

IS ENGLAND HEADING TOWARD REVOLUTION?¹

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[THIS analysis of the British general strike, which we imagine may prove in retrospect the most important historical event of the year in England, probably errs on the alarmist side as much as the self-congratulatory accounts that reach the general reader err in the opposite direction; but it is an interpretation worth weighing.]

¹ From the *Labour Monthly* (London Communist review), *June*

EVERY prediction, policy, and warning of the revolutionaries has been justified by the events of May. The Government's nine months of preparations have led to the inevitable and provoked conflict between the entire organized strength of capitalism and the working class in Britain, which the reformist labor leaders refused either to foresee or to prepare for, and proved unable to conduct. This conflict has proved the

first great mass struggle between the united working class and the ruling class since the days of Chartism, and the opening of a new revolutionary era in Britain.

The bourgeoisie believe that by their victory the revolution is henceforth killed in this country. They fail to see that the exact opposite is the case, and that the events of the past month are the greatest mass-revolutionary lesson in British history. In this conflict the forms of democracy have been flung to the winds, and the naked force of the State has been revealed in action against the working class. The unhesitating solidarity, enthusiasm, and fighting energy of the workers in response have been the triumphant vindication of the working class, and the guaranty of future victory, and have proved the truth of the revolutionary contention that the masses in Britain are already far in advance, in class instinct and revolutionary courage, of their backward leaders.

That this first stage of the new revolutionary battle of the British workers should have been lost and betrayed by the collapse of the reformist leadership was inevitable. But the lesson will be learned. Even the bitter experience of defeat is an essential part of the learning of the revolutionary task. The crimes, follies, and treacheries of the reformist leadership are paid for in the blood of the workers. It is a heavy price. But the fight goes on; the miners already have shown the way. The way forward lies, not through weakening or abandonment of the struggle, but through renewed struggle, stronger unity, new leadership, new fighting methods, to pit stronger force against the force of the capitalist class and the State. The battle to-day is centred in the miners' struggle, and in the fight against reprisals on the working class. And from henceforth the whole domi-

nating thought and will of every class-conscious worker is fixed with relentless determination on the supreme aim — Next Time!

The bourgeoisie are shouting loudly that the revolution is henceforth dead in this country, that it has no future in the English-speaking world, that parliamentary government is saved. Their cries would be more convincing if they did not shout so loud. It would not have occurred to the English bourgeoisie of fifty years ago to trumpet across the columns of every newspaper and the headlines of every political speech that they were still alive, and not yet overthrown. Their clamor betrays the measure of their fear; and their very asseverations that it can never occur again reveal their uneasy consciousness that it is only too certain to occur again, in a very much more serious form. The future in Britain depends, not on imaginary questions of national psychology, but on objective conditions.

The continuing crisis in Britain makes certain the recurrence of the struggle on a more intense scale. The past fifteen years have witnessed a continuous series of ever-enlarging conflicts between capitalism and the working class, not only because of the increasing concentration of organization on each side, and the growth of class-consciousness, but also because of the capitalist decline in Britain under the inescapable pressure of the worsening economic situation, which is driving the capitalists to launch ever-renewed attacks on the workers' standards of living, and the workers to awaken to more fundamental issues. All these conditions continue to-day, and in an aggravated form. The late strike, far from being the culminating point, marks the transition from the old local labor conflicts to a new and broader mass struggle, which irre-

sistibly carries us toward revolution.

The new feature of 1926 was that for the first time the battle was directly between the capitalist State and the whole working class. From this to conscious revolution is an inevitable step. It is because they know this that the bourgeoisie are concentrating all their force on preparing for this future struggle, and are endeavoring to use the moment of victory to shackle the working-class movement for the future, to introduce new legislation, to make the general strike illegal, and in every way by process of law to stave off the inevitable. In obedience to their masters, the Right Wing leaders are proclaiming that the general strike can never happen again, and are making 'Never Again' the moral of 1926. Certainly the general strike can never happen again in the same form, with the workers' forces shackled and bound by a leadership which did not believe in the struggle, and lulled by the opiate of a tradition of passive economic weapons suitable only to the old condition of the sectional trade-union struggle. When the general strike comes again, it will come with new leadership, a clearer aim, more active fighting methods, a hundred times stronger, not merely to show the passive strength of the workers, but to strike a blow at the seat of bourgeois power.

The general strike was the inevitable outcome of the whole previous development of the class conflict in Britain. An understanding of this fact is necessary for any discussion of the problems it has created. By common agreement the old sectional trade-union struggle had reached a point at which it could develop no further along the existing lines. The concentration of organization had already made every important industrial conflict a national conflict in each industry, and, therefore,

from the beginning of the twentieth century, has increasingly involved the direct intervention of the State in every important industrial dispute. For the past twenty years every big industrial combat has been, in fact, more and more visibly, a political combat.

What hastened the whole process after the war was that the capitalist decline of Britain began rapidly to affect adversely just those skilled operatives and mechanics and workers in heavy industry who had been once the 'aristocracy' of labor and the backbone of the old reformist trade-unionism. This capitalist decline, unemployment, and 'bad trade,' knocked the bottom out of the old bargaining basis of trade-unionism. The trade-unions in the basic industries, in mining and in engineering, found that there was no basis left on which to bargain, and that, unless they were prepared to fight for fundamental changes in the organization of industry and to attack capitalist ownership itself, they could not even fight to maintain, let alone improve, the standards of their members. From that moment reformism in the British Labor movement was doomed. The daily wage struggle had become in fact a revolutionary struggle and a political struggle. The workers could only advance as a class against the whole capitalist class. The battle for daily needs, which had once been the pillar of Liberalism, was now the driving force to revolution. The stronger organization and concentration of the capitalists, shown dramatically in such bodies as the Federation of British Industries, and the skillful combined strategy of the wage offensive of 1921-24, drove the lesson home.

At the same time the workers threw themselves into the political struggle. Already the mass agitation against the war on Soviet Russia, which had

forced into being the Council of Action in 1920, had shown the complete blending of the political and industrial struggle, natural and instinctive to the masses, but fatally detrimental to the fig leaves of constitutionalism of the conservative trade-union leaders. The workers came forward in millions to vote under the banner of the Labor Party, which held out the objective of a Labor Government and of Socialism. But here the vicious tradition of reformism, which insists on a complete separation of the political and industrial worlds, and on keeping the political and industrial struggles in water-tight compartments, defeated the efforts of the workers. The conception of the political contest, not as a synthesis of the whole class conflict, but as a part of the old parliamentary game, actually claiming to have no class basis and completely divorced from the daily struggle of the workers, found its logical expression in the MacDonald Labor Cabinet of 1924, which set itself apart from the working class, and in consequence became simply a mouthpiece of capitalist policy. Therefore the workers, finding no help in a 'Labor Government' of this kind, pressed forward once again in the trade-union field, where they still hoped to find the united leadership they needed. The campaign for trade-union unity, for the workers' alliance, for single directing power in the hands of the General Council, was an expression of this fundamental demand for a united class front. Thus this demand and campaign, expressed through trade-union forms, were in reality already a political demand and campaign. The growth of the Minority Movement, which soon comprised one quarter of the whole trade-union membership, was also an expression of this new class aim within the trade-union organizations.

Thus by 1925 a critical and menacing condition had already arisen. The economic situation, the policy of the capitalists, the progress of Labor opinion, were all driving straight toward mass conflict between the united capitalist class and the united working class. All the most active men in the Labor ranks, all the most farseeing and thinking of their leaders, were aware of this, and were straining every nerve to prepare for it. But the men in control of the official Labor Party and the General Council belonged to the previous period and were soaked in its traditions and ideology. They could not get away from the idea that old-style local strikes on the one hand, and old-style parliamentary politics on the other, each carried on independently, were the only way to assert the rights of Labor.

The one new force in the councils of the Labor leaders appeared with the election in 1924 of 'Emperor Cook,' the miners' secretary, by the ballots of one million miners. Thus a single representative of the mass movement, outside the ranks of old-style trade-unionism, has made as heroic and desperate a fight for the new needs of mass solidarity as has ever been fought by any working-class leader — with the significant result that he has become the dynamic factor in the actual struggle, and he alone prevented a surrender before the struggle had even begun. The lesson of this experience, the whole-hearted response of the masses to a single straight leader, is of very great importance for the future. But in the recent strike Mr. Cook's efforts only threw into relief the dominant control of the old leaders; and although an important Left movement developed in Labor's official ranks, it was not yet strong enough or clear enough to defeat the Right, in whose hands the real direction lay.

Aware of this trend of labor evolution, Baldwin and the bourgeoisie determined to throw their whole strength into preparing for the inevitable struggle. Sooner or later this conflict would have to come; and it was better that it should come, even with a little forcing, at a date convenient to the bourgeoisie, when their preparations were ready, and before the impending changes in labor leadership had taken place. Therefore they pursued a policy of deliberately provoking a general conflict in order to inflict a general defeat on the working class. They calculated that, while they were making elaborate preparations themselves, the reformist trade-union leaders would make no adequate counter preparations, but would trust in the old coöperation, and, even when the conflict had been forced upon them, would sabotage the fight and seek a way out at any price. This calculation proved correct. The nine months of Government preparations met no response from the organized working-class movement. Right up to the last week, and even up to the last moment, the official Labor Party, the Independent Labor Party, and the trade-union leaders declared that they did not consider the struggle inevitable, that measures of preparation were unnecessary or need not be hurried, that a way out would probably be found, that Baldwin was an honorable man, that the Government would probably continue the coal subsidy, and so forth.

Why did the reformist leaders fail to make serious preparations? Why did they fail to see the obvious approaching conflict? Why did they cling to the last to the belief that the struggle would not take place? Because to have admitted the real facts, the real character, of the crisis confronting the working class would have been to admit their own bankruptcy and to destroy the

whole castle of dreams on which reformist democracy is built. If a class conflict is inevitable, then the game of parliamentarism is over, the pretense of a peaceful transfer of political power to the working class has vanished, and there is nothing left but a bitter fight to the finish between two organized classes. Rather than admit this, they clung to every shred of illusion, and refused to face patent facts. This did not make the facts any the less real; it did not lessen the blows on the working class; but it effectively prevented the working class from protecting themselves against those blows. Because the reformist leadership had placed parliamentary democracy and constitutional legality above the working class, they could not lead the workers, when the hour of crisis came, but had to sacrifice them.

For this leadership to call the general strike was a mockery. They had preached against a general strike. They had sworn their eternal opposition to the whole principle of a general strike. They had done everything to prevent any preparation for it, and to disarm the working class materially and mentally in advance. Their calling of the general strike was a surrender to overwhelming mass pressure on the one side, and to the forcing tactics of the Government on the other, which left them no escape despite their 'groveling.' It was a dishonest surrender against their own convictions; and the dishonesty is shown by nothing more clearly than by the fact that, the moment the strike was over and the defeat for which they prepared had taken place, the same leaders came hurrying forward to declare that the general strike was wrong in principle and in practice, and would not be resorted to again. If they had been honest, either they would have handed over the leadership to those who did be-

lieve in it, or they would have openly confessed their error, confessed that the struggle was inevitable and that the working class could only save itself by fighting, and have thenceforth thrown their whole energy into winning the fight. They did neither. They called the general strike. They poured out the life-stream of working-class sacrifice and enthusiasm. But they did nothing to carry forward the struggle or give a leadership worthy of that sacrifice. Instead, their whole effort was concentrated on limiting, restraining, and sabotaging the fight, while in secret they gave themselves over to shady intrigues and negotiations with capitalist politicians, culminating in a settlement of surrender that involved, not merely the desertion of the miners, but the desertion of their own men.

Why did they accept this shameful settlement? Because they were not ready to face the forces of the State. This is the most important lesson of the whole general strike experience. It is not possible to take up the general strike seriously without being prepared to enter into struggle with the whole capitalist forces — that is to say, to enter into a political struggle. From this lesson the Right Wing leaders are already hastening to draw the deduction that the general strike must be abandoned, that there is no possibility of mass struggle, that the ballot box is the only method. This deduction amounts to saying that the working class must remain in servitude, that the capitalist class is impregnable, and that the workers can only attempt what the capitalist class will permit them to at-

tempt. The lesson for the working class is the opposite. The lesson of the general strike of 1926 is that the general strike is not enough by itself, that the general strike inevitably develops into a struggle with the Government and the whole capitalist State, and that henceforth the working class must be prepared for this. What happened in 1926 was that the workers, as a result of their experience and the compelling force of events, were ripe for mass action but were not yet ready or prepared for all that mass action involves. They were still trying to fight with obsolete weapons, and with leaders of the old-fashioned parliamentary and trade-union type.

The future struggle will inevitably be a struggle directly against the capitalist State. The myth of the classless State and pure democracy has been smashed by the present struggle. The workers, fighting for bread, have seen ranged against them the whole Government and Constitution, law and armed force. And meanwhile their leaders were exhorting them to remain loyal to the Government, the Constitution, to law and armed force. That contradiction cannot continue. The leaders, by exhorting the workers to remain loyal to the Government and Constitution, made it impossible for the workers to fight for bread. The fight for bread compels the fight against the Government and the Constitution. The experience of the present conflict has shown that the real enemy which the working class will have to fight is not simply an employer or a group of employers, but the Government and the capitalist State.