

# THE EMPIRE AND THE WAR

By R. Palme Dutt (June 1940)

## SILENCE IN THE EMPIRE

“The only public peace the nation knows is the peace of public prison. India is a vast prison house.” These words were spoken in 1930, when tens of thousands of Indians were in prison and when the Labour government, on behalf of the ruling class, was keeping order within the Empire with machine guns and police terror.

The subject peoples of the Empire are prisoners within their own lands. And now, with the outbreak of the war, the imperialist bureaucracy is attempting to enforce the silence of the prison house.

We are told that all is well with the Empire and that the people are united behind the Government—but strikers are being shot down in Rhodesia and India; there are food riots and huge strikes against the increased cost of living; workers’ demonstrations are broken up by the police in Trinidad and Cyprus; there are deaths from starvation, clashes with the police and strike sin Jamaica; in Australia, 75 percent of the organised Trade Union movement has declared its opposition to the war.

With a clear voice, and by their actions, the subject people of the Empire are declaring that their demands be met.

We are told that all is well and happy in the Empire—yet the government is forced to suppress the Moyne report on conditions in the West Indies lest it should give the lie to their hollow pretences. This government, representing the far-flung interests of British finance capital, tells us that a new era of progressive colonial administration is now dawning; and with cringing servility, the Labour leaders congratulate them on this “change of heart.” But the paltry £5 million which they profess to be going to set aside for this purpose at some future date, is far less than is spent on one day of the war. This miserable sop, to be paid out of the pockets of the British tax-payer, is not going to solve the acute problems of poverty, illiteracy, malnutrition and agrarian crisis that today beset the 480 million people of the Empire.

As the war develops, the misery and starvation of colonial people is increased tenfold. Hundreds of millions of peasants and workers, who even according to official reports, were before the war living below the minimum human standard, have now to face a 30 to 40 per cent rise in the cost of living in order to pay for the war and the profits of war.

In the eyes of the law, it has become a terrible crime to communicate news of what is happening in the colonies. A Jamaican correspondent writes to *Reynolds News* that “a most rigorous censorship bans all mentions of labour strikes in the Press, whether these matters concern the islands or any part of the world.” The Defence of India Act, which invokes the death penalty for certain offences, prohibits the “promotion of class hatred” or the publication

of news whether true or false, concerning the “sympathies of His Majesty’s subjects as regards matters relating to the war.”

Trade Union leaders in India, including officials of the All-India T.U.C., hundreds of Communists, Socialists and leading Congress workers have been arrested and thrown into prison for leading the struggle against the new war burdens or for making anti-war speeches. The Defence of India Act is being used, not to defend India against an external enemy, but rather to defend British rule in India against the Indian people themselves; it is being used in the attempt to suppress the rising tide of working-class protest.

As the war develops, the silence of the prison house deepens and we are spoon-fed with the lie that all is well within the empire.

## THE PEOPLE OF THE EMPIRE

The poverty of the people inside the Empire is so desperate that it beggars description. Millions of them have never tasted fresh milk or meat. More than 90 per cent of them have to keep body and soul together on 2d. a day. Less than one in ten can read or write. Millions die every year from easily preventable diseases or simply because they are so under-nourished that they no longer have any powers of resistance. It is not uncommon to find them reduced to the level of wild animals, eating the bark or leaves of trees. The smallest luxuries of life—a cup of tea, a pair of shoes, a visit to the cinema—are to vast majority beyond the wildest dreams of possibility. Their lives are a bleak and dreary round of labour. For them, indebtedness and slavery are the inevitable lot from which only an early death brings release.

In this vast slum of misery, the majority of the people are engaged in agricultural pursuits. The small peasants, who own an acre or two and whose annual crop is sold for a few miserable pounds, have to meet out of their income the demand for high rents, government taxes and innumerable other imposts for the upkeep of swollen police forces and high-salaried bureaucracies. Every year millions of them are driven deeper into debt in their inability to meet those demands and are evicted from their lands to join the ranks of the landless proletariat; if they are lucky, they are absorbed in the capitalist mines and plantations on a wage of a few pennies a day. If they are unlucky, they die of starvation or sell themselves into slavery.

This situation of mass impoverishment and agrarian crisis is the result of the deliberate policy of imperialism. By restricting production and working-class consumption at home, it creates an “unwanted surplus” of colonial products. Instead of selling their crops, the peasantry have to burn them; the price obtained is reduced by half.

The same capitalists who buy up these cheap raw materials sell their manufactured articles to the colonial people at artificially maintained “scarcity prices,” and the cheap goods of rival industrial countries are excluded. On top of these high monopoly prices, heavy import duties are imposed to collect revenue from the impoverished people. In the West Indies, where the people live almost entirely on imported foods, as much as 40 percent of the total revenue of the islands is raised by taxing imports, whilst only five percent is raised from Income Tax. Thus, the main burden is thrown on to the poorest people who, in return, are given no social services worth the name.

But now the Empire is at war; the subject people are called together and told they must make further enormous sacrifices in order to preserve "democracy" and "justice."

The first few months of the war are showing what this means. Prices of crops, which already barely covered the cost of cultivation, are being cut down or fixed at pre-war slump levels by the Government. In the Gold Coast, the Government buys up all the cocoa crop at a price fixed by themselves and permission to export is only granted to "established firms." In Palestine and Cyprus, fruit crops are rotting for lack of a market. In India, a flat rate has been fixed for sugar-cane and jute prices as paid to the grower, but the market prices of these commodities are rocketing up. In Malaya, in spite of the war demand for tin, the quota for production for the second quarter of 1940 has been reduced and some 20,000 miners thrown out of employment.

But there is no restriction of prices when it is a question of selling the goods of the capitalists to the people. Imported tinned milk and salt fish (the basic diet of the West Indian people) are up by nearly 50 per cent since the outbreak of war. The cost of living in India is up by 40 per cent. The price of a packet of sugar in the Gold Coast is doubled.

What does all this mean in terms of poverty and starvation for the people who inhabit this slum Empire? The growing strike movement, even in the face of tear gas and rifle fire, gives the answer. The subject people, already living in sub-human conditions, are being crushed down beyond the limit of endurance in an effort to make them pay for the war.

## WHOSE EMPIRE, WHOSE WAR?

But take a look at the profits made by those who tell us that the Empire stands for democracy. Lever Brothers and Unilever, Ltd., the huge soap and margarine combine which virtually owns West Africa, pays out a dividend of 15 per cent to its shareholders.

Tate and Lyle, biggest sugar firm in the world and owning huge plantations in the West Indies, have made a profit of £9 million in five years, and, after issuing a 40 per cent "scrip bonus," paid a 13.5 per cent dividend last year.

Apex Oilfields and Trinidad Leaseholds paid dividends of 30 per cent and 45 per cent respectively in 1936/7.

In India, the profit boom of the last war brought dividends of 365 per cent and 250 per cent to the fortunate holders of textile shares. Even in the depth of the world economic crisis, when workers' wages were slashed, the Textile Mills and Tea Plantations were paying dividends of 30 per cent, 40 per cent and even 50 per cent.

And now, with the second imperialist war, the capitalists are agog at the prospect of a "trade revival" and "renewed gainful activities." Sir Jeremy Raisman, spokesman of big business in India, rejoices that "the present is one of the times in which war is productive of certain advantages." Heavy speculation is reported on the Calcutta Stock Exchange; jute shares leap up; there is a rush to buy mining shares of the Companies operating in the colonies just at the moment when Rhodesian workers are shot down during a strike.

And yet they try to persuade you and me and the colonial people that this is *our* glorious Empire, which must be preserved at all costs in our own interests.

## WHAT THE EMPIRE MEANS TO US

The apologists of Imperialism try to throw the responsibility for their deeds upon the British worker by saying that, whether he likes it or not, the worker here depends for his food, for his standard of wages, for his employment and for his very existence, upon the exploitation of the Empire.

But Imperialism cares no more for the welfare of the British worker than it does for that of the colonial producer. The Lancashire and Dundee bosses had no hesitation in throwing thousands of their workers permanently on to the streets in order to employ cheap labour in India and to win larger surplus profits. They spend no sleepless nights trying to bring back prosperity to Lancashire by increasing the purchasing power of the millions of naked people within the Empire.

Imperialism no longer acts as a force for developing trade, expanding industry. Finance capital extracts its super-profits by restricting output and consumption, by closing, rather than opening, the doors of world trade. And in the present war, with the logic of insanity, it is carrying this process still further. By means of rationing, high prices and one form or another of "saving," the consumption of the British working class is to be cut to starvation level. We and the colonial people must starve, not because there is a shortage of food, but in order to pay for the war and the profits which monopoly capitalism is making out of the war.

The British people no more own the Empire than the Indians and Africans own the mines upon which they work for a few pence a day. Our livelihood no more depends upon the possession of an Empire than it depends upon the continued existence of those few multi-millionaires who are now seeking to extend their power and wealth.

The wealth of the colonies is used to increase the strength of those great monopoly combines whose very existence is the real threat to our wages and employment; it is used to increase their stranglehold over production, to enable them to artificially fix prices, to restrict output and consumption. These monopolies, drawing their strength from the surplus profits of Empire, are the cause of unemployment, the final absurdity of poverty in the midst of plenty.

This is the system which we are asked to preserve; this is the imperial paradise for which the colonial people are asked to make untold sacrifices—a paradise of bankers, industrialists and speculators. Once again, as in 1914, the subject peoples are drawn into war by those who own the Empire.

## THE CAUSE OF WAR

The Bombay workers, when on October 2nd they declared a one-day strike against the war and the Government's repressive measures, had no illusions as to what kind of war it was. The wave of strikes that is now sweeping not only across India but every colony of the

Empire, drawing in masses of hitherto unorganised workers, is reiterating that protest against the burdens and sacrifices resulting from the war.

The defeat of German Imperialism in 1918, after four years of bloodshed and incalculable suffering, brought no lightening of the yoke of oppression to the colonial people; every specious promise that had been made to them was broken. And no sooner were the dead buried than the new scramble for colonies and markets appeared in an even intenser form. And at the same time, there was a new complicating factor in the world—the existence of a Socialist State living side by side with the imperialist powers.

The Soviet Union neither desired nor needed to exploit colonial peoples; the liberation of the Tsarist colonies, and the rapid strides in prosperity made by them, created a deep and revolutionary impression upon the subject peoples of the Empire. For this reason, and because of the growing power and prosperity of the Russian people in the period of capitalist decline, the imperialist countries, in spite of their own acute conflicts, were drawn together in hatred of the Soviet Union.

The young and expanding German industry that had been temporarily smashed by the war and the imposition of heavy reparations at Versailles, was built up again with the support of British capital; Hitler was brought to power, financed and armed with British help; everything was done to encourage German imperialism with the set purpose of using it as the spearpoint of a united onslaught on the Soviet Union.

To serve this end, democracy was betrayed in every corner of the world and reaction was entrenched. But the game failed; German Imperialism, far more powerful and well-armed than in 1914 and forced by the dynamic of its own development to expand or explode, nevertheless refused to face the Red Army.

So, the robbers have fallen out again. In the sharpening crisis of world capitalism, they look with greedy eyes upon one another's property, they itch to lay hold on the huge imperial preserves which are the foundation rock of the big monopolies; the conflicts deepen; someone lets off a pistol; there is a general dive for the booty.

## RULE OF TERROR

Our ruling class, whose monied interests spread to every corner of the Empire, are determined to fight on to retain their rights to exploit this Empire.

If the workers in the colonies express their views on the war, their Press must be muzzled and confiscated. If the workers strike against the excessive burdens of taxation and rise in the cost of living, they must be forced back to work with tear gas and rifle shots.

Twenty-one years ago, we had an example of the extent of terror which imperialism is prepared to use against the people. In the town of Amritsar, at a time when demonstrations were being held all over the country to protest against the introduction of repressive legislation, General Dyer decided, in his own words, to “give the people a lesson.” He ordered his troops to fire on a peaceful crowd of 12,000. 380 were killed and more than 1,000 injured, including women and children.

India is not the only place where force is used. Nigerian women were machine-gunned for demonstrating against taxation and high prices. Warships are summoned to deal with strikers in the West Indies. Bombing planes are used to “pacify” the Frontier tribes and the Arab people. Long before Hitler came to power the Indian people knew and feared the concentration camps of British Imperialism.

The rule of terror becomes more pronounced as the contradictions of imperialism sharpen and as the oppressed peoples gather their forces in powerful united movements for national freedom. Whether it be in Germany, in France, in Britain or within the subject Empire, the ruling class, in its relentless drive to maintain the rate of profit, attacks the people with ruthless terror whenever they begin to threaten the foundations of capitalist exploitation.

### A NEW PHASE OF STRUGGLE

But 1940 is not 1914. The use of force against the people cannot today beat back the mighty mass movement that is sweeping forward. Twenty-five years ago, the colonial workers were unorganised and without leadership; the peasantry were politically unconscious; the movements for national liberation were undeveloped and led by reformists who were easily corrupted by minor concessions.

Today it is not so. There has developed in each colony, in a lesser or greater degree, a genuine popular movement which for twenty years has been in sharp and continual conflict with imperialism.

Three great waves of mass action have spread across the Empire since the last war. The first, coming immediately after the war and reflecting the world wide revolutionary movement, engulfed India, Ireland, and the Arab countries of Palestine, Iraq and Syria. The second wave came ten years later when imperialism attempted to make the colonial people foot the bill of its economic crisis. Huge strikes in India were followed by a united national struggle which paralysed the administration and called into operation the whole armoury of military repression before “order” was restored. There were big strikes in Kenya, Gambia, Nigeria, the Gold Coast and Rhodesia.

And finally, before the development of the present war, the third wave of unrest develops. In the West Indies, from 1935 onwards, the struggle has matured rapidly. In Malaya and Mauritius, big strikes are on the order of the day.

Thus, on September 3rd, with the outbreak of the war, British Imperialism was already facing a situation of growing discontent throughout large sectors of the Empire. This latest wave of colonial struggle, rising with unmistakable vigour, but as yet only half developed, already reveals the absolutely new character of the present period. The working class in every country has reached a far higher degree of organisation in spite of having to work in conditions of semi-legality or sometimes completely underground; and, because of its greater organisation and its clearer political consciousness, it more and more acts as the driving force and gives a lead to the various national movements.

Moreover, because of their stronger organisation and their resistance to shouldering the economic burdens of the war, the colonial people now begin to occupy the centre of the

world stage, not simply as peoples fighting for their national freedom, but as the front-line fighters in the struggle of all the exploited and oppressed to end the capitalist system and to advance towards Socialist peace and prosperity. In this new situation, the Indian people, and in particular the Indian working class, by their united stand against the war, have given a magnificent lead.

For India is the keystone of British Imperialism. Politically, strategically and economically, it is the pivot of the Empire, the foundation rock of a ruling class which is the most reactionary enemy of the international working class and which is now engaged in waging a war to preserve its colonial possessions and for more absolute world domination.

The fact that in India the imperialist system is faced with problems which it is unable to solve, throws upon the Indian people, and particularly upon the Indian working class, an international responsibility that they are showing themselves fully prepared to accept.

And as the burdens of war increase, the national struggle, not only in India but elsewhere, will grow in intensity, weakening the drive of British Imperialism to world domination and strengthening the fight for a new world freed from exploitation and war. This war which serves to sharpen the existing antagonisms and to increase the existing distress in the colonies, will, with extreme rapidity, draw remote and backward countries into the current of struggle for national emancipation and against the oppressors. All the experiences of twenty-five years are not forgotten; they are stored up for the struggles that lie ahead.

## LABOUR IMPERIALISM

For the peoples of the world these events in the colonies are of incalculable significance. What have the Labour Party leaders to say?

Nowhere is their complete betrayal of all Socialist principles more clearly shown than in their refusal to support India's demand for complete and immediate independence and their repudiation of the right of all peoples freely to determine their own futures. It is a far cry today from those days when, as in 1925, the General Council of the T.U.C. could roundly condemn imperialist exploitation and declare the right of all colonial people to complete separation.

For the Labour Party leaders have made it clear that they line themselves up completely behind the Viceroy in refusing India's demand for immediate independence. Like the Viceroy, they offer in the distant and shadowy future a meaningless fantasy called "Dominion Status" hedged in by vaguely specified conditions, reservations and safeguards. About the actual struggle in India, the mass arrests and the peoples' opposition to the war they say nothing.

For the colonial Empire, these Labour leaders have another question "solution"—they speak as though the "colonial question" can be solved by some form of International Commission of Control, perhaps an International Chartered Company to exploit the colonies on a grander scale, perhaps a League of Nations brought back to life to sanctify whatever form of joint imperialist rule the British and French ruling class dream of establishing after the war is over. But of freedom, not a word. All this vague talk about improving the Mandate system, of

reforming imperialism or of making the resources of the colonial countries available to all-comers, is purely reactionary and deceptive. So long as the monopoly-capitalist system, based as it is upon the exploitation of the Empire, remains unchallenged, so long no amount of “internationalisation” is going to have any effect other than to strengthen the hold of monopolies, to increase the degree of colonial exploitation and, because of the changing balance of forces within the capitalist countries, lead to fresh conflicts and imperialist wars.

## UNITY WITH THE COLONIAL PEOPLE

The people in the colonies themselves are not dumb. They have a voice and, since they know what it is to live under imperialist rule, their voice is one which deserves to be heard. They are claiming freedom to solve the problems which Britain has proved herself unable to solve for them.

For they have seen—and no power on earth can hide from them—the victorious liberation of the Tsar's colonies. They see that the once backward peoples of Asia have, with the practical aid and encouragement of the Russian Communist Party, stepped suddenly out of the dark ages of feudal and imperialist oppression into the bright light of Socialist prosperity, ever-expanding Socialist industry and undreamt-of advances in cultural life. The old myth of “backwardness” is exploded; the new prospect of rapid advance to prosperity through freedom and Socialism has become a flesh and blood reality to the exploited millions.

These facts are of tremendous importance today when the ruling class, still hoping to develop its attack upon the Soviet Union, has huge armies massed in the Near East.

There can be no freedom for the British people so long as we allow our ruling class to nourish itself upon the life-blood of the colonies. But now the struggle to end monopoly capitalism is on; the fight will grow sharper and more bitter as the war spreads and the burdens increase. We must seize this opportunity to forge links of practical unity with the subject peoples of the Empire and to afford them practical aid in our common fight. To lose this opportunity would be a crime against the working class.

We demand full and immediate independence for India and the right to frame her own constitution through a Constituent Assembly.

We declare the right of all peoples to full self-determination which implies the right of secession, and we repudiate the Labour Party's plan for international control of colonies which is only a cloak for more intensive imperialist exploitation.

We demand the release of all political prisoners, imprisoned for putting forward the economic, social and political demands of the people.

We demand the withdrawal of all repressive legislation introduced under the guise of defending the Empire from Hitler, and in particular full freedom of the Press, free speech and the right to organisation.

We declare that a war to preserve the system of imperialist exploitation cannot be in the interests of our people or of the people in the colonies. This system has brought misery and virtual slavery to hundreds of millions of people.

At a moment when we are being asked to tighten our own belts, we declare our complete support of the magnificent fight of the colonial working class to resist the lowering of their living standards in order to pay for the war.

We believe that in our struggle to put an end to this system which breeds poverty, unemployment and war, the working class of the world have the strongest and most powerful allies in the oppressed people of the British Empire.