

Unity and the People's Front

BY HARRY POLLITT

[This is an abridged report of the speech by Harry Pollitt, given at the London District Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain, on June 11, 1938.]

A CALL FOR mass protest is made in a leading article in the *Daily Herald* (June 11) against the present bombing in Spain and China, and against the policy of Chamberlain in permitting this bombing to go on while refusing anti-aircraft guns to the bombed towns. Our Communist Party will support such a campaign of protest to the full. But at the same time it is necessary to declare that so long as Transport House refuses unity, so long as it opposes the People's Front, so long as it carries out the tactics it did in Aylesbury and West Derby, just so long will we continue to get the results we got at Stafford.

These events should assist in bringing home to everyone the importance of understanding the line of this Congress and the line of our Party, and also of how to apply that line. There is certainly need for a better method of work in our organisation, but there is first of all an imperative need to get understanding of and clarity upon the whole line of our fight for unity and the People's Front. If only the problem of methods of work were to be seen, no doubt such methods could be improved, but we would not get the real political results we desire as the result of such a one-sided approach.

Now when we are facing ever new and more complicated problems, it is more necessary than ever to recall again and again the speeches of our comrade Dimitrov at the Seventh World Congress and to study again the decisions and the report of that Congress as a whole. What was the basic line and perspective of the Seventh World Congress ?

1. It laid the foundations for a greater mobilisation of all the workers against capitalism than ever before conceived in the history of the class struggle.
2. It did this on the basis of working-class unity and the People's Front.
3. It expressed the conviction that along these lines fascism and war could be decisively stemmed and checked.
4. It expressed the conviction that out of ever-growing united activities, the unity of all the working-class parties could be achieved and a mass political organisation of the workers established in every country, with a united workers' International.

5. It expressed the need for strengthening and consolidating the ranks of the Communist Parties.

6. Finally, it gave through all this a perspective of great advances towards power and Socialism.

This line continues to be our basis and our perspective ; we have to apply it to the existing and changing conditions in Britain. It is necessary at this Congress to emphasise how urgent is our task because of the key position that Britain occupies in world politics, and our consequent responsibility to the people of Britain and to the peoples of the whole world.

At our National Party Congress last May, we could only indicate the perspective of the People's Front in general terms. We were in that position because the conditions for its development as an issue in British politics had not yet matured to the stage where it could be dealt with other than in general terms. Now the situation has changed. The People's Front, the United Peace Alliance, call it what you will, has become the main issue in British politics. It has been and is being discussed with an intensity and energy, that no other political issue in the last 20 years has been discussed in labour, democratic and progressive movements of this country.

Despite all that the enemies of unity and the People's Front can do, we express our complete confidence that this year we will have broken down the major obstacles standing in the way of its achievement.

The opposition of the dominant clique in Transport House can be summed up in a sentence. It is not an opposition to the People's Front because of their desire for Socialism, it is not an opposition to the People's Front because they are afraid of losing their independence through an alliance with Liberalism and democrats ; the political basis for their opposition to the People's Front is because their political line is one of unity with Chamberlain and the " National " Government.

In expressing our confidence that we will realise unity, we are under no illusions as to the character of the obstacles to be overcome. Unity will not fall from the skies. It can only be achieved by hard, patient and persistent work, done in the main by the most class conscious and advanced section of the working class, dedicating their every endeavour to carrying through the fight until we have achieved the victory of unity. To do this work it is necessary to acquaint ourselves with the arguments and discussions going on in the factories, in the workers' ranks everywhere, in our own Party branches ; to take serious note of the questions at public meetings, to watch developments in all peace and democratic organisations. This careful attention is necessary in order to see and to understand the various forms which the advance towards the People's Front is taking, both inside and outside the Labour Movement, and to deal with the obstacles that arise.

We want to try and explain one or two things in the hope that such explanation will result in greater clarity among us as to what we are really driving for.

Firstly, the idea that the People's Front is some newly-devised tactic thrust upon us because of the advent of fascism is totally wrong. The basic principle of the People's Front is the same basic principle underlying the whole theory and practice of Leninism, the need of seeking allies to carry forward the struggle as a whole. Many mistakes, both right and left in our work, arise because of lack of understanding of this basic aspect of our theory and practice.

The People's Front is not a retreat from Socialism. In the present conditions it is the force which not only protects the daily interests of the people, it is at the same time the force which accelerates and intensifies the whole fight for Socialism.

It is wrong to think that the People's Front may now be correct, but that if a revolutionary situation developed it would then have to be abandoned. We need never to forget that even when the fight for power is won, that the dictatorship of the proletariat will be necessary, and that it will rest upon the alliance of the working class with its closest allies in any given country.

Secondly, the People's Front does not endanger the Labour Movement by placing it under the leadership of Churchill, Lloyd George, Eden or Sinclair. No People's Front in Britain is possible or can ever be established as a living reality unless the Labour Movement forms its indestructible basis and driving force. The People's Front is not exclusively an alliance with the Liberals, it is a mass movement of persons who want to defeat the "National" Government and organise a government of a new type. That is, something very different from what we had in 1924 and 1929, parties fighting on different programmes and afterwards reaching uncertain and uneasy agreement. We must realise that no rising class in history ever defeated the ruling class without allies. In the past it was the working class which was the ally, now the centre of gravity has changed, it is now the working class which is the dominant force and which must know how to win allies and how to advance with them.

Much of the distrust that is found in the Labour Movement concerning the middle class and wavering elements is justified and is correct. But we should understand why the middle class possesses these characteristics and not seek to apologize for them or explain them away. We should explain the basis upon which these waverings and vacillations have developed. But it would be political blindness not to see at the same time the tremendous changes that are taking place in important sections of the middle class. The People's Front is not something fixed and static, it progresses to higher stages of development as its supporters are educated in the school of action and experience.

It is not a small thing that practically every writer in Britain either spoke or sent a message to the great meeting at Queens Hall last Wednesday, in support of the common fight against fascism.

But is also true that precisely at the present moment there is need

for more effective independent Socialist propaganda, in order to show that while the People's Front is absolutely essential to stem the tide of fascism and war and to open the way for advance, by itself, it cannot solve the basic problems that confront the people, to show that the basic solution, the ultimate solution, can come only from the achievement of Socialism.

I believe that if we remember these points, that it will help us to do the practical work that waits to be done in the factories and the trade unions, in an entirely different and a more fruitful way than we have been doing for some time.

The successful carrying through of the line of unity and the People's Front, and the achievement of both our immediate and our final aims, demands the resolute strengthening and consolidation of the Communist Party.

Let us listen to how Dimitrov put this at the Seventh Congress of the Communist International :

The more the united front of the working class extends, the more will new, complex problems rise before us and the more will it be necessary for us to work on the political and organisational consolidation of our Parties. The united front of the proletariat brings to the fore an army of workers which will be able to carry out its mission if this army is headed by a leading force which will point out its aims and paths. This leading force can *only be a strong proletarian, revolutionary party.*

If we Communists exert every effort to establish a united front, we do this not for the narrow purpose of recruiting new members for the Communist Parties. But we must strengthen the Communist Parties in every way and increase their membership *for the very reason* that we seriously want to strengthen the united front. The strengthening of the Communist Parties is not a narrow Party concern, but the concern of the entire working class.

The unity, revolutionary coherence and fighting preparedness of the Communist Parties constitute most valuable capital which belongs not only to us but to the entire working class.

But, if we are to do this, if we are to realise in fact this strengthening and consolidating of our Party, it means ceaseless recruiting of new members, abolishing the fluctuation in Party membership, the better treatment of all the members in the Party, and a better understanding of how to use their capabilities. It means higher standards of financial integrity and responsibility. Two things are urgently necessary : firstly, a more fundamental understanding of Marxism-Leninism, and secondly, a radical change in the life of the branches and the rôle of the branch committees.

In regard to the first, we are not asking for study and education because we are bookworms. We want study and education because we want to help to form and guide the aims of the masses in a concrete way, we want to avoid living from hand to mouth, to avoid not being able to see the wood for the trees. That is why we are calling for greater attention to Party education and for greater understanding of the

fundamentals of our Communist principles.

Not one of us, and I emphasise this, not a single one of us whatever our position can afford to neglect constant study and education at this period.

We are all of us responsible leaders, whose every word and action to-day needs to be carefully thought out.

It was Lenin who told us in 1920 that the time for study was so short, that we never know when war would begin, that it was necessary to use all the means available to us in order to improve our political efficiency in the course of carrying through the political struggle.

In dealing with the new problems arising in Britain it is important that we should study the decisions of the Seventh Congress of the Communist International.

Let me draw your attention to this extract from the report of Dimitrov, it bears on the point we are now discussing :

It must not be forgotten that the more the People's Front movement extends, the more complicated become the tactical problems of the movement, the more necessary is a really Marxist analysis of the situation and the correlation of the fighting forces, the more necessary it is to hold in one's hand the reliable compass of Marxist-Leninist theory.

That is why we are now carrying through a great change in the whole methods of Party education ; why we are trying new forms of education ; precisely in order that we will be able to steer a right course for the masses, leading them into action, and strengthening and consolidating our Party.

Therefore we call for bigger and more effective sales of our literature, of our pamphlets, and of the Marxist classics published by the firm of Lawrence and Wishart.

In particular we ask every member that, in connection with the coming 15th Congress of our Party in September, they should make a special study of the following four books :

The Decisions of the Seventh World Congress.

The Speeches of Dimitrov.

Left Wing Communism.

The Report of our 14th Congress—“ *It Can Be Done.*”

We call for more agitation and propaganda, for the better use of our speakers, our writers, our artists, our singers, our poets and our painters. We have in our Party, especially in London, a wealth of talent and genius, anxious to help. Our activity is many-sided, but there is a place for every phase, from the type of banner that stands above my head, to the type of slogan lining the Congress Hall. There is room for it all, from the type of song “ The Peat Bog Soldiers ” to the people's song “ On to Action,” from the type of song “ Left, Right, Left ” to the Crusade Song, “ Forging Ahead.” There is room for the expression of our many-sided talent, all of which can strengthen the fight of our Party.

All this is bound up with every phase of our mass work. It is more than ever necessary that the main place for this mass work should be

in the factories and the trade unions. Never must we forget that these are the fortresses we must conquer. To forget this is to pay a price, a price we are paying now. The price is the absence of any big mass movement among the trade unionists. On the one hand to secure their own demands against the employers, and on the other hand to defeat the attempts of Citrine to bring about co-operation with Chamberlain, especially in the armament industries.

Here we emphasise a special point. We must make the trade unionists feel that the People's Front is not some nebulous movement of anybody, but an active mass movement with Labour as its core, which can strengthen the trade unionists in every phase of their struggle to secure their demands. That is the way in which our line for the People's Front should be discussed and explained in the factories and in the trade unions. In this work we believe it is not possible to reap the full results unless we remember at all times, in all circumstances, wherever we are doing our work, that we are Communists. That while we are fighting for the immediate demands of the workers, we are also strengthening and building up the working-class forces for the conquest of power.

There are tendencies to forget this and to put these things in separate compartments. Marx and Engels explained this question to us with brilliant clarity when in 1847 they declared in the Communist Manifesto :

The Communists fight for the attainment of the immediate aims, for the enforcement of the momentary interests of the working class ; but in the movement of the present, they also represent and take care of the future of that movement.

Now in regard to some of the weaknesses of our Branch life. It is necessary to overcome the lack of contact between the Branch Committees and the membership and to organise our meetings better. Meetings should work to a planned agenda. There should be reports of what our comrades are doing in the trade unions and the factories, and of the Branch Committee's work. Every meeting should discuss some of the political problems facing the Branch, and how to apply the line of the Party. There should be more tactful appeals to attend the meetings and take part in the work. Let it be known exactly what we want volunteers to do, and let us fit in the work with the particular temperament and inclination of the comrades. Then there will be a greater response from conviction and interest and not from a mere sense of duty which robs the work of so much of ultimate fruitful results.

Our Branch leaders as well as our District leaders should have real regard for the capacity and the ability of our members. We must also have a regard for the pockets of our members. So many appeals are made that many excellent comrades do not come to our branch meetings because they feel ashamed that they cannot afford to contribute to the demands constantly being made. We need a more effective check up

on literature sales and Party dues. I speak feelingly on the subject of the low standard of financial honesty in our Party in relation to literature and to dues which is an absolute scandal and disgrace.

In conclusion, despite the magnitude of our task and the prejudices and opposition we have to overcome, we want to emphasise our conviction that in spite of all enemies we shall win, and unity and the People's Front will be established.

Our path is not easy, our way is not smooth. There are no short cuts. Many obstacles and difficulties have to be overcome. The struggle exacts its toll. The very flower of our Party and its sympathisers in the cause of democracy have paid the supreme price. We must never let the British Battalion of the International Brigade be forgotten. We must help those comrades who come back wounded, and when they are fully recovered we must help them to get jobs ; we must see that the fund which is paying maintenance to the families of these comrades is kept higher than at the present time. For these comrades have a record of valour, of bravery and of heroism that has never been equalled in any battles that have taken place in the history of the world. They are our people, flesh of our flesh and blood of our blood, bound to us by a thousand ties of love and friendship, and we have the right to be proud of them and to shout their achievements and bravery to the skies, so that it shall be a powerful weapon in the movement towards the People's Front.

Some may not be able to go all the way. Some will falter and some capitulate, but the majority are unconquerable and indomitable. That is as true of Britain as it is of the U.S.S.R., Spain or China. History cannot be put back, it can only go forward, though perhaps not quickly enough. That is our responsibility. It is the price of our weakness and mistakes. All over the world the Communists are at their posts. Death cannot frighten or intimidate, but its terror and sacrifice in China and in Spain are a challenge to us.

Comrades have heard me speak of Tortosa before. I repeat it now without any apology. On Good Friday morning I stood in Tortosa where there had been 35,000 inhabitants, and there were exactly seven living people in that little city. The silence was ghastly, unearthly and deathly. Two of us wandered and turned a corner. There we saw, sitting on a rubble of débris and destruction, a young Spanish mother, mad as a March hare. In one hand she dangled a child, in the other she had a hard crust, gnawing it as a dog gnaws at a bone. To save our people here from this, we Communists will unite with anybody.

Let that picture burn itself into your mind ; let it fill you with hatred and desire for revenge against the class that has been responsible for such horrors. Let it determine you to go forward as never before, to defend the interests of the people, leading them on to the fight and struggle for the achievement of Socialism and the transformation of our land into a paradise of joy and happiness.