

The Politics of the Co-operative Congress

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The Southport Congress of the Co-operatives has been variously referred to as a "revolutionary congress," a "democratic congress," "a milestone in co-operative history," etc. All of these descriptions, of course, are interesting, and no doubt, the respective enthusiasts could make out a case for their particular description. But it is not our intention to dwell upon the appropriateness of any one of these descriptions. Here we are anxious to take the measure of the politics of the Congress in order to get a correct appreciation of the tasks of the workers, and our Party in particular, in relation to this great movement.

There is no need for us to belabour the dead dog of "political neutrality." Our analysis will show that this Congress was as much involved in politics as any other congress which has any relation whatever to the social and economic life of the world. Indeed, it was most politically eloquent when it was striving to be non-political, and humanly tolerant.

In this respect, probably the printed reports are more eloquent than the Congress itself. I refer in particular to the reception given to the Russian delegates; to the treatment meted out to their reports, and the political observations they offered. No doubt the applause was tremendous. But there is no evidence of any other speaker in the Congress relating the most significant features of their report to the co-operative movement of this country.

Both delegates stated that without the active assistance of the Soviet Government it would have been impossible to make the remarkable progress they had made. No one drew attention to the contrast which this makes with the position of the co-operative movement here in relation to the Government of this country. Instead it would appear that the Congress, and especially the leaders of the Congress, were patting themselves on the back for being "so tolerant," "so sportsmanlike," "such good fellows," to listen to two communists from a "foreign country," give five-minute speeches. The most ideal Christian Liberal could not beam with more unctuous self-complacency than they.

But to discuss the speeches, the practical application of communist principles to the co-operative movement, ye gods!

We have only to read the "Co-operative News" regularly to appreciate what would happen under such circumstances.

CONSERVATISM IN THE RANKS.

But this attitude of the Congress, accompanied by a boycott of information in the printed reports to the Congress, and the silence after the Congress, cannot be taken at its face value of "benevolent toleration." It means much more than that. It reveals only too clearly the political backwardness of the co-operators, and the strength of conservatism in the ranks of the co-operative movement of this country.

Apart from the speeches of the two Communist co-operators from the Soviet Union, there was hardly a speech throughout the Congress which could not have been delivered by a Tory or a Liberal, and the most radical of the speeches by a tame Labour politician.

Still more eloquent are the decisions of the Congress with regard to the relations of the co-operatives and the trade unions, nationally and internationally. Nationally, the machinery for jointly settling disputes between the co-operatives and the trade unions had broken down, while no machinery existed at all for the joint action of the co-operatives and the trade unions against capitalism. The key to the disputes which have torn the movement for years only serves to prove the domination of conservatism in the co-operatives.

More than all the differences concerning representation and machinery the demand of the co-operative union, that the Trade Board rates take precedence of trade union negotiation, has been the source of the troubles of the two bodies.

The Trade Boards, as everybody knows, were created for the regulation of wages, where the trade unions were too weak to be effective—they were intended for the protection of sweated labour. To permit these regulations to form the foundation upon which the trade unions had to build their case, and their conditions, on the plea that these conditions governed their competitors is actually to reduce the co-operative movement to the level of their competitors in the realm of exploitation. The breakdown was therefore inevitable. But if inevitable in this direction, how great is the distance between the present and the transformation which is necessary to make the co-operatives into fighting allies of the trade unions in the class war!

RETREAT FROM GHENT.

Internationally, the retreat has been equally pronounced. It will be remembered the British co-operators played a leading rôle in the Ghent Congress last year against the Alliance of

the International Co-operative Alliance with the Trade Union Internationals. The Ghent Congress, as the report to the Southport Congress shows, retreated from the projected closer co-operation of the I.C.B. with International Federation of Trade Unions. This retreat was conducted ostensibly to wait and see what turned up from the negotiations for International Trade Union Unity. Actually, the decision was taken because the revolutionary workers appeared on the horizon in the form of the Red International of Labour Unions.

The fear of contact with any body of workers who were really anxious to do battle with capitalism dominated the I.C.A., in which the British co-operatives play a leading part. The British co-operators had not yet had the experience of revolutionary struggles or a strong working-class challenge within its ranks, and, consequently, retreat from something they did not understand was easier than a direct challenge.

The Southport Congress accepted the I.C.A. report without challenge. The political retreat of the co-operative union away from the working-class struggle was thus conducted on all fronts.

It may be argued that this retreat was not so complete. It will be said that the Congress endorsed the report of the Co-operative Party, that no protest was made against this party on the grounds of "political neutrality"; that it was also agreed that the Co-operative Party should seek harmonious relations with the Labour Party and the latter's accommodation to this new development. Objectively speaking, there is something to be said for this argument, in that it certainly places co-operators in a very weak position to defend "political neutrality" when the same people organise a Co-operative Political Party. It is certainly important that the Co-operative Party seeks accommodation with the Labour Party. But in neither case does it minimise the conscious political retreat from identification with the workers' struggle. On the contrary, the Co-operative Party, and its approach to the Labour Party, may mean for some time the strengthening of the reactionary forces of the whole movement, labour and co-operative, especially if the conscious political efforts of the Co-operative Party are as reactionary as the politics of the reactionaries of the Labour movement.

In this respect we need only refer to the Congress resolution endorsing the policy of the Labour Government. This, we all know, included "the continuity of capitalism"; the change from opposition to the Versailles Treaty to its endorsement as a basis for its foreign policy; the signing of the capitalist "United Front" expressed in the Dawes Report; the continuation of Imperialist repression in the dependencies as a means of cementing the Empire; the use of military in strikes—in short, the defence of capitalism against the workers and the exploited everywhere.

CO-OPERATION AND IMPERIALISM.

The magnitude of the retreat at this Congress is evidenced in the Chairman's address, and the general conduct of the proceedings. The opening speech was the most amazing endorsement of Imperialism that could possibly come from a Co-operative Congress, or, in fact, from any Congress.

"While addressing ourselves to the subject of our relations in distant parts," the President continued, "**our hearts and eyes compel us to call to mind our kith and kin comprising the wider parts of the Empire—Canada, New Zealand, India, West Africa, etc.**" His own visit to Australia and New Zealand in 1920, in the interests of co-operative development, was an experience never to be forgotten. There is to be found in these two countries, he said, a number of excellent societies, comprising also a large number of struggling ones. It is quite obvious that their one great need is a central producing and distributing agency. At home we are well possessed in this direction, but one cannot fail to ask: "Do we value this great service in the same degree as those who are denied the advantage of it?" The President was afraid not; but this failing, he remarked, "can only be remedied by ourselves."

Trading relations with the co-operators of those lands are greatly developing. But there is another side to the picture. It is not merely that they seek to import co-operatively-produced goods from this country, they desire also a market for their own co-operative produce. The definite character of these products—butter, cheese, fruits, and the like—has been considerably advertised of late. This post-war policy the co-operators of Great Britain assisted in advocating and advertising.

The co-operative developments of Canada are an outstanding testimony to the need of a closer imperial co-operative connection. **A question filled with such immense possibilities should occasion serious reflection, and the application of additional energy in developing a policy which is of supreme interest to the whole Empire.**

"Would it not increase our knowledge of the supply and demand on both sides if some official inter-communication on the subject was established, or if a conference of representatives of the interests involved was held?" (Applause.) Look at the relation of population:—

	Population.
British Isles	390.5 per square mile.
New Zealand	12.5 ,,
Canada	2.1 ,,
Australia	1.8 ,,

On this side of the world we have a great need of supplies, but on the other side there is a greater need of securing satisfactory markets for their commodities, eliminating all unnecessary intermediaries between producer and consumer.

Within this circle, the President ventured to suggest, there

is an opportunity of alleviating the pressing problem of unemployment. At the same time, **we cannot afford in the process to send our desirables abroad, and continue to admit undesirables into this country.** Our growing co-operative interests in India and Ceylon and our enterprise on the West Coast of Africa are worthy of the best reputation of the movement, and are indicative of **the progress that has been made in forging the commercial links of the Empire, but how much more there is to do in this direction co-operatively, and indeed generally, must be apparent to all;** and the President besought the co-operation of all in this fundamental effort.

I quote this statement at length because of the immense political significance of its content and presentation in relation to the working-class movement of the whole world. This statement was applauded without a single person in the audience indicating that this whole scheme of committing the co-operative movement to Imperialism was in flat contradiction to the pacificism with which the speaker attempted to identify it. Had Mr. Baldwin given the presidential address, he could not have drawn the co-operatives more closely to Imperialism than Mr. Dudley. It was followed by a denunciation of war, oblivious to the fact that the Empire itself, which he proposes to cement, is founded on anti-co-operative principles, and is maintained by iron oppression.

Yet there was no protest. The Congress applauded. The parsons preached. The audience sang hymns. The diners toasted "the King," as if "the King" was a feature of the "Co-operative Commonwealth." And not one protested.

CEMENTING THE EMPIRE.

But the significance of this retreat from the working class is more important to us at this moment than an extended denunciation. It is of no small interest and importance that, at a time when the Co-operative Congress concentrates its attention upon Empire building, that the Labour Party Executive should place upon the agenda of the next annual Conference of the Labour Party proposals wherein the British Empire is described as "The British Commonwealth of Nations," and grandiose schemes of Labour co-operation in Empire development are outlined. Nor is it without significance that in the same period a number of "Left Wing" Parliamentary Labour Party vote for Imperial Preference. There is, indeed, a close connection between all these phenomena.

The Labour Party leadership is composed in the main of middle class leaders and trade union leaders permeated, through and through, with ideas of class collaboration typical of the middle class. Those who do not belong to the Labour aristocracy, that is, the higher paid trades by profession, have been sufficiently long in positions of petty-bourgeois bureaucrats, that their mentality is practically the same. All of them approach the problems of trade unionism and politics

from the standpoint of a bargain between bosses and workers, and not as a fight of one class against another.

They are thus profoundly concerned, when the social foundations of their policy begin to crumble, and look for ways and means to hold their traditional situation together.

It is the same with the Parliamentary Left Wing. An examination of the social composition of those who voted with Thomas and the Tory Party for Imperial Preference will show it to be composed of skilled engineers, skilled railwaymen, teachers, parsons, doctors—trade union bureaucrats, and little business men. Animated by typical craft union motives, nationalistic sentiments, and the whole outfit of the "collective bargainers," they are terrified at the state of British industry, which reveals all the features of capitalism bankrupt, and unable to maintain the old privileged position of the labour aristocracy developed on the basis of Imperialist exploitation of the colonies and dependencies. Apparently incapable of understanding why they had the higher social conditions than the "foreigner," they can only blindly resent what is happening, and attempt to stem it by catching on to the panaceas of Imperialism.

CONGRESS PASSIVITY.

The same applies to the co-operative movement. The co-operatives, as economic organisations, have reacted profoundly to the dislocation of capitalist economy. They have grown up with Imperialism, and, at this moment, when they feel again a new impulse derived from the temporary stabilisation of capitalism, they cling to their traditional line of development, which is saturated throughout with the shopkeeper outlook. Dependent upon the workers mainly for their market, they are anxious to see the workers employed and able to spend their money with the "Co-ops." Just as other shopkeepers do, who are anxious to sell their goods, they plead for social peace in the midst of a class war, and become the hangers-on of the dominant political class.

British capitalism knows that its fate is sealed, and struggles to save itself by a concentrated development of the economy within the framework and extension of its possessions. The Co-operative movement, dominated by Conservatism, reacts to this development, and, as good opportunists, tries to make good business without regard to principles, or the class interests involved.

The Co-operative Congress, therefore, feeling at one with the Labour bureaucracy and Parliamentarians, moved away from working class politics and clung to Imperialism for salvation. It refused the path of struggle, though unable to escape it. It shut its eyes to the lessons of the Russian revolution, and longed for the return of capitalism to the "normal." The politics of the Co-operative Congress and the vagaries of Labour politicians indicate the bewilderment of the middle classes and the Labour aristocracy, before the crumbling of the Empire's foundations and the intensification of the class war.