

Revolutionary Significance of the General Election

BECAUSE the official Labour Party suffered a net loss of 42 seats, it has been concluded that the General Election of 1924 showed a great falling away of the working class from anything resembling class consciousness. Those Labour politicians particularly who think only in terms of seats in the House of Commons find the results disastrous. Seeking an excuse for this "loss of confidence" by the electors in the Labour Party they find it in Communism and the Communist Party which has, they argue, "frightened the moderate electors" back to the flag of reaction.

Do the actual figures of the voting show anything of the sort?

THE LABOUR AND ANTI-LABOUR VOTE.

The total vote for Labour candidates in 1924 was in round numbers, 5,551,000. During the previous election of 1923, it was 4,348,000.

The Labour vote, therefore, in one year, increased by 1,203,000 or 27½ per cent. Is this any indication of a stampede of terror?

Hardly, considering that the Anti-Labour Parties deliberately fought the election as a campaign against Communism.

During the early years of its existence the Labour Party had a tremendous difficulty in winning the mass of the trade unions over from their traditional Liberalism. The "Socialism" even of the I.L.P. was constantly objected to as an obstacle to the growth of the Party. Not until 1922 did the votes polled by the Labour Party exceed the total of its affiliated membership. The process of winning the trade unions over to Labour politics has been slow, but it has been sure.

The following table illustrates the growth of the Labour Party and its progress in electoral strength:

THE GROWTH OF THE LABOUR VOTE.

Year	seats contested	Seats won	Total votes	average per contest	average per seat won
1900	15	2	62,000	4,133	31,000
1906	50	29	323,000	6,460	11,137
1910 (Jan.)	78	40	505,000	6,474	12,652
1910 (Dec.)	56	42	370,000	6,607	8,809
1918	361	57	2,244,000	6,216	39,368
1922	414	142	4,236,000	10,231	29,830
1923	427	191	4,348,000	10,182	22,764
1924	514	151	5,551,000	10,798	36,758

Not only does this table show the steady rise of the Labour Vote (with the sole exception of the December election in 1910, when owing to financial difficulties and political deference to the Liberals, the Labour Party was unable to poll its full strength) but it demonstrates also several other things.

The average per contest shows that the growth in the total vote is no chance local symptom; its size in 1924 conclusively disposes of the "stampede" theory. The average per seat won shows how illusory is the number of seats obtained as a test of absolute or relative electoral strength.

Finally a comparison of the averages for the "Khaki" election of 1900, the "Win the War" election of 1918, and the "Kill Communism" election of 1924, shows a steady progress in the solidity of the Labour vote in the teeth of furious Imperialist propaganda.

It should be noted, too, as evidence of the illusionness of the number of seats obtained as a test of the "democratic will" that the average of votes per contest and per seat gained was lower in the election of 1923 which gave Labour the Government than in that of 1924 which registered its "defeat."

This worthlessness of the British electoral system as a test of the "democratic will" is made clearer by the following comparison of the total votes for and against Labour in the last two elections with the respective allocation of seats:

	1923		1924	
	Votes	Seats	Votes	Seats
Anti-Labour	9,858,000	416	10,863,000	455
Labour	4,348,000	191	5,551,000	151
Anti-Labour Majority ...	5,510,000	225	5,312,000	304

So that not only does Labour with an increased vote get a smaller ration of seats, but an anti Labour majority *reduced* by $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent. gets a majority of seats *increased* by 79, or over 30 per cent.

To show how little evidence there is of any "stampede" of the "electorate" against Labour, take the following comparison of votes cast to voters on the register:

	Total on register	Labour votes	Anti-Labour Votes
1924	19,948,000	5,551,000	10,863,000
1923	19,173,000	4,348,000	9,858,000
Increase	775,000	1,203,000	1,005,000
Increase per cent.	4.0 per cent.	27.4 per cent.	10.1 per cent.

Which shows that for all the loss of seats the Labour votes increased not only absolutely and in proportion to the number of votes cast, but also in much greater proportion than the increase of the electorate.

To finally demonstrate the worthlessness of the British elec-

toral system as a "democratic" test take the following table of comparisons :

Comparisons, 1923-1924 :

Percentage of voters on register polled	1923	1924
By all Parties	74.0	82.2
" Labour	22.6	27.8
" Conservatives	26.8	39.5
" Liberals	22.4	14.9
Anti-Labour Vote	51.4	54.4
Percentage of total votes actually cast :—		
Labour	30.6	33.8
Conservatives	39.0	48.0
Liberals	30.3	18.1
Anti-Labour Total	69.3	66.1
Percentage of seats obtained :—		
Labour	31.4	25.1
Conservatives	42.5	68.0
Liberal	26.0	6.5
Total Anti-Labour	68.5	74.5

The Conservatives, it will be seen, with less than half the actual votes, and only two-fifths of the possible votes have well over two-thirds of the seats. The Anti-Labour Parties with only a little more than half the possible votes, and less than two-thirds of the actual votes, secure nearly three-quarters of the seats.

The Anti-Labour Parties with a reduced proportion of the votes cast, secure a large increase of seats. The Labour Party while increasing its proportion both of the actual and possible votes, suffers a heavy decrease in its proportion of seats.

Thus a definite reduction in the opposition to Labour is converted into an increase in the Parliamentary voting strength against it.

And (as a final word on the "democracy" of the business) it should be noted that in no single instance during these two elections did the proportion of actual votes or of the electorate correspond with the seats allotted to either party.

LABOUR LOSSES.

So far we have dealt with the results quantitatively. The question now arises how is the Labour vote distributed and what charges can be inferred from any detail transfers of votes and seats. Take first the seats lost. The total of these was 64. In only twelve cases was the Labour vote less in the election of defeat than in that of victory.

These twelve (with their respective reductions of vote) were :

Barnard Castle	(— 19)	Northampton	(— 410)
Ipswich	(— 33)	The Wrekin	(— 532)
Swansea, W.	(— 72)	Whitehaven	(— 678)
S.E. Essex	(— 150)	Maldon	(— 1,006)
N. Salford	(— 263)	Frome	(— 1,250)
S. Norfolk	(— 306)	Harrow	(— 4,572)

As these were the only cases in which the Labour seat was lost with a *decreased* vote, it is here, if anywhere, that we should find the evidence of a stampede of electors away from Communism. Harrow, the worst case on the list was never a Labour seat at all. It only figures on the list by virtue of the fact that Oswald Mosley elected as an Independent joined the Labour Party after election. It has never before been contested by a Labour candidate as such, and the vote of 9,507 for the Labour candidate is quite creditable—in fact so surprisingly good as to prove the reverse of a “stampede.”

Out of the twelve places in this list, eight are at least partly, if not mainly, agricultural. Only in two cases were they predominantly industrial. Finally, only in one instance out of the twelve is there a Communist group of any sort anywhere near. Thus the direct effect of Communist agitation upon the result is imperceptible.

Of the total of 64 seats lost by the Labour Party, there were lost :—

In three-cornered contests	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	14
In straight fights	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	50

If we deduct from the straight fights the seven cases in which the Labour vote was decreased, we get a total of 43 seats whose loss was clearly due to the united capitalist front against Labour.

In the 14 cases where Labour lost the seat in a three-cornered contest, it obviously had been treated to a lucky win last time; the five instances in which the Labour vote decreased being evidently due to personal considerations.

In the seven cases in which the Labour vote decreased in a straight fight it is noteworthy that every case was that of a wholly or partly agricultural area.

THE LABOUR GAINS.

Compare with these cases of Labour loss, the 22 contests in which Labour scored a gain :

	Total vote	Average
1924	297,704	13,532
1923	222,047	10,093
Increase	75,657	3,439

The distribution of these gains is worth while noting as follows :—

Yorkshire, 6; Scotland, 4; Midlands, 3; North East, 3; London, 3; Lancs, 2; Eastern, 1. Total 22.

Thus the areas with the greatest density of population give the greatest relative advance of Labour.

The comparative distribution of Labour seats area by area illustrates this point :—

POSITION OF THE LABOUR PARTY BY AREAS.

	Labour and Communist	All others	Total seats
Scotland	26	45	71
Yorkshire	24	33	57
London	20	42	62
Lancs and Cheshire	18	62	80
North-East	16	12	28
Wales	16	19	35
W. Midlands	11	39	50
E. Midlands	9	37	46
Greater London	7	31	38
South West Counties	2	39	41
Eastern Counties	2	30	32
North-West Counties	1	5	6
Southern Counties	—	45	45
Ulster	—	12	12
Universities	—	12	12
	152	463	615

From this it will be seen that the allocation of Labour members is in substantially exact correlation with the greatest concentration of population and industry. Proportionately the highest average is held by the North-East, which has a majority of Labour members of four. But it should be remembered that an equally great proportion of Labour members to total representation could be obtained by drawing the boundaries of areas differently.

For instance the West Riding of Yorkshire taken separately has a clear Labour majority—23 Labour members against 20 anti-Labour. Glasgow and South Wales each show a similar result.

But most important for us are the movements at the last election. The following table of Labour gains and losses by areas will make these clear :—

LABOUR GAINS AND LOSSES BY AREAS.

	Gains	Losses	Net balance
North-East	3	1	plus 2
Yorkshire	6	5	plus 1
W. Midlands	3	3	—
Universities	—	1	minus 1
London	4*	6	" 2
North-West	—	2	" 2
South-West	—	2	" 2
South	—	3	" 3
Wales	—	3	" 3
E. Midlands	—	4	" 4
Eastern	1	6	" 5
Lancs and Cheshire	2	9	" 7
Greater London	—	7	" 7
Scotland	4	12	" 8
Total	23*	64	41

* Including one Communist.

With this table should be compared the fact that cases of Labour defeat with a decline of votes from 1923 were distributed : Eastern Counties, 4; and one each in the North-Eastern, North-West, Lancashire, East Midlands, West Midlands, Greater London, Wales and South Western.

Taken by industries the Labour victories may be approximately allocated as follows :—

Miners, 3.1 per cent. ; Iron and Steel Workers, 22 per cent. ; Textile Workers, 15 per cent. ; other workers, 32 per cent.

As evidence of the solidarity of the Labour vote, we may take this comparison between 1923 and 1924. In the 404 cases in which a seat was contested by official Labour candidates in both elections, the Labour vote was :—

1923	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	4,266,682
1924	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	4,920,203
Increase	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	...	653,521

Thus of the total increase in the Labour vote more than one-half was a positive increase obtained in previously contested areas. A further set-off against the gains in votes from new candidatures exists in the six cases where a Labour candidate was opposed in 1923 and unopposed in 1924.

THE COMMUNIST VOTE.

No account has been taken in the above given statistics of voting of the eight cases in which Communists stood as candidates without official Labour endorsement. These must be treated in a separate category since in every case they had to struggle against the additional handicap of official Labour opposition (direct or indirect). The results in these eight cases were :—

In Battersea (North), S. Saklatvala, defeated in 1923 as an official Labour candidate, increased his vote from 12,341 to 15,096 and won the seat in 1924 as an unofficial Labour candidate.

In Bethnal Green, J. Vaughan, increased his vote from 5,251 to 6,024—despite the stigma of “unofficial.”

In Greenock, Geddes' vote was decreased from 10,355 to 7,590 by the intervention of an I.L.P. candidate, who polled 5,874.

In West Birmingham, Dr. Dunstan contesting a seat previously contested by an official Labour candidate, polled 7,158 as against 9,983 by his predecessor.

In Rusholme, W. Paul, polled 5,328 as against 5,366 secured by him as the official Labour candidate a year before.

In Dundee, R. Stewart, polled 8,340 as against the 10,380 previously polled by Gallacher.

In Nottingham, E. and in Streatham, Tom Mann and A. Wall polled 2,696 and 3,204 votes respectively, in divisions never before contested by Labour.

The total vote for the six divisions contested both in 1923 and 1924, was an aggregate of 52,656, and 49,536 respectively. The loss in the aggregate is thus less than the votes lost by the intervention of the sabotage candidate in Greenock.

The whole series of Communist candidates suffered the full bitterness of the official Labour hostility and the decline recorded for them as against those of 1923 gives the measure of the evil thus done. It proves that the only symptom of "stampede" away from the Labour standard is that created by the official Labour Party itself. If we add to the above totals the votes for Ferguson (Kelvin Grove); Newbold (Motherwell), Price (Gloucester City), and Wilkinson (Ashton), with those of their official Labour successors in 1924, we can set out the full results thus:—

	1923	1924
Ashton	6,208	7,451
Battersea, N.	12,341	15,096
Bethnal Green	5,251	6,024
Birmingham, W.	9,983	7,158
Dundee	10,380	8,340
Greenock	10,335	13,464*
Gloucester	8,127	8,005
Kelvingrove	11,167	12,844
Motherwell	8,712	12,816
Nottingham, E.	—	2,696
Rusholme	5,366	5,328
Streatham	—	3,204

* Combined Labour vote.

The various fluctuations in these votes give (if allowance is made for the improvement in the general Labour average, a measure of the influence of Labour central authority over the disciplined trade union vote. The two constituencies in which the Communist improved his votes are chiefly General Workers areas. Where the vote was that of more compact and traditionalised trade unionists, the official Labour opposition or approval made the difference.

THE CONCLUSION FROM THESE FACTS.

From the whole of the above facts and comparisons certain conclusions can be drawn.

The most obvious is the general conclusion that the Labour Vote consists mainly of that of the trade unions (with their women-folk) and that this has now been completely detached from its one-time loyalty to the Liberal Party. That it has also been won almost entirely from Liberalism itself to its new orthodoxy of Labourism also follows from its steadfastness in the teeth of the most vigorous and unprincipled anti-Socialist campaign on record.

A second conclusion supplementing this is that of the utter unreliability from the Labour standpoint of the middle class and would-be middle class vote. It is safe to say that the majority of Labour losses were due to the defection of this type of voter or to the fact that greater numbers of these were roused to vote for Reaction than ever.

A third conclusion is that Labour's weak points are (1) the agricultural workers; (2) the general workers' areas in the larger towns (*e.g.*, London, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Bristol, Cardiff, Swansea, etc.), and (3) the whole cotton area. In each of these cases the backwardness is co-relative with a quantitative or qualitative backwardness of trade unionism.

A fourth conclusion is that the Labour solidity is more the result of a chrySTALLISING class sentiment than that of any positive merit in the Labour leadership or programme. Both were as weak and confused as they could well be.

A fifth and final conclusion is that while the mass of Labour supporters are by no means revolutionary, they contain, as a mass, a much higher revolutionary potentiality than ever. The peaks of revolutionary enthusiasm are lower than they were in (say) 1918, but the shallows are correspondingly higher. The average of class consciousness is more widely diffused. This (taken in conjunction with the wholesale move of the Liberal middle class over to the Tory Party) means that the political lines of class cleavage are more clearly drawn than ever. If, as seems inevitable, the victorious Reaction follow up their political success with an industrial offensive, the development of class consciousness in the massed areas of proletarian concentration may proceed at a rate such as to astonish everybody.

The Communist Party may look forward to the future with every confidence. The official Labour Party will for some time be able to mobilise Labour solidarity to its disparagement, and it will probably have to face a period of acute persecution at the hands of the triumphant Tories. But the latter will neither desire nor be able clearly to discriminate between Communists proper and the militants of trade unionism; and the former will be unable for ever to pursue a policy of conciliation of a capitalism that is at once too strong and too hard-pressed to have any need or desire for conciliation.

We are not far from the period when class antagonisms will ripen into open and conscious conflict; and when that state of things exists, the pre-conditions will have arisen for the mass recruiting of the Communist Party.

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