

The Employers' Offensive and How to Meet It

THE Labour unrest amongst the workers is undoubtedly growing and even the capitalist press is looking forward to the possibility of heavy struggles before the year is over. In some quarters of the Labour Movement the situation is being compared to that existing between the Armistice and Black Friday, when the organised workers were full of fight and pressing forward everywhere for increases in their wages. There is indeed a superficial resemblance between the present situation and that existing prior to Black Friday. Nevertheless, they are not altogether similar.

During the years between 1919-1921, the situation was on the whole favourable to the workers. Unemployment over most of this period was almost non-existent. Not only the workers but even the employers for a time had an exaggerated idea of the strength of the Labour Movement. The employers during this period were everywhere on the retreat being prepared to grant temporary concessions lest worse should befall them. That section of the Labour leadership which is most closely in touch with the employers, and which normally acts as a channel for the expression of the opinions of the employing class in the Labour Movement, devoted most of its strength to breaking the full force of the workers' drive by taking steps to discourage mass movements and by strongly urging the workers to participate in Joint Councils, etc., with the employers, and so raise their standard of life without indulging in mass struggle.

EMPLOYERS PREPARING ATTACK.

The situation to-day is somewhat different. There are still over a million unemployed, and the strength of the unions is not nearly so great as it was previous to Black Friday. Although the workers in the principal industries are demanding increases in wages, the employers are not prepared to give ground, even temporarily, as they were in the years immediately following the Armistice. So far from giving ground, the employers, under the pressure of foreign competition, are moving forward to attack the wages and conditions of the workers.

The metal workers' application for an increase in wages has been turned down, the National Wages Board will probably refuse

to consider the All-Grades Programme of the N.U.R. as a whole, while the mineowners at the present moment are openly scouting the possibility of any increase in wages to the miners.

In this situation the right-wing trade union leaders are working desperately to prevent the unity of the working class in the struggle. At every possible opportunity they are fulminating against the Minority Movement, and its efforts to secure unity. They are not acting as in 1919-20 to prevent the workers' full strength being exerted against the capitalists in retreat, but are endeavouring to demoralise the working class to such an extent that the capitalists will be able to get their blow in before the workers are ready and to gain a smashing victory.

NO LEFT LEAD.

In this situation no lead is coming to the workers from any trade union officials, with the possible exception of Mr. A. J. Cook. While the right wing have been vocal in their attacks on the Minority Movement, the trade union leaders of "Left" tendencies on the General Council and elsewhere have not given any lead to the workers as to what they should do in the impending struggles.

There is no doubt that the "left-wing" union leaders are working fairly hard in other directions. They are pushing forward the idea of international unity, they are endeavouring to bring about more union amalgamations, and to give the trades councils a more definite status in the Labour Movement. Left-wing leadership, however, cannot concern itself purely with question as to how the trade union movement should be organised to-morrow. It must face the struggle as it is developing to-day, and give the working class the lead in that struggle. It is a grave weakness for the left-wing to remain silent when issues of capital importance are before the working class.

It is true that, if any of the left-wing leaders, either through the General Council, or, as individuals, ventured to make any suggestions as to how to deal with the situation confronting the workers at the present time, their action would be widely resented by large numbers of trade union officials.

The tradition which exists among the trade union leadership that each official should look after his own union and leave the business of other unions to be conducted by the properly elected officials, is still very strong in the British Labour Movement. It is, nevertheless, an evil tradition and must be fought against. We have passed the stage when each union could consider its special problems in isolation from all others. We have reached the

stage when the situation demands that the position of the working class movement in relation to its struggle against capitalism should be considered as a whole, and it is, therefore, to be hoped that the silence of the left-wing as to what should be done in the impending struggles will soon be broken.

THE RANK AND FILE OUTLOOK.

Among the rank and file there is seething discontent. It is, however, unlike the discontent of 1919-20. The discontent of 1919-20 was a discontent mixed with hope; one might almost say with an exaggerated faith in the power of labour organisation to extract concessions from the employing class. The discontent existing at the present time is a discontent mixed with pessimism. The defeats following Black Friday have had their effect. However great the worker is in rebellion against existing conditions, he feels that his union and all the unions in his industry are much weaker than they were and the chance of gaining concessions by isolated action is almost nil.

The problem before those who desire to see effective struggle on the part of the working class is how to dispel the pessimism which exists among the discontented workers. We believe that it is possible to dispel this pessimism, if we can convince the workers that while they are weak acting in isolation they can be strong if they combine their movements against the capitalist class. In this connection the efforts of the Minority Movement to put before the discontented workers a practical method of struggle is of the very highest importance. Briefly, the principles of the Minority Movement are, that the large industries which are putting in a demand for higher wages should combine their forces and take strike action at the same time, giving each other a mutual guarantee that no section shall make an agreement until all have been satisfied. It would, of course, have been better from the theoretical point of view to have had the main industries striking together for the same common demand, and if we were facing a situation which had not yet been developed, and where we could influence the character of the demands as well as the character of the organisation to secure those demands, there would be good grounds for advocating a common wage claim as well as common action to secure the demands.

However, we have got to take the trade union machinery as it is, and as the demands have already been formulated and the likelihood of their being revised is remote, we have got to concentrate all our power upon securing common action on behalf of the demands already formulated.

THE MINORITY PLAN.

In pursuance of this plan, the Minority Movement has written to the General Council of the Trades Union Congress asking them to take steps to bring the mining, railway and metal unions together for a common struggle. It has also written the Executives of these Unions asking them to take similar steps. The Minority Movement realised, however, that its plan of campaign is unlikely to be realised unless great popular pressure can be exerted upon the officials. When aggressive action is in question, the average trade union official is a follower rather than a leader and will not take any steps off the beaten path unless he is convinced that there is an overwhelming weight of rank and file opinion in favour of those steps. The Minority Movement is, therefore, suggesting that the rank and file should get busy in the districts, form local solidarity committees of miners, railwaymen and metal workers, which shall popularise the idea of joint action. These local committees will endeavour particularly to interest the District Committees of the unions concerned.

WHAT TRADES COUNCILS CAN DO.

In past industrial crises it has been exceedingly difficult for the rank and file to exert their full weight in bringing pressure upon the officials. They have now, however, an opportunity which they never previously had. That opportunity is afforded by the Conferences of Trades Councils which are going to take place all over the country. These trades councils conferences have been called by the General Council to discuss the relations of the trades councils to the general Labour movement, and current trade union problems.

These Conferences must not, however, degenerate into conferences discussing purely organisational questions. The trades councils must use their influence to bring pressure upon the leaders to line the workers up for united action against the capitalist class. From their very structure, the trades councils representing, as they do, all sections of the working class are well qualified for this task.

It will be claimed, of course, that the question of mobilising the workers for the struggle does not come within the purview of the trades councils, but is purely a question for the individual trade unions. The trades councils delegates would, however, be well advised to treat this point of view as a sectional and departmentalist one which cannot be countenanced at the present stage when the whole working class is menaced by the power and

aggressiveness of the capitalist class. They must put in the forefront of their tasks the question of how united action can be secured and, secondly, the relations of the struggle going on at home to the struggles abroad.

The employing class have asserted that they are faced with intensified competition abroad, and that the only way out is to lower wages. No trade unionist will accept the employers' way out, but they will have to face the fact that the employers' statements about intensified competition is in the main correct, and if they reject the employers' way out they will have to find the working class way out. The working class way out is via international trade union unity, and the struggle against the Dawes Plan which is now having, as the Communist Party predicted months ago, detrimental effects on the working class standard of life. The work of preparing the workers for struggle through the unions, the local solidarity committees of the trades councils, is one which calls for better organisation among the active rank and file.

The Communist Party has very responsible work to accomplish in the present situation. Last autumn it predicted the development of heavy industrial trouble, and clearly outlined the steps that the workers should take to meet that trouble. It is our belief that the policy put forward by the Communist Party is the only policy which can meet the situation. That policy has to be driven home to the workers by every Party member. Where sympathisers are supporting the Party in the trade union branches and are not prepared to come into the Party as members, endeavours should be made to organise them in a minority group linked up with the National Minority Movement. The factory groups must be developed as speedily as possible because the Party message must be carried not merely to the active men in the trade union branches, but also to the masses in the workshops who never go near a trade union branch. In this connection the development of factory papers, the holding of factory gate meetings, has become a matter of immediate practical importance.

In a period of industrial struggle like this, the C.P. above all other parties, will be able by its leadership and the devotion of its members in the actual struggle to prove that it is the real Party of the working class capable of leading them to victory.

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