government crisis the General Council, with an indecent and servile haste, trotted around to see Chamberlain, listened to him as if a mere technical question was involved and went away without breathing a word of opposition to his reactionary line. It was left to the delegation of the Amalgamated Engineering Union a few days later to make that political pronouncement against the Government using British arms for pro-Fascist purposes that the General Council should have made at the height of the crisis. A few days subsequently the General Council did see Chamberlain and made a political pronouncement on arms, but the crisis had by that time blown over. The charge against the General Council was that by going to Chamberlain when it did, and in the manner that it did it helped to buttress his shaken authority and did a grave disservice to the peace forces of the country. That

charge was never met by Citrine in his defence of the General Council's action. In his speech and in that of trade union representatives who supported him there was the general plea that the Unions must approach the question of rearmament from the industrial and not from the political point of view. What is the meaning of this? What is the industrial as distinct from the political point of view? The trade unions have a clear duty of protecting their members who are employed in the manufacture of munitions and must guide their policy accordingly. But the trade unions are also interested in preventing the spread of Fascism throughout the world, for every Fascist victory means a menace to the very existence of the trade union movement. To say that the trade union movement should protect its members against dilution but should not challenge the policy of a government which is assisting Fascism to spread throughout the world is so nonsensical that it is difficult to understand why any rank and file delegate could be taken in by such meaningless sophistry. The plain fact is that the decision of the General Council was influenced by Sir Walter Citrine, and there is no better Chamberlainite than Sir Walter—even in the ranks of the Tory Party itself. In both his opening and his closing speech Sir Walter gave this away completely:

Our policy, he said, is to stand up to the aggressors. If the challenge is made we must meet it. Last year we said that in no uncertain voice. We said that we approved ourselves of the Government equipping itself to meet that challenge if it is made.

In his concluding speech he asserted:

We have in this report (of the General Council) a specific pledge by the Prime Minister that the arms will only be used in defence of Great Britain.

He further told the Congress that he had put to the Prime Minister the fear expressed in certain circles of the Labour Movement that British arms might be used to back a Fascist aggressor:

The Prime Minister asked us what Fascist Powers we had in mind, and I frankly confess that I couldn't tell him. After all, does anyone imagine that these arms are to be used to help Germany conquer Czechoslovakia? (Cheers.)

Now Sir Walter Citrine was asked this question by the Prime Minister in March, a few weeks after the same Prime Minister had dismissed his Foreign Secretary in order to make a deal with Mussolini. If Sir Walter could not answer the question it only proves his complete unfitness to interfere in any political question. The youngest member of the Labour Party confronted with a similar "poser" last March would have promptly answered: "Signor Mussolini, whose invasion of Spain is being helped by the policy of the British Government." Any ordinary member of the Labour Party could have answered that in March, but the General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress cannot answer it in September after he has seen Chamberlain refuse to use British arms to defend British ships from

being bombed by Italian aeroplanes, after he has seen the British Government clinging to the policy of non-intervention in spite of the rejection of its plan for the withdrawal of volunteers. "Are British arms to be used to help Hitler to conquer Czechoslovakia?" The answer is clear. They are being used to back a policy whose aim is to force Czechoslovakia to concede territory to Germany, and Citrine knows it. Why did the President of the General Council in his opening speech ask: "Is Czechoslovakia to be the next victim? If not, why Lord Runciman's visit to that country?" Why does the General Council's own resolution on Czechoslovakia say:

The German Government has demanded that Czechoslovakia yield its democracy to force and admit a totalitarian system within its boundaries. These demands are incompatible with the integrity and independence of Czechoslovakia. Every consideration of democracy forbids the dismemberment of the Czechoslovakian State by the subjection of the Sudeten German regions to Nazi Government control.

British Labour emphatically repudiates the right of the British or any other government to use diplomatic or other pressure to compel an acceptance of such a humiliation.

So in the opinion of the General Council itself the British Government was capable of using such pressure as would force the Czech Government to agree to concessions "incompatible with the integrity and independence of Czechoslovakia." If that is not telling Hitler to conquer Czechoslovakia, we wonder what is. Sir Walter in trying to whitewash Chamberlain was coming out against the line of the Congress resolutions themselves.

On the industrial side of the question the objections to the line taken by the General Council are equally clear. If its first consideration had been that it wanted to protect the trade unionists in the munitions industry, it would have postponed rushing to Chamberlain until it had a prior consultation with the Unions. From the purely industrial point of view its visit to Chamberlain was worse than useless. In his concluding speech Citrine used a curious argument which will be worth watching in the future. Arguing against delegates who urged the need for State control of the arms industries with a view to the limitation of profits, Citrine argued that you cannot raise the question of the State control of industry without raising the question of the State control of labour. This is clearly monstrous nonsense. The State can clearly put limits to profiteering without taking away from the Unions their right to defend their members by collective bargaining and strikes. The same line of support for Chamberlain emerged clearly in the debate on the refusal of the General Council to call a Special Congress in order to more effectively organise the struggle on behalf of the Spanish people and against Fascist aggression in Europe.

Since the last war the Trade Union Movement of Britain has never taken up the position that questions of war and peace can best be left to the Government. It never took up the position that war cannot be

prevented. On the contrary, it always insisted that the Trade Union Movement could use its mighty power to influence the policy of governments in the defence of peace. Time and time again the Trades Union Congress has pledged the unions to act against a government dragging the country into war. And in March and April this year, when a number of powerful and influential unions asked for a special conference, the great majority of the Labour Movement was accusing Chamberlain of pursuing a warlike policy. He had just sacked Eden in order to open negotiations with Mussolini on the basis of allowing that gentleman to strangle the Spanish republic. Not only was he against co-operating firmly with France and the Soviet Union to defend peace, but he was striving to break the Franco-Soviet pact. He was, as we can see to-day, preparing to back Hitler in the dismemberment of Czechoslovakia.

The Trade Union Movement owed it to the British people to make clear to the whole world its hatred and detestation of the whole criminal policy of the Government. A Special Congress would, more than any other measure, have concentrated public attention on the necessity of forcing a change in the Chamberlain policy. Not only was there very great misunderstanding of the meaning of Chamberlain's policy, which many people believed was keeping Britain out of war, but the pro-Fascist press was sedulously spreading the lie that the Labour Movement was seeking to push a reluctant Mr. Chamberlain into attacking the Fascists. A special Congress could have made clear to the whole public the treacherous character of Chamberlain's policy, could have exposed the terrible dangers of this policy to the freedom and welfare of the British people. Such a Congress could at least have inaugurated a mighty campaign which would have created such a public opinion as would have made all further betrayals of peace impossible.

It is self-evident that it could have done something more for Spain. The Miners' Federation, the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the National Union of Distributive Workers, have shown in practice that much more could have been done to raise money than was previously the case. If the special Congress had only decided to ask the Unions to take special measures of the character of those undertaken by the Miners' Federation it could have done in March what the pressure of the movement compelled the Trades Union Congress to belatedly undertake in September.

And the conditions were absolutely favourable for organising direct action against Chamberlain by directly attacking his ally, Franco. There was such a hatred of Franco, occasioned by his ruthless bombing of the civilian population, a hatred which grew to enormous proportions when Franco commenced to bomb British ships, that it was perfectly possible to have put a trade union embargo on all goods to and from Franco-Spain.

What were the arguments against this that were produced by Citrine

in the secret session whose proceedings were in reality a secret to no one? They were that this or similar action would have constituted a political strike, under the meaning of the Trades Union Act of 1927, and the Government could have confiscated union funds. There never was such a contemptible drivelling piece of cowardice. A government can only proceed to a major political act like the confiscation of union funds when it has the backing of the overwhelming majority of the people. In point of fact on such an issue, the mass of the people would have been behind the Unions. It is difficult to conceive how the Congress could take this nonsense of Citrine seriously. The whole policy of Chamberlain has been one of doing everything possible to keep the Unions quiet and passive, while he operated his policy of betrayal, for this policy requires the tacit co-operation of the Union chiefs. This policy of betrayal could not have been carried through on the basis of an open struggle against the Trade Union Movement.

The chief argument of Citrine was that any policy of direct action was impossible because the Transport and General Workers' Union was against it. This only means the bureaucracy of the Union. In many parts of the country the whole apparatus of this Union had to be used to prevent the dockers from refusing to load the ships of Franco and of the Japanese assassins. Had the leading unions of the country declared their willingness to support the Transport Union in any action that it took to refuse to load ships for Franco-Spain, the masses in the Transport Union could have dealt with the reactionary leaders who were trying to hold them back from action.

It is to be noted, however, that the General Council not only turned down the proposal for a Special Congress, but in point of fact it rejected all alternative methods of organising pressure against the Government. Its whole energy was devoted to keeping the Trade Union Movement passive—the necessary condition for enabling Chamberlain to carry through his policy.

While the Congress supported the policy of the General Council, in refusing to call a Special Congress there was nevertheless great discontent with its passive attitude to Chamberlain. This found expression in the terrific support given to the resolution of the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen calling for action "forthwith" to secure for the Spanish Government its right to purchase arms in its defence. The General Council had decided to oppose this resolution because of the use of the word "forthwith," but the unanimous roar of applause which followed the speech of Comrade Paynter, an ex-Commissar of the International Brigade, who seconded the resolution, caused the platform to beat a strategic retreat. The platform now asked the mover of the resolution, Mr. Squance, of the A.S.L.E. and F., to interpret the resolution in the light of the fact that the previous decision on the question of the Special Congress now ruled out the possibility of industrial action. Finally the Congress delegations

were asked to submit suggestions as to how the resolution could be implemented, and the following resolution was finally adopted :

1. That a campaign be organised nationally and internationally in conjunction with the I.F.T.U. and the L.S.I.
2. That through these international bodies, the suggestion be made to their affiliated French organisations that the French and British Labour Movements make simultaneous approach to their respective Governments calling for the removal of the ban on arms.
3. That the campaign be linked with a further appeal for funds, and that the attention of the Executives of affiliated unions be specially drawn to the suggestions made to and by Congress in regard to the need for exceptional efforts to be made.
4. That affiliated unions report, in a period prescribed by the General Council, the nature of the maximum efforts they can make to aid the International Solidarity Fund.
5. That a report of the results of these efforts be made to all affiliated unions as early as possible, and any further suggestions invited after which the whole position be again reviewed by the General Council.

The resolution is an advance in that it opens the way to a closer co-operation of the French and the British Labour Movements on behalf of Spain, and that the question of further substantial aid was left not in the form of a vague general appeal, but of a precise request to the individual unions and the placing upon the General Council the responsibility of guiding and extending the campaign.

The supreme international issue before the Congress was the threat to the independence of Czechoslovakia. Here the Congress took an apparently strong line. There was no decision, however, to make an effort to mobilise the British people behind this apparently strong resolution. Indeed in the joint meetings of the Trades Union Congress with the Labour Party the Chamberlainites in the General Council opposed all suggestions for an immediate campaign against Chamberlain, and are reported to have threatened to carry their opposition into the Trades Union Congress itself. If these reports are accurate it is clear that black treachery was at work in the ranks of the Labour Movement. If the General Council and the Labour Party had launched such a campaign at Blackpool they would have made it quite impossible for Chamberlain to return from Hitler and proceed to carry out the ultimatum of the German dictator. The Labour Movement was betrayed at the decisive moment by those leaders who had resisted the calling of a Special Trades Union Congress, and who were now spreading the illusion that Chamberlain was in some measure protecting Czechoslovakia. The reactionary trade union leaders confined their activity to sabotage behind the scenes. They dare not come out with a full pro-Chamberlain line and so in conjunction with the emergency resolution on peace the Congress passed a composite resolution which declared :

The policy of the National Government has contributed to bolstering up the Fascist governments of Italy, Germany and Japan, which governments are totally opposed to free trade unions, co-operative societies and other working-class organisations, and have either destroyed or

suppressed the liberty of their peoples. This Congress declares its emphatic opposition to such a Tory policy, which is not only lowering to the prestige of the British nation, but, owing to its vacillating character, is actually provocative of war.

Congress pledges itself in accordance with Labour's peace policy to oppose any arbitrary and aggressive action the Government may take, and decide to do all possible to defeat them and make way for a Labour Government.

Up till the moment of writing the General Council of the Trades Union Congress has not taken steps to actively oppose the Government's "arbitrary and aggressive action" with respect to Czechoslovakia. That in a measure is the tragedy of the Trades Union Congress. The militants on certain questions are able to force the adoption of a line, but the carrying out of that line can always be sabotaged by the pro-Chamberlain forces on the General Council.

A similar situation arose on the question of the affiliation of the Soviet Trade Unions to the International Federation of Trade Unions. The General Council had turned down the proposals of the Soviet Trade Unions for affiliation, but had instructed its delegation at Oslo to support the continuance of negotiations. The delegation at Oslo scrapped these instructions and voted for breaking off negotiations. The General Council was obviously in a dilemma at Congress. It was calling upon the British and French Governments to unite with the Soviet Government at the same time as it was refusing even to negotiate with the Soviet Trade Unions. This crying absurdity the General Council sought to wriggle out of by confining its defence mainly to its rejection of the Russian terms and not to the action of its representatives in breaking off negotiations. On the basis of this confusion, and on the basis of some quite arbitrary action on the part of leaders of delegations, the reference back of this paragraph of the General Council's report was defeated by 2,619,000 votes to 1,493,000. The indignation in the delegations was terrific, and after lunch the General Council knew that it would be defeated if it opposed the resolution of the Tailors and Garment Workers' Union, which said :

This Congress expresses its regret at the absence of any satisfactory result of the negotiations between the I.F.T.U. and the Russian Trade Union Movement, reaffirms the desire and policy of the British Trade Union Movement to establish complete unity and common action by Trade Union organisations in all countries, and asks the General Council to continue their efforts to achieve this object.

This resolution, although carried unanimously, does not appear in the summary of the Conference which is contained in the Trades Union Congress weekly news-sheet, *Industrial News*. The Movement will require to be on its guard against unscrupulous attempts to shelve this resolution.

The lesson of the Congress must be grasped by all trade unionists. While the pressure of the working class can force the General Council to make concessions, the pro-Chamberlain forces are still strong enough

to sabotage all real action. Until it is realised that the treacherous policy of Chamberlain has been aided by his sympathisers inside the British Labour Movement, it will be impossible for that Movement to use its full strength to protect the British people from Fascism and War. A recognition of the positive evil wrought by the pro-Chamberlain forces in the Labour Movement is the first pre-requisite for a change.

There were innumerable complaints amongst delegates that the political questions had predominated over the purely industrial questions at the Congress. The complaint in the form it was put is ill-founded. The political questions were life and death questions, and even if the agenda had been full of good industrial resolutions the political questions would still have had to receive the predominant attention from Congress. But there is substance in the complaint in that apart from various essays in class co-operation on the lines of the deputation to Chamberlain, Congress is not pursuing any industrial policy. Two workers in every three in Britain are still unorganised; in 1938 the percentage of organised workers is lower than in 1920; great new industries are springing up outside the influence of trade unionism; whole districts of the country are given over to non-unionism. This situation cannot be tackled by the isolated efforts of individual unions, nor by campaigns organised by local Trades Councils. It requires the co-operative efforts of the major unions, pooling their resources in a stubborn, continuous, well-organised campaign of trade union recruitment. In respect to some of these new industries, we are to-day in the fantastic position that if any one were to suggest forming a new union in those industries he would be denounced as a disrupter by the very union leaders who refuse to do anything effective to themselves organise them.

Equally, Congress requires a policy with regard to the unemployed. The Trades Council Unemployed Associations are miserably weak. The National Unemployed Workers' Movement, which is the strongest and most effective unemployed organisation still encounters the hostility of the Trades Union Congress. Surely with almost two millions unemployed the time has come when all unemployed organisations should be merged in a single organisation under the auspices of the Trades Union Congress, and when the Unions should give all possible assistance to the organisation of the unemployed.

It is unlikely that the General Council will take the initiative on either of these questions. This can only come from the individual Unions, putting the question squarely before the Congress, and insisting, in spite of the resistance of the Chamberlainites, that a policy on these questions be formulated forthwith.