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"Laborism" Triumphant?

SILENTLY, relentlessly, class war convulses England. "Civil Peace" does not prevail, nor are the unions acquiescent to government dictation, as in Germany. British labor is not simply fighting to retain the rights threatened by war measures; it is consciously and unconsciously fighting to secure a part, a dominant part if possible, in the government of the nation.

The strike of 200,000 miners in Wales, their triumph over the government and its Munitions Act. demonstrate the acute character of the struggle and the power of labor. That Hervè should characterize the strike as "treason not only against England, but against France and the rest of the Allies," proves his war-mania, but does not alter the central fact: *the strike was directly caused by the mine operators' desire to starve the workers and crush their organization, The National Federation of Miners.* This was in line with the policy of the whole Capitalist Class of England, which is using the war as an opportunity to deprive the workers of the rights and power secured by the struggles of many years. The miners showed their "treason" by making 217,000 enlistments, 20 per cent. of the total recruits and 50 per cent. of the miners of military age, according to Prime Minister Asquith himself; while the mine operators showed their "patriotism" by selling coal to the people and the government at prices that have aroused universal protest. Fortunes are made, while the workers starve and the nation trembles.

The miners gave the operators three months' notice of the intention to strike if their demands were not granted. The operators used the war as a pretext to deny the miners the right of making new agreements in April. The miners demanded an increase in wages to meet the high cost of living, and pointed out the damning fact that the operators were making profits of 50 per cent. to 100 per cent. A member of the London County Council characterized the finance of the mine owners as "robbery," and said that one of the companies which had offered him shares was paying dividends of 50 per cent., and expected to pay 100 per cent. dividends for 1915. According to Sir Arthur Markham, "the price of coal in Wales has now been advanced by from 70 per cent. to 100 per cent., but the miners in the meantime have not received a penny increase in wages."

The original demands of the miners included nothing of a political nature; but when the government threatened them with the Munitions Act, which makes striking a heavily punishable offense, they demanded that the Act should not apply to them. The first time this Act was applied was against the miners, and failed utterly of its purpose. The government met defeat, as it met defeat in the Clyde strike.

The coalition government was organized chiefly for the purpose of putting through the Munitions Act and the National Register Bill. The passage of the Act was preceded by a tremendous and vicious

agitation against labor. Lord Landsdowne, secretary for war during the early stages of the Spoilation of the Boers, in a speech in the House of Lords last March emphasized two points, and only two: *the urgent need for further statutory safeguards for employers' profits, and the government's duty to deal sternly, fearlessly with discontented workers—"the enemy within our gates."*

The Munitions Act was intended to meet the situation in the interests of the Capitalist Class and the National Defense, and aroused labor protest everywhere. *Justice* criticized it caustically:

"One of the reasons which always, and with some reason, has been put forward in defense of the British domination in Egypt is that we have done away with the forced labor or Corvée of the Fellaheen. . . But now our government, with its slap-dash tyranny, has introduced here the Turkish Corvée of Egypt for the benefit of English workers. . . This Munitions Act, as it stands, places the workers of Great Britain at the mercy of the class which dominates us to an extent not yet fully understood."

The passage of the Act was preceded by an event of great significance. This was the consultation on the munitions problem between representatives of the unions and Lloyd George, who took these men into his confidence. About the meaning of this event the *Labour Leader* is specific:

"The Trade Unions may be congratulated on their sudden recognition as a Fourth Estate. For that is what it really means, at least in Labor affairs. We shall see if the Trade Unions will have the strength to maintain the greatness which has been thrust upon them."

The whole situation provides an opportunity, a magnificent opportunity, for British "Laborism" to secure recognition as a part of the governing class. This is not clearly stated by the *Labour Leader,* but the implication is obvious:

"It will be some months yet before it is finally decided whether Trade Unionism will emerge from this war having won its rightful place in industry or whether it will sink into the permanent destitution of Lazarus at the rich man's table. We have no hesitation in saying that Trade Unionism has an opportunity just now which may mean the saving of this country from the heavy penalties of peace. If the Trade Unions drift as they have been drifting since last August, then the opportunity will be lost. Then we may expect the advent of forced labor and the long night of the servile State."

A few days prior to the miner's strike, J. H. Thomas, M. P., and assistant secretary of the National Union of Railway Men, warned the government that labor would revolt if all efforts were not directed toward defeating the enemy:

"I therefore say to those in authority: Stop this fooling. It is senseless talking to workers about unity unless you set the example yourselves.

"You passed the Defence of the Realm act and also the Munitions act with a view to bringing to the work of the country all sections of people. Apply the principles and penalties of those acts to the top as well as to the bottom.

"Having spoken quite plainly and fearlessly of what I know to be the feeling of large masses in the country, I still say that the war is so important, the issues involved so vital to the future of democracy, that I would say to the workers: 'Let us continue to set these people the example. Let us continue to give of our best, so that when the history of the war is written, and, I hope, victory recorded, it will never be said that the working classes of this country failed to respond to their duties and responsibilities.'

"If those who are paid to run the nation fail to realize their duty, you may depend upon it the time is not far distant when the workers themselves will rise in revolt."

The indications now are that the war will leave the working class, as represented in organized "Laborism," stronger economically and politically, than any other class in England. The working class has the power and seems intent upon using it for its own class advantage. But there is nothing revolutionary about the workers of England. Their purposes are defined along strictly nationalistic lines; they seek a position of dominance *within the nation* and for conservative purposes. Yet it is one of the momentous social phenomena of the war—momentous in the measure that "Laborism" triumps in its ends.

LOUIS C. FRAINA.

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