

From Minority to Majority

THE SCARBOROUGH CONFERENCE AND AFTERWARDS

By J. R. CAMPBELL

NOTHING could better illustrate the growth of Left-wing opinion in the British trade union movement than the tremendously successful conference held by the Minority Movement on the eve of the British Trades Union Congress. At the inaugural conference of the Minority Movement held twelve months ago, 280 delegates were present. At this year's conference, 613 delegates were present, amongst them being delegates from fifty of the leading Trades Councils of the country.

The growth of the Minority Movement is due largely to its correct understanding of the situation through which the British trade union movement is passing.

While the Right-wing leaders were preaching about the blessing of industrial peace, the Minority Movement was warning the workers about the impending capitalist offensive. Moreover, long before the project of the industrial alliance took shape in the mind of any trade union leader, the Minority Movement was advocating the unity of the workers in the four main industries: metal, mining, railways and transport, in preparation for the struggle. Further, it has consistently advocated more power to the General Council since its formation.

When the employers put forward their demands for lower wages, when the miners were faced with the alternative of fighting or accepting starvation conditions, it was recognised that the only practical policy which the workers could adopt was that which had been consistently advocated by the Minority Movement. The fact that the victory of "Red Friday" was likely to stimulate the Minority Movement was instantly perceived by Mr. J. R. MacDonald. The success of the Minority Conference confirmed his opinion.

The Minority Demands.

It is worth while noting the principal decisions of the Minority Conference, and their subsequent effect on the Trades Union Congress.

The Minority Movement asked the Trades Union Congress

(1) To prepare for the united struggle of the workers by starting a campaign for factory committees.

(2) By allowing the Trades Councils to affiliate to the Trades Union Congress.

(3) By intensifying the struggle for amalgamation on industrial lines.

(4) Giving extended powers to the General Council.

On international questions, it asked the Trades Union Congress to stand for—

(1) International Unity.

(2) The annulment of the Dawes Plan.

(3) A joint movement with the colonial peoples against imperialism.

The Minority Movement undoubtedly was helped in getting consideration for its point of view for two reasons. First, as a result of its intensive effort prior to the conference it had many Minority resolutions on the agenda. Second, the presence of a somewhat larger Communist fraction at the conference and the general Leftward tendency of the workers. These two factors constituted the main advantages of the Left-wing.

On the other hand, the Right-wing were reinforced by the presence of several influential Right-wing leaders, who had been unable to be present at the previous Congress owing to their membership of the Labour Cabinet.

The Left Leaders' Attitude.

The conference opened well for the Left by a stirring speech from the chairman, A. B. Swales. The time for conceding reductions in wages, he urged, had gone; we must prepare to advance. The need for greater powers to the General Council, more effective union organisation, co-operation with the Trades Councils, International Trade Union Unity, and no class collaboration—all were touched upon.

It seemed as if the speech was a clarion call to the Left-wing to give battle to the Right. As a matter of fact, it was almost the sole contribution which any of the Left-wing leaders associated with the General Council made to the business of the Congress. The other Left-wing leaders were silent in face of a well organised Right-wing. As a consequence, the burden of upholding the Left-wing policy fell upon the Communist fraction and the Minority Movement sympathisers, and right well they fulfilled their task.

More Power to General Council.

The first big fight arose out of a Minority Movement resolution calling for extended power to the General Council of the T.U.C. This was moved by two delegates from

small unions, but was sharply opposed by the Compositors, whose arguments were of a purely craft character. Their spokesman, Mr. Naylor, failed to appreciate the fact that the position of his union was an exceptional one, and that no analogy could be drawn from it to the position of other unions.

We can understand Mr. Naylor's position. It is the frankly selfish one of "to hell with you, Jack, I'm all right." But what can we say of the position of Mr. Clynes (representing badly-paid unskilled labourers), of Mr. Brownlie (representing Metal Workers whose wages are below pre-war), and Mr. Thomas (representing large numbers of railwaymen with wages around 50s. per week? None of those gentlemen were in a position to argue that his union could win better conditions without the assistance of other unions. Yet they all pleaded for delay, for more consideration, etc.

Cook, alone of the prominent leaders in the union movement, supported the immediate granting of more power to the General Council. The other Left leaders remained silent. Finally, the matter was referred to the new General Council to report on to a subsequent meeting of the Executives of the Unions. It is delay, but not defeat, if the Party and Minority Movement rally the workers in favour of the proposal in the interval.

One Big Union.

The next big resolution which the Congress discussed, was one advocating One Big Union. The capitalist press described this as a "Red" resolution. It was nothing of the kind. It was a resolution typifying the sectionalism of the leaders of the unskilled workers.

The advocacy of One Big Union and the statement that the General Workers Unions are the nucleus of the One Big Union is the stock-in-trade of those leaders. It enables them to poach for members in every industry under the pretext that they are furthering working class progress towards a general consolidation of the ranks, and it gives them an excuse for preventing the unskilled workers in any industry from being absorbed through the amalgamation of existing unions on the lines of One Union for each industry.

The hypocritical character of the resolution was illustrated by the fact that it was moved by the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, whose leader, Mr. J. R. Clynes, opposed the day previously the more modest proposal of giving more power to the General Council. Mr. Naylor, of the Compositors, rehashed the old craft union arguments against this resolutions, which brought several Left-wingers in to defend the principle of unity. Finally,

both the resolution and the craft union amendment were defeated.

Factory Committees.

The resolution on More Power to the General Council which had been referred to the incoming General Council to report upon, was the first Minority resolution to be considered. The second Minority resolution was that on Shop Committees. This resolution declared that "the trade union movement must organise to prepare the trade unions in conjunction with the Party of the workers to struggle for the overthrow of capitalism." (The overthrow of capitalism, be it noted, not its transformation "by Parliamentary means, and in progressive stages," à la the crawling "gradualists" of the Labour Party E.C.)

It proceeds to warn the workers against class collaboration schemes and co-partnership, and considers that "strong, well organised shop committees are indispensable weapons in the struggle to force the capitalists to relinquish their grip on industry, and, therefore, pledges itself to do all in its power to develop and strengthen workshop organisation."

The resolution contains three essential ideas.

(1) That the trade unions are called upon to play a positive role in the struggle to overthrow capitalism. They are called upon to use their organised power to overthrow the capitalist class and set up a workers' government, and not merely to be the passive financial supporters of a reformist Labour Party.

(2) In this struggle of the unions, schemes of co-partnership, National Alliances of Employers and Employed are a trap for the workers.

(3) The workers must unite in the factories as the necessary basis of class unity, and the General Council must actively assist in the development of committees in the factories.

The Minority Movement supporters who spoke in favour of this resolution made no effort to conceal its revolutionary implications. The only Right-wing leader who spoke against it was Mr. Sexton. Most of the other Right-wing leaders were committed to vote for it by the decision of the delegates of their unions.

International Unity.

Equally significant was the carrying of the resolution in international unity which reads:

"This Congress records appreciation of the General Council's efforts to promote international unity, and urges the incoming General Council to do everything in their power to securing world-wide unity of the trade

union movement by an all-inclusive international federation of trade unions."

In this resolution it will be noted that it is no longer a question of securing the entry of the Russian unions into Amsterdam, but securing the unity of the trade union movement of the world. There is no restriction on the British unions going outside the Amsterdam machinery and using the Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee as a unifying factor. This was made perfectly clear by comrade Sam Elsbury, who moved the resolution, which was carried unanimously.

The Congress was equally emphatic in declaring for an international struggle against the Dawes Plan. It showed manifest impatience with those who tried to square the idea of reparations with the international interests of the working class. This decision was a blow at the Right-wing of the Labour Party, which, when in office, endorsed the Dawes Plan without the consent of the Labour Party and the trade unions.

This decision was defended at the time on the grounds of expediency, or, as the pseudo-Marxist whitewashers of the Labour Government put it, "the relation of class forces." The Labour Party E.C. is, however, endeavouring to carry the process a stage further by defending the Dawes Plan in principle, describing it in one of its resolutions to be submitted to the Labour Party Conference as "the application of continuous and impartial arbitration to the reparations problem." The Labour Party Conference, let us hope, will have followed the Trade Union Congress before these lines appear in repudiating this fatuous "statesmanship."

The last big fight of the Conference was around the Minority Movement resolution on Imperialism, in decisively carrying which the Congress delivered a smashing blow at the Labour Imperialists, both of the Left and Right variety. Some of the former have chosen to regard the resolution as differing from the "smash the Empire propaganda of the Minority Movement." If the granting of the right "of self-determination, including the right to chose independence" is not smashing the Empire, words have no meaning.

Congress Results.

Of the measures suggested by the Minority Movement to the Congress as a means of preparing the working class for the struggle, the Congress—

- (1) Carried Factory Committees.
- (2) Ruled the question of the affiliation of the Trades Councils out of order.
- (3) Did not discuss the question of amalgamation on industrial lines.

- (4) Referred back the question of extended powers to the General Council for fuller consideration, and agreed to,
- (5) International Unity.
- (6) The repudiation of the Dawes Plan, and
- (7) The fight against Imperialism.

The Congress on the whole trod the path of the class struggle, by adopting some of the leading aims of the Minority Movement. The really significant thing about the struggle waged around those aims was, that it was led, not by the Left-wing trade union leaders who are so much in the public eye at present, but by the lesser known leaders directly associated with the Minority Movement.

The result of the Congress imposes fresh tasks on the Minority Movement.

It must begin right now to carry on an intensive propaganda to ensure that the decisions which were taken by the Congress do not remain a dead letter.

It must define in clear organisational terms what it means by "more power" to the General Council. Many Left-wingers who believed in this slogan when it was merely an agitational slogan are beginning to manifest signs of uncertainty now that the time has come to translate it into workable proposals.

It must continue to fight for the Industrial Alliance, recognising the possibility that while all the unions may not be prepared to concede extended powers to the General Council (except in a special emergency) some of the big unions may be ripe for an alliance.

It must, on the basis of the resolution on factory committees passed at Congress, get the Trades Councils to carry on an agitation for the setting up of factory committees and a hundred per cent. trade unionism.

It should undertake a campaign for increasing its individual membership, especially in those districts and unions where it is yet weak.

Those tasks of the Minority Movement will be facilitated if the present effort of the Communist Party to increase its numbers brings concrete results.

Influence on International Labour.

The decision of the Congress on International Unity should strengthen the drift of the Social-Democratic workers on the Continent towards International Trade Union Unity, and a more favourable attitude to Soviet Russia. This drift has been especially pronounced of late as a result of the investigations of workers' delegations to Soviet Russia from Belgium, Germany, France and the Scandinavian countries.

Already, the Norwegian trade unions have taken a stand similar to that of the British unions. The Left-wing is growing and gaining influence in the trade union movement in Belgium and Germany.

But more significant still are the recent developments in France. The French trade union movement was split, as a result of reformist intrigues in 1922, into two trade union centres, the C.G.T.U. (which is under Communist influence) and the C.G.T. (which is under the influence of a particularly vicious set of reformist leaders led by the notorious Jouhaux). The C.G.T.U. is the larger organisation of the two, though matters have been evened up somewhat by the adhesion of the Teachers' Union to the reformist organisation.

The C.G.T.U. has been in favour of healing the division by calling an all-in conference of the affiliated organisations adhering to both organisations. This the C.G.T. has been always unwilling to do, fearing that it would be outnumbered. It has, therefore, advocated the policy of the membership of the C.G.T.U. coming into the reformist organisation.

Both organisations held their conference in Paris at the same time this year, and from the beginning of the C.G.T. conference it was clear that there was a keen Left-wing at the conference. After some discussion, the Congress decided to hear a delegation from the C.G.T.U. conference present their case for unity. The influence of the Right-wing leaders was strong enough to prevent the conference from breaking away from its previous attitude, but there is no doubt that the Left-wing in the French reformist unions is growing, and that in its struggle for unity it is inspired by the international attitude of the British trade union movement.

At a unity conference held subsequently in Paris, over a hundred branches belonging to the reformist unions associated themselves with the representatives of the C.G.T.U. and the independent unions in the planning of a campaign to realise Trade Union Unity in France.

Thus the Left-ward moving tendency of the British unions is having great influence for good not merely in Great Britain, but all over the world. It is for the rank and file trade unionists to ensure that this Left-ward tendency is not weakened by the Right-wingers who were elected to the General Council at the last Trade Union Congress. This they can best do by building the Communist Party and the Minority Movement.