

The October Revolution and British Labour

By J. T. MURPHY.

IT is now eight years since the workers of Russia took the reins of power and set the pace for the workers of the whole world. Eight years since the whole earth reverberated to the shock of a working class triumphant. And what years they have been! Civil war, intervention, famine, pestilence, painful struggle amidst ruin and desolation, to build anew. Then reconstruction and steady grappling with fundamental economic and social problems and giant strides towards Socialism.

There has been nothing like it in human history. Nothing so stupendous. The press of the capitalist world shouted "It is falling" from the first moment of its emergence. For weeks, for months, for years, they continued "To-morrow it will fall."

But "to-morrow" came, and, as it did not fall, the hatred of its enemies grew in intensity the more it advanced from chaos to order and increasing power. The changing situation brought changes in tactics on the part of world capitalism without a change of purpose. From direct armed intervention they changed to economic penetration; from economic penetration to financial boycott and diplomatic manoeuvres, e.g., the formation of pacts, police, conspiracies.

But what of British Labour? Instinctively, the Labour movement was on the side of the Russian workers without understanding anything about the dictatorship of the proletariat. It organised a Workers' Council Convention, denounced intervention and prepared for action to stop intervention. The I.L.P., particularly in Scotland, nearly affiliated to the Communist International, then retreated, joined the Two-and-a-Half International, while subscribing to the dictatorship of the proletariat, and then retreated still further back until it landed into the lap of the Second International. Those of the Labour Party leaders who had subscribed to Workers' Councils became alarmed. They pulled themselves together, drew back and steadily assumed an offensive against the Communist International based upon the funda-

mentals of the very revolution they had defended. They defended the fact of the dictatorship while denying it as a principle in political evolution.

Throughout this process of change in the ranks of Labour there is a remarkable divergence between the line taken by the trade unions, by the Labour Party and by the I.L.P., the dominant fraction in the Labour Party. This divergence culminates in the contrast of the Scarborough T.U. Congress and the Liverpool Conference of the Labour Party.

Scarborough and Liverpool.

Of course, there are those who argue there is no difference between Scarborough and Liverpool. To us it is a study in contrasts so far as the political decisions were concerned. The chairman of the T.U.C. sounded the class war note throughout his speech and took his stand with the workers in their struggle. The chairman of the Labour Party declared there is a class war, but it was the task of the Labour Party to "transcend" it—in short, help the capitalists to strengthen capitalism to the tune of resonant Socialist phrases. The T.U.C. denounced the Dawes Plan, the Labour Party proposed to "enquire" into it. The T.U.C. denounced imperialism. The Labour Party Conference clothed it with Socialist phraseology, re-baptised the British Empire the British Commonwealth of Nations and promised not to disturb it.

It may be thought that all this has nothing to do with the "October" revolution, but it has everything to do with it. As a matter of fact, a cursory glance across the eight years will reveal that the enthusiasm for the revolution in the ranks of British Labour varies according to the degree to which its principles are related to our own experiences.

So long as it was a gesture to something external, all well and good. But immediately it enters their own experience with dangerous obligations, the reaction, especially on the part of parliamentary politicians and intellectuals who prefer to write about a revolution rather than work for a revolution, is one of consistent retreat until they even turn upon the revolution they once cheered to the echo. The effect upon the rank and file workers and many trade union leaders is different, because their position in the struggle of social forces is different. They cheered with the best when the recognition of the revolution was a gesture and the more emphatic the presentation of the case as the triumph of the workers over the bosses, the more they cheered. It fitted in

with their own heartfelt desires, although it is perfectly true to say they had no theoretical conception about the matter. Thus it was that when the parliamentarians began their counter-revolutionary propaganda, and pleaded for the transformation here to be peaceful, etc., etc., there came along also increasing confusion.

From the moment that the proletarian revolution found its theoretical embodiment in the Communist Party, definite alignments of forces become ever clearer and a dual process begins. One phase is a battle for the theory of the proletarian revolution and the other is the struggle against its application to the day-to-day struggle.

Exorcising the Communists.

The theoretical fight has proceeded with increasing sharpness in the Labour Party. The struggle for its application has been mainly in the trade unions and Trades and Labour Councils. No one at all familiar with the history of the Labour Party and the trade unions can look back over the last few years without being literally amazed at the rapid changes that have taken place in the movement, especially since the formation of the Communist Party. Up to this time the Labour movement had muddled along, asserting its independence in the mixed language of Christian Socialism and trade union Liberalism. Even after it had formulated its Fabian programme in 1918, it slowly bumped along as history swept British imperialism into the rapids of economic disaster.

It did not know upon which leg to stand—on industrial action or parliamentarism. It somehow thought political power necessarily took the form of parliamentarism, and yet was puzzled by the severe shocks it received when the unions came in conflict with the State. Black Friday was the culmination of this muddle when the spectre of a British October stood in the pathway of the British Labour movement, and called for a decision. This occasion was the most drastic of all. The challenge to the State had been faced in 1920 on the occasion of the threat of war against Russia, but this was deemed an exceptional situation which would not recur. Here, however, was an event developing out of their own inner experience—an event bound up with the fate of the economic life of this country.

Then it was decided by the Labour leaders and the I.L.P. leaders that these situations must not recur and all ideas associated with this event, directly bearing upon the question of revolution, must be fought.

The Communist Party crystallised the revolutionary implication of these developments and consequently became the storm-centre. The effect of this battle, expressing itself most fiercely in the Edinburgh Conference of 1922, has been continually to force the Labour Party leadership into a clearer formulation of its own programme as against the programme of the Communist Party.

Politicians Triumph.

The culmination of this struggle is the Liverpool Conference where, for the first time in the history of the British Labour movement, the fight takes place all along the line, not simply on one or two issues associated with the question of the affiliation of the C.P. to the Labour Party, but in addition on a clear choice of programme in relation to the first principles of the October revolution and the line of policy. How far the Labour Party has travelled I have already indicated in contrast with the T.U.C. resolutions.

But more than these were put through. For the first time the Labour Party fastened itself completely to the Parliamentary machine. Hitherto it had left the situation open to question. Now, however, there is to be no question about it—only by Parliamentarism—is the answer to the unions in spite of 1921. As for the I.L.P., its Socialism is relegated to the realm of a personal religion in which secularists and Christians may unite for ethical purposes. Its politics are the politics of the majority in the Liverpool Conference. Its Socialism is what it would like if it dared to. Its politics are the politics of Liberalism, and poor Liberalism at that. This is the answer of the parties other than the Communist Party to the oncoming British October.

Bevin's Growl.

It is one of the greatest ironies of history that the very people who are fiercest in the denunciation of the Communist Party, which contains the politics of the October Revolution, are repeatedly pushed into circumstances which compel them, time and again, to say and do the things which the Communist Party says are necessary.

For example, Mr. Bevin was exceptionally loud-mouthed in his denunciation of the Communist Party, but when he savagely tries to dissociate the Communist Party from the events of July, simply because he "did not care a damn what the Communist Party was saying or doing," he lays himself open to ridicule.

Everybody knows that for months and months we had been calling and working for a united front of the unions to the wage offensive, that the steps taken by the General Council and the trade unions, whether consciously taken in response to Communist propaganda or not matters not, were the steps advocated by our Party. And they were steps that proved effective. We did not claim that they were due to us only, we are not such fools as that. But neither Mr. Bevin, nor anyone else, can get away from the fact of the coincidence of our policy and what was recognised by the union leaders and the workers themselves as the right policy to pursue in the interests of the workers.

We are not worried about Mr. Bevin's personal feelings for us. More important than Mr. Bevin is the fact that the unions, in order to defend their interests, got together as we had said they must get together to defend them, and in the process proved the soundness of our revolutionary theories and demonstrated the correctness of our application of them.

Here we revealed that no amount of resolutions registered against us can defeat our Party providing history is for us and not against in the application of our political theories. Life is the test, not resolutions. It is in the realm of this historical test that the Communist Party has made the greatest headway, and it is such incidents as that which make Mr. Bevin squeal, revealing why the trade unions are brought nearer to us than the Labour Party, and why Scarborough contrasts with Liverpool.

Labour Party and Liberalism.

The basis of the unions is not a political programme, but the immediate economic needs of the workers and their families. No amount of resolutions against the Communist Party will add butter to the bread, or increase the wages of the workers one iota. But to maintain wages they have, and are continually having, to fight against them being lowered. Everything which affects them, direct attacks, Dawes schemes, colonial exploitation, provide the grist to the mill which keeps them ceaselessly struggling. It is the relation of the respective theories to this struggle which is the test both of the parties and the theories as the workers endeavour to solve the problems of the struggle which counts. The more the struggle sharpens, the more experience proves to them one or the other.

Although four years ago many of the leaders ran away at the sight of "October," and left the workers in the lurch, the struggle did not stop. The ranks had to be re-formed,

and the evolution of the union movement from that time shows a remarkable approximation to the lines outlined by our Party as necessary.

We have only to recall the demand for more power to the General Council, the coming together of the latter body with the Unemployed Committees and the Trades Councils, and the growth of the Minority Movement. The reason is clear also. In each case the proposals are accepted not on the basis of principles, but as measures governed by expediency.

It is the working class learning by experience and responding to the challenge of its interests in the struggle. This is why the Trades Union Congress contrasts with the Labour Party Conference. The former discussed the issues of the day in terms of its experience. The latter discussed theories first and subordinated the issues to them. Hence the contrast.

This contrast is the measure not of the failure of the Communist Party, but of the failure of the Labour Party leadership to keep in touch with the workers' struggle and its requirements. The retreat of the Labour Party into the lap of Liberalism is the confession of futility in the face of a situation which drives the unions into conflict with them. It cannot be overlooked that during the whole period of retreat from the issues of our "October," the economic position of British capitalism has become steadily worse and offers less and less prospect of concessions to the workers.

In seeking to save capitalism in preference to saving the workers through leading towards our "October" instead of away from it, the Labour Party leaders seal their own doom and pave the way for the Party of revolution.

Of the role of the Left-wing we need say nothing at the moment. It has been badly singed and the stench has not yet vanished. All the Liverpool contingent can do at present is to weep, gnash their teeth and wish there were no Communist Party. But there is nothing doing. Our Party will not be put out either by resolution or persecution. Liverpool is already behind us.