The Labour Conference

by J. R. CAMPBELL

ALTHOUGH this year's Labour Party Conference mainly occupied itself with problems of post-war reconstruction, the delegates showed by their actions that they all understood that the heaviest battles of the war still lay ahead. This was evident in the overwhelming vote registered for the retention of the electoral truce. Apart from the truce debate, however, the concentration on post-war reconstruction created the unfortunate impression that Labour had nothing to say with regard to the better organisation of the war effort. With production problems still rife in shipbuilding, coal and transport, this was unfortunate.

Curiously enough for a conference so greatly concerned with the post-war position, the section of the Executive Report on "Labour and the Future" slipped through with comparatively little discussion. Yet much more will probably be heard of this section of the report, which lays down the policy that the party will pursue in the remaining years of the war and the post-war period. Looked at carefully, this resolution appears to have two aims. It is obviously framed to appeal to strata of the population outside the ranks of the working-class people and could provide a basis for Labour co-operation with other political parties. Indeed, it might serve as a guide to labour members in determining their attitude to some of the problems which they are likely to face inside the Coalition Government.

The resolution lays it down that:—

> The adjustments of industry to the needs of peace, the adoption of a policy of economic expansion at home, and the organisation of our export trade, will all call for wide measures of central regulation and control.

The resolution has to face the fact that state interference in industry before the war meant encouragement of monopoly and restriction of output and rejects this policy.

> The great sustaining power of the State must not be turned into a prop for irresponsibly conducted private business. Specious cries for self-government in industry mean in practice the right of the private owners of industry to go their own way, often with the help of the State and without any safeguard for the public interest. Down that road lies national decay and decadence, as the years before the war gave alarming evidence.

The report does not indicate how these tendencies can be overcome except by declaring:—

> All industries must be subjected to such public supervision as will provide guarantees against anti-social restrictive practices or artificial price-levels, and ensure the maintenance of proper standards of welfare for all those engaged in these . . . for the basis of such a relationship between the State, finance and industry there must be a determination to maintain full employment as a permanent feature of public policy.

An explanation of the differing methods of a state control policy organising restriction and a state control policy promoting expansion would have been illuminating. It was never given. Let us hope there is really a concrete policy behind the general phrases of this part of the report.

The delegates were in a much more realistic mood on the electoral truce than they appeared last year. Taking their stand on the obvious proposition that it would be suicidal to break the truce, because it involved leaving the Government, the Executive had no difficulty in carrying the Conference with it. It was absolutely clear from the debate that in the minds of a number of delegates the truce is a general scapegoat for all the weakness of the

Labour Party. If it is losing members, or is only attracting sparse audiences to its meetings, it is assumed that all those things would be cured by participation in half a dozen by-elections. When Mr. Aneurin Bevan drew a picture of Labour regaining the initiative by bringing pressure on the Government from outside he forgot that pressure exerted by a political party is a function of the support that it has amongst the masses of the people. No party could be so weak in the eyes of the country as one that had voluntarily relinquished responsibility for carrying on the war, unless it could do so on an issue that carried the majority of the people with it.

Initiative is not something that need only be exercised in opposition. It can be exercised by a party in a Coalition Government, provided that party can mobilise widespread public support for its policy.

The full exercise of Labour initiative, however, depends on working-class unity. That is why friends and enemies of the Labour Party alike treated the debate on Affiliation as being of such outstanding importance. The result of that debate we know. It reflects, not the actual strength of the sentiment for unity existing in Britain in the middle of 1943, but the past decisions of some of the larger unions, arrived at under quite different circumstances, and in advance of the decisions of the delegates at their 1943 annual conferences. It was a result arrived at after a one-sided debate, in which the relation of unity to the present-day problems of the working class was hardly ever mentioned.

Star turn of the Executive, as usual, was the urbane and adroit Home Secretary, Mr. Herbert Morrison, who was unable to resist his usual itch for trying to prove too much.

He drew a harrowing picture of having at one time been under the necessity of spending half of his time as Leader of the London Labour Party in fighting Communist intrigues in London, when he ought to have been free to organise the entire Labour Party to fight for the total defeat of the Conservatives. Thus a situation typical of those which are likely to arise when two working-class parties are not united, was presented as being typical of what would happen if unity were realised. The bad results of disunity were impudently presented as the results of unity. For of what period was Mr. Morrison talking? Obviously of the period 1924-28, when MacDonaldism was being consolidated inside the labour movement. In order to tighten his grip on the party, Ramsay MacDonald and his followers had persuaded Labour Conferences to turn down Communist affiliation, and to expel from the Labour Party individual Communists who up to that moment could be individual members of the Labour Party or could represent their Union at Labour Party Conferences. So far from being enraged beyond measure at the intrigues of the Communists, most local Labour Parties tried to resist their expulsion. Hence the disaffiliation of local parties, the expulsion of Communists and non-Communists alike. We have no doubt that this process took fifty per cent. of Mr. Morrison's time—to the outside observer it looked more like 100 per cent. But it is not an example of how Labour Party time was wasted because there was unity with the Communist Party, but how it was wasted in a successful endeavour to prevent unity—an endeavour which led logically to the betrayal by MacDonald in 1931. So with all the bans, restrictions, expulsions, operated with the Labour Party to-day. They are only rendered necessary because masses of Labour people desire to achieve working-class unity and must be forcibly prevented by their leaders from moving towards its attainment. With all that Morrison said about the lamentable effects of such situation we can agree. We want to attain working-class unity and end such situations for ever. Mr. Morrison wants to maintain disunity and perpetuate such situations.

Mr. Morrison's other argument was to present what he called a dilemma—if the

Communist Party was not in 100 per cent. agreement with the Labour Party, then it could not be admitted: if it were in such agreement, it should dissolve.

Now this latter argument clearly implies a revision of the Labour Party Constitution, which allows for the admission of Socialist bodies who accept the aims, objects and constitution of the party: but Mr. Morrison, brushing the Constitution aside, declared that all such bodies were potential dangers, tolerated only if they, like the Fabian Society, took no sides in the current controversies inside the Labour Party.

The other horn of the dilemma is equally unreal. Every intelligent worker knows that there are scores of questions (like the need for Labour playing a greater role within the coalition, the character of the peace, the various measures of post-war reconstruction) on which there is common agreement between the Labour Party and the Communist Party. Every day in the workshop Labour men and Communists find a basis for common agreement on many questions. Yet when there is this wide agreement on immediate questions Mr. Morrison dares to argue that unless there is a hundred per cent. agreement on all questions—practical and philosophical, tactical and strategical—there can be no working-class unity. This is nonsense and Morrison knows it. He would never dare appeal as leader of the London Labour Party for support of those who agree with his aims one hundred per cent.—rejecting and destroying all others. At any given moment the working-class movement contains people of different political levels, with different ideas of strategy and tactics. This fact cannot be argued away, and the whole problem of working-class unity consists of securing united action in advance of 100 per cent. ideological unity on all questions.

As to Mr. Morrison's specific for securing unity—namely, dissolution of the Communist Party—it can scarcely be taken seriously. If we were to lower the debate to the level of Mr. Morrison we could meet the argument "The Communist International is dissolved—therefore there is no justification for the existence of the Communist Party" with the "Labour and Socialist International is dead. Why doesn't the Labour Party die too?" This is the small change of Conference debating.

The Communist Party in the course of its existence has made a definite contribution to British working-class advance. Without it we would not have had the powerful compaigns against Mosley Fascism, the mobilisation of aid for Spain, the campaign for the Popular Front, the building of the International Brigade, and in the first stages of the war the campaign for friendship with the Soviet Union. (It should not be forgotten that in 1940 a resolution pledging the Labour Party to defend the Soviet Union from capitalist intervention was defeated by the moving of the previous question).

In domestic politics the Communist Party played a leading part in organising the unemployed, in promoting Trade Union unity, and in building up the Shop Stewards movement. It was also the main Socialist propagandist force in Britain.

Now these things were being done by no other parties. Had the Communists not been there they would not have been done at all. Yet at this moment, when the Unions have to be strengthened as never before, when the new generation has to be trained in a socialist understanding of war and post-war problems, when the spirit of working-class internationalism has to be strengthened in view of the many post-war problems—the Communist Party is invited to disappear without the slightest guarantee that any other organisation is willing or able to carry on the work that the Communist Party does so well. Instead of facing the problem of how to reconcile different trends in the working-class movement, within a broad framework of working-class unity, Mr. Morrison petulantly calls upon all other trends but his own to disappear.

At the bottom of this is a lack of understanding of the dangers confronting the working class. Unless a miracle has happened there are still important elements among the British monopoly capitalists, who, fearing the social consequences of the defeat of Fascism, will be prepared to make a compromise peace at the earliest favourable opportunity—and it would be a bold person who would argue that military reverses may not yet occur which will give them this opportunity. Mr. Morrison himself in recent speeches has accused influential employers of aiming at economic Fascism after the war. Clearly there are big political implications in this employing class attitude.

If the working-class has to play a significant part on these questions and to decisively influence other groups in the population, it must be united. It can only be united on the basis of agreement on immediate aims—complete ideological unity is the product and not the cause of unity in action.

The debate on the post-war treatment of Germany was conducted between Pacifists and Vansittartites and the latter, by carefully concealing their full policy, won. Their resolution, carefully framed, stressed the obvious fact of the mass support for Hitler, the need for the disarmament of Germany, and hoped that after a period of re-education (by whom it was not stated) the German people would play their part in the creation of a peaceful, democratic and secure world.

This resolution left out of consideration the role played by the breaking up of the organisations of the working-class and the murder of their militants in the building up of the mass support that undoubtedly exists behind Hitler

The Pacifists, on the other hand, failed to say what should be done with the Nazi-educated generation of young Germans. They were right in insisting that the roots of the "German problem" lie in the peculiar development of German Imperialism—in the alliance between the Prussian military caste, German big business, and the State (and now the Fascist party) bureaucracy. They did not, however, face up to the implications of a situation in which the Fascist Party was liquidated, a democratic facade created, but the basic elements of German Imperialism remained. To give Germany equal rights to rearm in such a situation would be a monstrous piece of political imbecility and the Conference was right to turn this proposition down.

On the other hand, the dangers of Allied control being used to stifle a popular revolution in Germany was insufficiently appreciated by those who were out to ensure that German militarism would not break out again.

It is impossible, in our opinion, to discuss concretely what the treatment of Germany should be, until we see the strength of the various political trends arising after the defeat of Nazism. And it is impossible to believe that the preservation of peace is solely dependent on something or other that is done to Germany after the armistice or in the peace terms. It is much more dependent on the strengthening of the alliance of the united nations. In facing the problems of the peace Vansittartism and Pacifism are equally unreliable guides.

On the whole the Conference registered a step forward as compared with the previous year. If the delegation of one big Union, voting in advance of its annual conference, had not held up its card for the breaking of the truce, the vote for the disruption of national unity would have been insignificant indeed. The defeat of Mr. Morrison as treasurer was in part a rejection of one whom Conference feared might play the role of MacDonald and of one of the chief architects of the policy of bans, prescriptions and restrictions. The Labour Party clearly wants no Party boss. The vote of 712,000 for affiliation compares with 592,000 in 1936. But there is one very significant difference. The 1936 vote was taken in October after the main

Unions had declared their attitude. This year it was declared before some of the largest Unions had declared their attitude. Without prejudging the results, it is certain that the vote for affiliation will be very much heavier than it was in 1936. Solid progress to unity is being made; but the pace is dangerously slow. A mighty effort on the part of the advanced workers is needed to accelerate it.