

The LEFT WING Movement : Its History and Significance

The following article is a summary of the lecture delivered by Comrade J. T. Murphy at the opening of the Plebs Summer School at Cober Hill.

THE PLEBS is so much a part of what is known as the Left Wing movement in British Labour, that we ought to appreciate the part we are playing and its general direction.

It would be a mistake if we simply proceeded arbitrarily to divide the working-class movement into departments of "right", centre, left, with the Communist Party at the edge, and choosing the particular department to which we belong and to think that is the end of the matter. Nor will it suffice for us to attempt to take simply an outside view and explain the process historically, but mechanically. The value of any historical survey lies in the degree to which it enables us to understand the circumstances governing our struggle, and what we can consciously do to make history.

It is not without significance that the whole working-class movement is fiercely discussing the questions of class war, the dictatorship of the proletariat, physical force, and parliamentarism. No one can dispute that these are the burning questions of the day. But it is not the first time that most of these fundamental questions have agitated the working class of this country. A reference to the history of trade unionism in the first quarter of the last century will provide ample material regarding the "war of the classes"; and debates on the "use of force." We can all recollect the records of riots, mass demonstration, and the division of the Chartist into physical forcists and constitutionalists. This period was a revolutionary period of working-class history, when the working class stepped forward into the arena of class struggles as the only remaining revolutionary class of history. The rising capitalist class, with the aid of the masses, became the dominant ruling class. In the midst of these struggles the working class was too inexperienced in organisation, too politically immature, to do more than lay the foundations of an independent working-class movement. Nevertheless, we realise that this period was rich in revolutionary struggle, sharper in its class alignments and expression than the remaining years of the last century. We have also explained in our classes the change that came over the movement due to the changed objective conditions of capitalism and the consolidation of the strength

and power of the capitalist class. Indeed, many years pass after the collapse of the Chartist movement before the class-war note is sounded once again with any appreciable effect.

Now the situation is completely changed again. We are witnessing a big organised Minority Movement in the trade unions, proclaiming again in clearer notes the class-war message of early revolutionary trade union history. Coming a century after the latter, it has at its disposal the vast organisational and cultural experiences of the working class of the whole world accumulated in the interval, and answers more precisely many of the problems previously unsolved. We are witness to the remarkable growth of independent working-class education in the form of the Labour College movement, actually educating many thousands of students per year in the facts of the class war. There is still a big volume of opinion sympathetic to these movements, which finds expression in the trade unions and the Labour Party. Besides these manifestations, we have the rise of the Communist Party, which has great significance and importance in spite of the misrepresentations and misunderstandings concerning it.

We can say definitely that our aim, as Left Wingers, is not only a revolutionary aim, but the remarkable advance of this movement with all its manifestations is a product of a revolutionary period. Of course, it would not be difficult to establish the fact that we are living in a revolutionary epoch by relating other facts of supreme importance, economic, political, etc. But it is sufficient for the moment to develop this point from the narrower basis of the content and character of the Left Wing movement. The similarity with the expressions of the struggle of the workers in the previous period of sharp class conflict is a clear indication that this movement of which we are a part is an integral part of the process whereby the working class of Britain comes again on to the path of revolutionary struggle. Under these circumstances it will be readily recognised that the fierce discussions in the Labour movement as a whole, and even in the Left Wing movement, are not something to be deplored, but to be welcomed. It means the working-class movement is thinking aloud. In these discussions we, who claim to be revolutionaries, have to fight more keenly than any. But we should not obscure the points at issue by passionate prejudice. A movement such as ours which represents the process of change in the Labour movement in its most class-conscious form must not only think hard and fight for its opinions, but it must be able to see clearly the various points of view.

With this appreciation of the historical setting of the Left Wing movement, let us consider its principal manifestations and phases. It will be remembered that, after the collapse of the Chartist

movement, the trade union movement passed into its essentially non-revolutionary phase of development, adapted itself to collective bargaining and securing whatever it could within the framework of capitalist relations. It was not until the eighties of the last century that we get a new breath of revolutionary air into the movement when the new Unionism makes its appearance, and attempts are made to found socialist parties. It is not without significance that this development takes place just after British capitalism begins to lose its monopoly position in the world market and modern imperialism to get into its stride. We see in the struggle of this period the onslaught on old forms of trade union organisation, the demand for broadening the basis of the unions, for class action. The net result is to lay the foundation of general labour unions and later actually to broaden some of the unions. But the Party efforts are not so successful. They remain sects and do not embrace the mass of workers. They were not only sects so far as numerical strength is concerned, but were exceedingly sectarian in outlook. Abstract criticism of the unions combined with an abstract view of history and their relation to it, combined to make expert critics on the basis of principles, without any ability to relate revolutionary conceptions to immediate tasks. After battering the unions for years, describing them in all kinds of contemptuous terms, a process of adaptation of the socialist parties to the unions began. This brought its reactions in the decade before the war, and we witness the effect of the revolutionary ferment in America which gave rise to the I.W.W., and the Socialist Labour Party. When the S.D.P. split in 1903 and the Socialist Labour Party was formed, the foundation of a new Left Wing propaganda is laid which has had a profound effect upon the subsequent revolutionary movement. Criticism of the trade unions was revived and the theory of revolutionary industrial unionism took the field. The S.L.P. formed the Industrial Workers of Great Britain as a revolutionary opposition to the trade unions, seeking not to advocate the leaving of the trade unions, but joining the Industrial Workers of G.B. with a view to the supersession of the trade unions when strong enough. This did not succeed, and the S.L.P., under the influence of the experience of the war period, and the Russian revolution, changed its views.

In England the Industrialist Syndicalist League urged the amalgamation of the unions into industrial unions. It sought to make the questions of amalgamation and forms of organisation the burning questions before the labour movement. Meanwhile, the Labour College and Plebs movement began an educational work which in political content approximated to the teachings of the S.L.P., modified by the influence of the industrialists and syndicalists.

These were the forces which constituted the Left Wing movement at the outbreak of war.

Then came further tests on the unions and the political parties, and the outstanding defects, not so obvious at the time, but especially clear to-day. The parties which proclaimed themselves as revolutionary parties proved that they were nothing more than propaganda bodies, and did not understand the rôle of a revolutionary party as an organised leader of struggle. Membership of a political party was regarded simply as meaning a label indicating to which party programme one subscribed. Hence there was no co-ordinated action. The reformation of the Left Wing movement in the unions depended upon spontaneous developments in the factories leading to the creation of Shop Stewards and Workers' Committees.

First came the Clyde dispute, paving the way to the Clyde Workers' Committee. Then the Sheffield dispute of 1916, which gave an impetus to a similar development in England. A whole series of developments follow, leading to the formation of National Administrative Council, and an attempt to co-ordinate these committees and give them a definite line. The name of the national committee indicates at once the continuation of the decentralisation theory into this movement. The history of the movement from 1915 to the passing of the Workers' Committee into new forms in 1922, will show that we never overcame this defect and that it played no little part in hampering the activities of the movement and laid us open at many vulnerable points when we needed to have the whole weight of the organisation behind the national leadership. Each centre acted on its own and had to improvise national connections. And the great strike of May, 1917, started in Manchester and unfolded itself to national dimensions without drawing in the Clyde. Of course it can be argued that this dependence on spontaneous action of the masses ensured real strength in the locality in which it originated. But its weakness was felt when other centres had to be called into action. If one could guarantee that a spontaneous movement would be general and endure generally at the same tempo, the case would be stronger for this dependence on spontaneity. But it does not work out like that, as we proved many times. On the contrary, we were left to fight in fragments and the opposition forces were able to tackle us in sections very frequently with success.

Nevertheless, while these defects are glaring the Shop Stewards' Movement brought the revolutionaries down to the task of relating revolutionary aspirations to immediate demands. It raised the question of action on these issues as the means to changes, both in form of organisation and means of struggle. Industrial unionism was thus transformed from the propaganda of a form of

organisation with which to struggle at a later date, to a definite method of struggle now.

The next important stage came when those members of the Workers' Committee Movement and the Socialist Parties, who had felt the impacts of these experiences and the repercussions of the Russian Revolution formed the Communist Party. Then, for the first time the question of the rôle of a revolutionary party is raised and we are witness to the crystallisation of these experiences in a single party. As yet this is not a completed process ; but it is a process which is developing. And meantime the task of fusing the Left Wing forces into a single disciplined army is helped on by such discussions of immediate problems and methods as we are taking part in at this Summer School.

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