

INDIA'S FIGHT AGAINST THE INDIA BILL

By M. MUZAFFAR

[*The following article is a continuation of the series¹ which was commenced in January this year on the significance and background of the British Government's new plan to maintain its enslavement of the Indian peoples as embodied in the Government of India Bill now before Parliament.*]

THE Parliamentary Joint Select Committee's Report on Indian constitutional "reforms" has been universally condemned in India. Not since the boycott of the Simon Commission has there been greater unanimity in India among the various political parties. The Indian National Congress, the Muslim League, the Hindu Mahasabha, the Liberal Federation, the Indian Merchants' Chamber, the Servants of India Society, and *all sections of the Labour Movement* have in no unmistakable terms condemned the Report and the India Bill which is based on that Report. *Only* the most reactionary feudal elements in India—the big landlords and the Princes do not look upon the India Bill in the same light. They, too, profess dissatisfaction with it, but that is because they want more safeguards and guarantees for themselves from the British Imperialists as the price of their support to an alien imperialism—at a time when ninety-nine per cent. of the Indian people have expressed their strong disapproval of the new imperialist scheme, and when agrarian discontent in India is directly threatening the very existence of these antiquated parasites.

But while it is true that no single political organisation in India is satisfied with the India Bill, the opposition to the Bill and to Imperialism has not yet reached the stage when it can force Imperialism to take back this measure, or even to revise it. The very fact that the British Government can go on with insolent disregard of Indian public opinion pushing this retrogressive measure through Parliament, proves that they believe and hope that in spite of vocal opposition to the Bill, neither in India nor in England is there any immediate prospect of a powerful pressure

¹The previous articles in this series were: *The New Deal in India* by Reginald Bridgeman, January, 1935; *The New Imperialist Strategy in India*, by Lester Hutchinson, February, 1935; *The Sixty-Six Per Cent. Background to the India Bill*, by Joan Beauchamp, March, 1935. Copies of each of these issues can be obtained from the Manager, THE LABOUR MONTHLY, 7 John Street, London, W.C.1.

being brought to bear on them by the largest organised opposition parties which still have a hold over large sections of the masses—the Indian National Congress, and the British Labour Party.

The New Tactics of the Congress

At the last Annual Session of the Congress held at Bombay in November, 1934, the White Paper scheme (which is the basis of the present Bill) was solemnly “rejected” by the Congress. But at the same session the Congress decided to participate in the elections to the Legislative Assembly, and abandon all “direct action” against Imperialist rule. This step was, of course, welcomed by British Imperialism; because even though they knew that the Congress leaders would not “fight” for India’s Independence except by “peaceful and legitimate means” as laid down in the Congress creed, still the experience of the last sixteen years clearly showed that mass movements led even by such people, had invariably developed into something more powerful and dangerous than what the Congress leaders or the Imperialists expected. The capture of Peshawar and Sholapur by the workers, the widespread peasant rebellions in all parts of the country, the mass strikes by the working class and non-payment of taxes by the peasants—all these things Imperialism cannot afford to see repeated again in India. The economic situation is far too critical; and a revolutionary crisis might develop at any moment which might threaten the very foundations of the present régime in India. Not only the Imperialists, but the Congress leaders are also afraid of such developments. Hence, their complete abandonment of all activity tending towards mass action, and hence the fact that they have embraced constitutionalism with such fervour and enthusiasm. As to Gandhi, he professes to have given up politics altogether; he is begging the Imperialist Government to help him with his Village “Uplift” work, and indignant Congressmen in the Legislative Assembly have asked the Government what possible “harm” could there be in Government officials helping the Mahatma—now that he has openly declared that he will devote himself uniquely to “social work”!

The recent debate in the Legislative Assembly over the Joint Select Committee’s Report very clearly shows the whole attitude of the Congress leaders towards the Indian struggle for independence. The following amendment was moved by Mr. Desai, the leader of the Congress Party in the Assembly:

This assembly is of opinion that the proposed scheme of Constitution for the Government of India is conceived in a spirit of imperialist domination and economic exploitation and transfers no real power to the people of India, and that the acceptance of such a constitution will retard instead of furthering the political and economic progress of India, and recommends to the Governor-General in Council to advise His

Majesty's Government not to proceed with any legislation based on the said scheme. (*Legislative Assembly Debates*, Feb. 1935).

But while our brave Congress leaders, comfortably sitting in the Assembly, talk about "imperialist domination and exploitation"—strong phrases to come out of the mouths of Congress leaders—one looks in vain in the speeches of these gentlemen for even a verbal declaration that they stand for the complete independence of India outside the British Empire, let alone as to how that independence is going to be achieved. They criticise the Report and want to reject it—but beyond that they do not want to go. No one with the slightest amount of common sense can believe that the British imperialists are going to be driven out of India by mere speeches in the Assembly—not even Dominion Status, not even partial demands can be conceded to us without mass struggle—this has been the experience in India as well as the experience in all other countries wherever people have striven against political or social tyranny and exploitation. The astute Congress leaders know this as well as anybody else. So that when the logical question is put to them : what is the next step after the rejection of the India Bill by the Assembly ; what is the further stage of the struggle against imperialism—and they in reply can profess only their utter helplessness to do anything—we know that this not only means the bankruptcy of their political leadership, but that it is a deliberate and conscious attempt on their part to retard, check, hinder and mislead the mass-struggle in India. Thus Mr. Desai concluded his speech by saying :

Even if we have not got power to compel the Government to grant what we desire or deserve we have certainly self-respect to repel what we do not want. (*Legislative Assembly Debates*, Feb. 1935).

The speeches of other leaders also end in the same hopeless strain : we are helpless against imperialism—so the only thing there is left for us to do is to console ourselves with the noble idea that we are preserving our "self-respect." Mr. M. A. Jinnah, the Mohammedan nationalist leader, also ended his speech in the same strain :

We may be helpless, but our self-respect demands that we tell you that we do not want this scheme. (*Legislative Assembly Debates*, Feb. 1935).

Pandit G. B. Pant, deputy leader of the Congress party, was pathetic in his confession. He appealed to the Government to realise :

That Congressmen as human beings would like to give up the life of sacrifices involving austerities . . . if they could find in the proposed scheme the hope of advance towards the goal the Congress had been working for. (*Legislative Assembly Debates*, Feb. 1935).

Mr. Shamlal, another Congress veteran from the Punjab, made the abject remark :

Even if we failed in the method of direct action the Congressmen will not compromise with evil. (*Legislative Assembly Debates*, Feb. 1935).

There is no wonder therefore that the Government spokesmen in the debate did not take the Congress speeches seriously. Sir Joseph Bore, a Member of the Viceroy's Council, characterised the Congress attitude towards the Bill as "*an empty meaningless and theatrical gesture.*" This impudent remark of an imperialist lackey was possible only because Congress leaders have abandoned *mass-struggle*; because they have no faith in the revolutionary actions of the Indian people; because they do not want to participate in the heroic struggle of the anti-imperialist fighters in India.

The Imperialist Government knows that in spite of their speeches rejecting the proposed scheme, the Congress leaders will work the "Reforms." What is the alternative to the India Bill? Call a Constituent Assembly, reply some of the Congress leaders. A Constituent Assembly, called by the British imperialists, which is going to frame a Constitution for India, involving the end of British rule! One has only to put the proposition in this way to realise how stupid and absurd it is. There is not the slightest doubt that Congress leaders know very well that the British Government is not going to hand over the reins of government to them in such a simple and easy manner. If that was possible, if imperialism could be persuaded to destroy itself, India would have been free a long time ago. The only possible motive which the Congress leaders can have in using this slogan is to deceive and delude the masses which still follow them, into believing that they stand for freedom; that they are fighting for the liberation of our country from its imperialist yoke.

The Congress Socialists

But what of the minority—the Congress Socialist Party? They have refused to participate in the elections to the Councils; they declare that they want to establish a Socialist State in India. Their leaders have even spoken about the necessity of a revolution. But what is their *method*? Do they fundamentally differ from their right-wing colleagues in the Congress? When the Working Committee of the Congress declared itself to be opposed to the idea of class-war and expressed its dissatisfaction with "loose talk" about it in the ranks of the Socialists, the Congress Socialist leaders issued a statement, wherein they said:

The symbol of faith of Congress is the achievement of Purna Swaraj, with the aid of legal and peaceful means. There is nothing in our programme which would in the least contradict this. We also want to win independence, and the very fact of our being in the Congress proves *the peaceful and legal means which we apply.* (My italics—M.M.) (*Bombay Chronicle*, Nov. 1934).

More recently when during the celebration of Independence Day on January 26 the Congress Working Committee proceeded to whittle

down the original Declaration of Independence³, which was couched in strong words to a mere pious affirmation in the cult of "non-violence in thought, word and deed," the Socialists objected to the change. They said that the Congress should adhere to its creed of striving after Purna Swaraj by every peaceful and legitimate means, and not aspire to reach the higher spiritual level of the pure Gandhian cult.

This incident is characteristic of the whole attitude of the Congress Socialists towards the anti-imperialist question. They criticise the Congress leadership up to a point, but when it is a question of following a real revolutionary line of anti-imperialist struggle we find them, in effect, doing exactly the same as the Right Wing of the Congress. The Congress Socialists want the "establishment of a Socialist Society," but not a Workers' and Peasants' Republic; they believe in class-war, but it is to be waged by "peaceful and legitimate means"; they are for "mass action," but not in "mass action culminating in a general strike and non-payment of taxes, rent and debt charges"—all this was made clear at the Second Session of their Party held last November at Bombay when revolutionary amendments were lost and the programme of the Socialist Party was finally passed.

The Class Character of the Congress

It is necessary to analyse the character of the Congress in order to understand its present defeatist vacillating and contradictory attitude. While the majority of the rank and file of Congressmen belong to the lower middle-class, lawyers, doctors, students, journalists, artisans, sections of peasantry and town poor, the leadership of that organisation is in the hands of the upper bourgeoisie who control the whole Congress machinery. The interests of this class are opposed to the British capitalist class and it wants the monopoly of the Indian market for itself to the exclusion of the British competitor. But there are certain difficulties in the way. Firstly, in order to fight with British Imperialism this class, the Indian bourgeoisie, needs the support of the Indian masses: workers, peasants, the petty bourgeoisie; but they cannot rely on this support because the masses once roused might not remain under their control and thus threaten the existence both of Imperialism and of the Indian bourgeoisie. Secondly, the Indian bourgeoisie is, to a very large extent, dependent on British finance capital,—so that it does not want a complete break from British capitalism. And, thirdly, the Indian bourgeoisie is closely connected with the landed feudal elements in India—so that it hesitates to declare itself in favour of the total abolition of feudalism. The Congress has again and again assured the Princes and the landlords

³This declaration was read out after the famous Independence resolution had been passed at the Lahore Congress in December, 1929.

that it will stand by them in case they are threatened with the expropriation of their lands.

The Indian bourgeoisie has therefore to pursue a most difficult course. Fearing the imperialists above, and trembling at the prospect of a revolution from below, it has to manœuvre always for a position in which it will *appear to be revolutionary*, and so be the leader of the national emancipatory movement ; but as far as real mass actions are concerned it hesitates a thousand times before it takes a single step forward. And very often the step forward is followed by two steps backwards, because situations develop when its position is threatened from below—when the masses begin to show ominous signs of independent action and independent leadership. The whole history of the Indian National Congress, and most recently its attitude towards the India Bill, is a proof of this.

The Anti-Imperialist United Front

The main problem, therefore, of the anti-imperialist struggle in India to-day is the regrouping of all the anti-imperialist elements under a new leadership—the leadership of a class whose interests, unlike those of the bourgeoisie, lie in carrying on a ceaseless struggle against imperialism until it is totally destroyed. This class is the working-class. And the working-class led by its Party, the Communist Party, can achieve this leadership only by correctly following the tactics of the united front. The rank and file Congressmen who are genuinely anti-imperialists ; the Congress Socialists who are dissatisfied with the present leadership of the Congress ; all those honest sections of the people who want to fight imperialism, but who are still in the ranks or under the influence of the Congress, are now standing at cross-roads—one leading towards Constitutionalism, reformism, inaction and defeat, the other towards mass action, revolution and victory—can be won over only if the revolutionaries in India, patiently and intelligently build up a wide-spread anti-imperialist united front, keeping their party and identity intact and adding to its strength by proving to the masses *through action* the correctness of their programme and the sincerity of their purpose.

This is the only way in which the challenge of the India Bill can be met by India. This is the only way in which India can advance towards freedom from British rule. The indications are that such a united front is being built up ; the great united front meeting on February the 7th in Bombay and similar meetings in all other parts of India ; the move towards unity in the Trade Union Movement ; the united front demonstrations against the banning of the Communist Party of India and other working-class organisations in Bombay and Calcutta ; all these events show that the working-class is closing its ranks to meet the imperialist offensive.