The Bournemouth Trade Union Congress

By Earl R. Browder

October 9, 1926

At the Bournemouth Trade Union Congress in 1925, at Scarborough, Mr. A. B. Swales, then president, said on the question of wages:

"There is a limit to the concessions that the unions can be forced to make, to a limit that has been reached; the time has come for re-establishment and improvement of standards of wages, hours, working conditions, and in fact for a joint attempt to give the trade union activity for the winning of a larger measure of economic democracy for the workers."

In quite a different spirit and form does Pugh deal with the question in his opening address at Bournemouth. A few quotations will show how Pugh paraquotes the American labor movement. In the 1912 "new wage policy" of the A. F. of L. adopted at Atlantic City (1912):

"They (the new conditions) require from us a new consciousness and determination to industrial cooperation; an industrial Chamber of Commerce ... for the practical realization of an American labor movement, for the growth of power of political democracy."

"The time has come to examine in the light of the new conditions, the whole basis and application of the traditional wage policy, and methods of determining wages which the A. F. of L. has been in the habit of applying."

"... A scientific wage policy requires to be thought out at length. A United States model set of principles ... must not be left to us to consider the principles of a new wage policy."

In the speeches of Hervin in the Congress, there was particularly to be heard the "American" note. "Industrial Democracy" was a word often and glibly on his tongue; labor banking and insurance were mentioned as available substitutes for struggle and solidarity. Listening to Bevin and some others at Bournemouth, one could almost believe himself suddenly transported across the Atlantic for a moment; these were echoes from the A. F. of L.

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Smashing a Tradition at Bournemouth

The new "scientific wage policy" mentioned by Mr. Pugh, which is to be "correlated to the index of productivity," is an obscure manner of stating what Mr. Baldwin, in his English, when he declared that all wages must be reduced. That is the policy adopted by the majority of the American labor movement. In the 1912 "new wage policy" of the A. F. of L. adopted at Atlantic City (1912):

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ley could adequately represent it as a supporter of the tradition of the British Trade Union Congress. When Bromley appeared, a minority delegate also rose, and demanded that someone else speak instead of Bromley. Immediately the Congress was in an ungainly position, with all the suppressed feelings against the betrayal of the General Strike and the miners to come to the surface. In vain did the gentleman from Bromley talk a proper order; his reading of the rules providing for expulsion of those guilty of disorder intensified the storm. When he ordered the ejection of some of the demonstrating delegates, half of them began to sing the Red Flag. Above the din rose the strong voice of a delegate, shouting: "You are letting a traitor speak to us. You are traitors, all of you; everyone on the platform."

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International Delegates—Present and Absent.

Representing the I. P. T. U. (Amsterdam) was J. W. Brown, one of the secretaries of that body. He made the same sort of a speech as that last year at Scarborough, but strangely enough, while last year he failed to get himself the General Council hundred, and of course he was absent from Congress, this year he seemed almost like a left-winger. He spoke of international unity; he quoted from Tomsky a declaration of the necessity for a single World International; and then he staled that he supported that view. He said that it was necessary to find immediate tasks upon which unity could find its beginning, laying down a list of courses of action. The American organizers who had attended the Congress, which was connected with the preparations for the war against the Soviet Union, demand unison resistance from the trade union movement. Both were adopted by large majorities.

British Unions Becoming Ripe for New Leadership.

The Congress made clear beyond question the bankruptcy of the General Council, including all of its former groupings. There is no essential difference between them and all are agents or prisoners of the bourgeois, its social institutions, its ideology. This leadership is incapable of conducting a struggle against capitalism, or even for the protection of past gains. But the masses are in a militant mood; they wish to fight to protect their standards of living. Already they are beginning to elect to the Congress men and women who stand for a fighting program. The American Trade Union Movement has united a million of such trade unionists already, and other millions are being swiftly brought to a new position. Out of this situation a new leadership must come to power in the British unions. But this can only be realized out of a sharp and relentless struggle against not only the brazen treachery of a Thomas, but also against the illusion of the so-called "left" that capitalizes to Thomas, against the illusions of the "new scientific wage theories" and the Americanized methods of class collaboration, and against all weaknesses in its own ranks.

And Where Was the Former "Left Wing"?

The so-called "left wing" in Congress was not evident in the Congress. It had no views on anything. Hicks addressed the Congress twice; first on the question of a certain method of curing tuberculosis, which he recommended to the entire trade union movement; and second, on a question concerning the building trades. On this last point, other building trades delegates denounced Hicks for having split the building trades federation and asked the Congress to take Hicks' resolution off the agenda because it should have been brought before the organization. The Congress did, to the discomfiture of Hicks, who was not noticed again until his name was mentioned as one of those who opposed the General Council. Purcell spoke on international unity; he was against a world congress. He said the I. P. T. U. feels that the split in the world movement is caused by Communist propaganda; that only the British unions were able to overcome that feeling, but the revolutionaries use such bad language that we can get nowhere; he still thought there was a possibility of changing the attitude of the I. P. T. U. and bringing the Russians into Amsterdam; but anyway a world congress would do no good. And that was the "Left Wing" of the General Council.

The Real Left Wing—the Minority Movement.

Throughout the Congress there was one group which had a militant fighting policy to offer the British trade unions on every point that was allowed to come before it. That was the group led by members of the Minority Movement. Every resolution on the agenda which dealt with the big problems of the movement, had a Minority Movement member as its sponsor and minority Movement members as the supporters from the floor. The leaders of the Minority Movement, who had been chided in the Congress by the rule of the General Council, immediately and wholeheartedly identified themselves with the telegram. Arthur Cook declared the following day that he "has a great deal sharper criticism even than Tomsky to direct against the General Council." From America arrived Mr. Hutchinson, representing the A. F. of L. He apologized for the absence of the other A. F. of L. His group had voted against the division, and outraged every one of their instincts of bourgeois decency. Also they withdrew their support of the Denver Delegation. Here was an echo from the rumblings among the masses.

The telegram from the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions was distributed to the delegates on September 9, the fourth day of Congress. It was the reply of the General Council, which declared that the telegram "abused the ordinary courtesies expected of fraternal delegates," that the General Council has no intention of replying to this ill-instructed and presumpitous criticism." The capitalist daily press took up the cudgels for the General Council, and the long leading editorials attempted to whip up indignation in the Congress against the "incredible interference in British trade union affairs." On the whole, however, the Congress received the telegram in a very thoughtful mood. The attempted outbursts by a few delegates received little encouragement and fell flat. Everyone had the feeling, even those who supported the General Council, that this document was the only one in the whole Congress which boldly dealt with the real problems of the British working class. The millions organized workers in the Minority Movement, whose voice had been choked off in the Congress by the rule of the General Council, immediately and wholeheartedly identified themselves with the telegram.

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The continued decline of the British capitalist economy inevitably forces new struggles upon the British proletariat, so will the new leadership rise to power in the British unions. It will be a difficult and painful process; only the first steps were taken at Bournemouth. These must be followed up swiftly, determinately. The entire revolutionary trade union movement of the world must study the British problems closely and carefully, and render all possible assistance to the British comrades in their great and tremendously important task.