

CAN ENGLAND GET RID OF CHAMBERLAIN?

What Are the Prospects for the People's Front?

R. PALME DUTT

WILL some form of broad popular-front combination or democratic peace front be realized in Britain in time to check the pro-fascist policy of Chamberlain before it has completed its task of wrecking the League and releasing general war in Europe?

This is coming more and more to the forefront as the central question of British politics. In view of Britain's role in world politics, it is obvious that the answer will have a decisive influence on the world political situation, for the further advance of fascist aggression or for the success of a world peace front.

Until the spring of this year the problem of a people's front in Britain was still a more or less speculative question of the future, and not a direct issue of practical politics, despite the widely recognized urgency of the need to combine forces to defeat the reactionary "National" government. It was obvious that the conditions were not yet ripe. In the first place, working-class unity had not yet been achieved; the Labor Party still rejected the affiliation of the Communist Party, and equally rejected cooperation with any other groups. In the second place, there were not yet any signs of disintegration of the government "National" majority or of regrouping within the capitalist parties.

These conditions have not yet changed. But there are signs that, with the gathering internal crisis of British politics, they are beginning to change, and new combinations may develop in the near future. It is too early to say in what direction the regrouping will finally take place. But the proposal, if not of a full-fledged people's front, at any rate of some type of democratic electoral-parliamentary combination or united peace alliance, ranging from the Liberals to the Communists, centering round the Labor Party and possibly associating some dissident conservatives and independent elements, has been brought to the forefront by a series of recent events, and is now being widely discussed as an issue of practical politics.

The gathering internal crisis of British politics is the reflection of the general crisis of

British policy in the present world situation.

The "National" government, since its formation seven years ago, has consistently favored and assisted the advance of reaction and fascism in the world, and has pursued a generally anti-Soviet line. Since the victories of the People's Front in France and Spain, the ap-

prehension and hostility toward these events, and open favor to fascism, have been especially marked. At the same time, in the most recent period, the marked advance in the armed strength and aggressiveness of the fascist powers, their direct threats to British interests and possessions and unconcealed ultimate aims of



John Groth

John Groth

The Star Act from Neville Chamberlain's "Greatest Show on Earth."

expansion at the expense of the British empire, have no less aroused the apprehension of the British ruling class. Hence the notorious division in the ruling class between two lines of policy: the dominant policy, to seek to reach an understanding with the fascist powers, in order to divert their expansion elsewhere, away from the British empire, against the democratic countries in Europe, against the Chinese popular movement, and ultimately against the Soviet Union; and the minority policy, which finds this encouragement of fascist aggression too dangerous, and finds the path of safety in support of the League of Nations and a collective peace front, even at the expense of alignment with the democratic countries and even the Soviet Union. Thus the strong popular opposition of the labor, democratic, and peace forces against the reactionary policy of the "National" government has been accompanied by a division in the conservative camp.

So long as Baldwin was Prime Minister, he encouraged a certain maneuvering between the groupings in the conservative camp. But when Neville Chamberlain succeeded him as Prime Minister a year ago, he was closely identified with the most directly pro-fascist elements, the Londonderrys, Astors, etc., and hostile to the traditionally maneuvering policy of the Foreign Office group associated with Vansittart, who combined reaction with deep suspicion of Hitler. Chamberlain had been the first to denounce sanctions, in advance of the cabinet of which he was a member, as "midsummer madness," and never lost an opportunity to pour contempt on the League or express his admiration of Hitler and Mussolini. He set himself the task of realizing his cherished aim of a close agreement with Mussolini and Hitler. Thus the issues were immediately sharpened.

Eden's resignation in February (after several previous threats of resignation, and immediately following a public attack on him by Hitler and Mussolini) was the first public expression of the crisis within the cabinet. Several ministers very nearly followed him. Eden was by no means the white angel of the League of Nations and collective security that he is sometimes pictured; he bore direct responsibility for much of the worst pro-fascist government-policy, especially toward Spain. But he was identified in the public eye with the League; and his resignation in protest at the opening of the Anglo-Italian negotiations was popular. Hence this breach delivered a powerful shock and awakening to public opinion.

Hitler's armed seizure of Austria in March intensified this awakening. Demonstrations were held on a scale unequaled since the year of the general strike, under the general slogan launched by the Communist Party, "Chamberlain Must Go." A critical situation marked the third week of March. Six conservative MPs prepared to vote against the government. An influential meeting of the City (London's Wall Street) turned down Chamberlain. Lloyd George and Churchill scented their opportunity. Herbert Morrison of the Labor

Party leadership supported in an internal meeting some type of popular-front combination. Plans were prepared for an alternative government, comprising eleven Conservatives, nine Labor men, and two Liberals. Parallel approaches were made by Chamberlain to trade-union leaders. For a short time Chamberlain himself is reported to have judged his defeat inevitable.

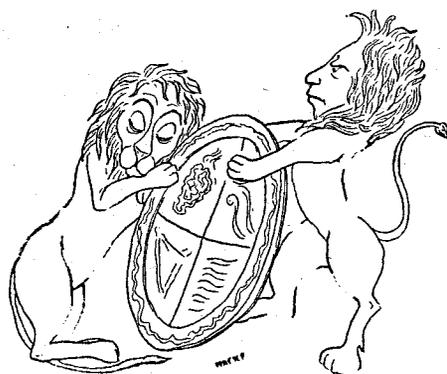
The right-wing Labor leadership saved Chamberlain. When the National Council of Labor met on the critical day, March 22, it debated for four hours and ended without a decision, save to await Chamberlain's speech. The initiative was handed back to Chamberlain. On March 23 Chamberlain summoned Sir Walter Citrine and the Trades Union Congress General Council leaders to Downing Street; they dutifully obeyed his summons and heard his appeal for "good will and cooperation" without opposition. The impression was created that Chamberlain had labor on his side. The conservative opposition collapsed. Lloyd George remained in France, Morrison hurried off to America. When Chamberlain delivered his speech on March 24, there was not a vote in opposition.

Confident that the crisis was over, and triumphant in his success, Chamberlain now poured public scorn on the "feeble opposition," and went full steam ahead with his negotiations with Mussolini and Hitler.

But the crisis was not over. The signs of the new forces gathering had been shown in the March episode, and were to return with increased strength in the succeeding period.

The crisis in British politics is, in reality, still sharpening.

Chamberlain went rapidly forward with his policy of alignment of Britain with the Berlin-Rome axis, toward the further aim of the four-power pact of Britain, France, Germany, and Italy, with the exclusion of the Soviet Union. The Anglo-Italian agreement was signed in April. At the British-French meeting in London pressure was placed on France. France was compelled to open similar negotiations with Italy. A rapid victory of Franco was openly banked on. Plans were prepared for the League of Nations Council to secure the recognition of the Italian conquest of Abyssinia, and to prepare the further weakening of the covenant by the precedent of the special exemption of Switzerland. Pressure was brought to bear on Czechoslovakia to accede to the demands of Henlein and Hitler.



John Mackey

But as the policy develops, and the situation grows more and more acute and menacing, the success of Chamberlain's methods begins to become less and less obvious to British opinion, including a considerable proportion of conservative opinion. The final ratification of the Anglo-Italian agreement begins to become doubtful, especially after Mussolini's openly threatening Genoa speech. Spain's resistance has defeated the calculations of rapid victory for Franco. At the London meeting Daladier made a stronger stand than France has seen for some time in behalf of the rights of French foreign policy, and refused to accede to Chamberlain's demands with regard to the Pyrenees frontier. At the League of Nations Council, British plans had no easy passage, because of the effective leadership for peace of the Soviet Union, cooperating with Spain, China, and New Zealand; only two states voted with Britain and France for non-intervention, while nine abstained; Britain was discredited, indicted, and exposed on every side, and the unhappy Halifax returned, vowing to resign his emergency Foreign Secretaryship. Finally, Mussolini's Genoa speech and Hitler's open threats to Czechoslovakia have increased the difficulties.

At home the position of the Chamberlain government has equally weakened. The docile obedience of Sir Walter Citrine and the general council was found to be not so easily repeated when it came to approaching the decisive trade unions for rearmament, on whose behalf Citrine had no power to negotiate; the engineering trade-unions were not ready to give the old blind wartime cooperation, did not conceal their suspicion of the government and the whole policy behind rearmament, and openly demanded arms for Spain, if arms were to be produced, as alleged, for the defense of democracy. The May Day demonstrations touched records not equaled since the year of the general strike. A surge of the demand for unity to defeat Chamberlain spread through the labor movement and all supporters of peace. On this basis, by the abstention of other candidates and local cooperation in the fight, a whole series of by-elections were won against Chamberlain, and revealed the tide of public feeling running against him. At the same time the wholesale scandals of profiteering and inefficiency of the Chamberlain regime in rearmament, especially in air rearmament, discredited the cabinet.

By the middle of May a new reconstruction of the Chamberlain government was necessary, involving the throwing overboard of two cabinet ministers, and changes in five cabinet offices and four other ministerial offices. But it was universally recognized that this reconstruction was only a beginning. A major reconstruction is due to follow; and there are reports of intentions to draw in Eden, and possibly Churchill, in order to strengthen the weakening "National" government.

The situation is thus exceptionally favorable for a combination of the opposition forces to defeat Chamberlain.

The events of March have shown that la-

bor's role is decisive for the possibility of such a combination of opposition forces to defeat Chamberlain and save the fight for peace. The Liberal Party is ready for such cooperation, as shown in the decision of its conference at Bath in May; the Communist Party is ready, and has from the outset taken the lead in the fight for this aim; there exists a potential opposition among the Conservatives which could be won; above all, there exists a strong body of unrepresented opinion in the electorate favorable to a collective peace policy, partially shown in the strength of the League of Nations Union and peace organizations. But un-

less the Labor Party, which represents the decisive force of the organized working class, takes the lead, the conception of a people's front is chimerical.

Will the Labor Party change its policy with regard to working-class unity and a people's front? This is the key question for the possibility of a people's front in Britain. Although the March meeting was a failure, and the opposition of the central leadership continues strong, there are signs of new currents developing in the Labor Party in consequence of the crisis.

In the days of March the conception of a

united peace alliance, or combination of Labor, Communists, Liberals, and Independents to defeat Chamberlain on the basis of a program of collective peace, resistance to fascism, and social measures of advance, was put forward in *Reynolds News*, the organ of the cooperative movement, by the editor, Sydney R. Elliott. The Cooperative Party, which works in unity with the Labor Party, but is an independent body, is based on the affiliation of the cooperative societies, and represents a membership of over five million. At the conference of the Cooperative Party at Easter the proposal of the united peace alliance was put forward



THE SNATCH

A. Redfield

by the national committee. The Labor Party Executive, determined to scotch the new movement, put forward a manifesto commanding all Labor Party members to oppose the policy under pain of severe disciplinary threats (this manifesto was dealt with in my article, "The Blind Men of Transport House," in *NEW MASSES* of May 3). Nevertheless, the resolution for the united peace alliance was carried by 2,343,000 to 1,947,000 votes.

This decision of the Cooperative Party conference has transformed the situation in the labor movement. There may be attempts, possibly successful under extreme pressure, to weaken it or even withdraw it at the Cooperative Union Congress (which includes the non-political cooperative societies outside the Cooperative Party) in June. But the effect of the decision remains. The Labor Party Executive could no longer claim that the demand for a people's front came only from a small left-wing minority, overwhelmingly defeated at Labor Party conferences. The Cooperative Party membership of five million included most of the two million members of the Labor Party, and its machinery of voting is considerably more democratic, being based on the local societies. From the moment of this decision the issue of the people's front has become a burning issue of the labor movement and of the whole of British politics.

Signs of change have consequently begun to appear even within the Labor Party Executive. Powerful unions, such as the Distributive Workers (the sixth largest union), the South Wales Miners Federation, and the Shop Assistants have gone on record for the united peace alliance. When the Labor Party Executive in May endeavored to issue a new manifesto of denunciation of the people's front, the first draft was defeated, and it was revealed that the Executive was divided. A minority of four (Cripps, Pritt, Laski, Ellen Wilkinson), representing the left wing, and those having the strongest confidence of the mass of the membership, and including half the directly elected representatives of the local labor parties, put in a memorandum in favor of the people's front. The manifesto that was finally issued on May 13 was no longer couched in terms of excommunication and pontifical reference to conference decisions, but was presented in the form of a reasoned argument without threats. It was further universally noted that certain reservations and loopholes had begun to appear. For the first time the Labor Party Executive admitted that a change of policy might become necessary if this was "the sole condition for the preservation of peace and democracy," and that "a new situation might arise if any considerable number of Parliament members were to rebel against the Prime Minister's authority."

The general character of the manifesto, however, remained full opposition to the people's front, full insistence on the division of the forces opposed to Chamberlain, and, therefore, a gift to Chamberlain. The government press received it with jubilation. The manifesto endeavored to cover its reactionary



*"If Hitler, if Mussolini, if Japan
—how does that Chamberlain
peace plan go again?"*

policy with "left" arguments, appeals to the traditional "independence" of the Labor Party, and to the necessity of "Socialism" as the only cure for all evils of the present crisis, "the road to peace lies through Socialism," etc. The joyous applause of the most reactionary pro-fascist press, such as the *Observer*, organ of the Cliveden set, which found the manifesto "one of the best-reasoned political papers that we have had for some time," pricked these pretensions. The spectacle of the Citrines and Daltons presenting themselves as militant purists of working-class independence and the fight for immediate Socialism, refusing to be corrupted by the Communists and left wing into the service of capitalism, was too comic to win wide credence. Transport House found its main support in the remnant of the Independent Labor Party, which survives today as a channel of Trotskyist arguments, and in the Trotskyites from whose ranks it found one to run as Labor candidate in the recent Aylesbury by-election in order to split the vote against Chamberlain and thus present a seat to Chamberlain.

Experience is increasingly convincing serious Labor Party supporters that the policy of Transport House in opposing the people's front does not mean independence, but on the contrary, practical assistance to Chamberlain, impotence of the labor movement, and even cooperation with Chamberlain in day-to-day policy. This was powerfully shown by the role of Sir Walter Citrine at the International Federation of Trade Unions meeting at Oslo, where he not only opposed international trade-union unity, delivered sneering attacks against France and the Soviet Union, opposed any measures of working-class sanctions against fascist aggressors, but even went so far as to support Chamberlain in his unconcealed international financial swashbuckling in Mexico and prevent the passing of a resolution of sympathy to the Mexican workers and government

in their stab against the British oil capitalists and Chamberlain's bullying intervention.

What are the prospects for the people's front? It is evident that only a combination of all the opposition forces around the central leadership of a united labor movement, on the basis of a program of collective peace, cooperation with France, the Soviet Union, Spain, Czechoslovakia, the United States, and the other democracies to hold fascist aggression in check, and an inner program of social and economic advance, can raise any prospect of defeating Chamberlain and bringing in an alternative government in the near future. The alternative to this is not a Labor government. The alternative is the continued domination of Chamberlain and the "National" government, with its more and more open support of fascism and fascist war, and all that this will mean for the future of Britain and the world in the next few years.

That a people's-front combination could defeat Chamberlain is even widely admitted in the government press, which openly counts, however, on the Labor Party Executive to prevent its realization. An examination of the election figures shows the relation of forces, and why a people's front is essential to defeat Chamberlain.

At the last general election, in 1935, out of 29,500,000 electors, 11,750,000 voted for the "National" government, 10,000,000 voted for the opposition, and 7,500,000 did not vote. Of the opposition, Labor represented 8,300,000, and the Liberals 1,500,000 (the Communists withdrew all their candidates but two to secure unity behind Labor). Since the general election there has been a growing current of public opinion against the government, which won the election on the basis of full and active support to the League of Nations as its main plank and has since pursued the opposite policy. The Labor Party, however, on its present basis, has been able to win only a portion of this opposition, much of which, though against Chamberlain, is not yet prepared to accept a Socialist program, and much of which is repelled by the division of the anti-government candidates and so relapses into non-voting. On the present basis of development there is no prospect whatever of Labor winning an absolute majority. To win a majority against Chamberlain will require decisive inroads into the ranks of the borderline supporters of Chamberlain and the non-voters. In the present stage of public opinion among these sections only a broad, united democratic and peace front could accomplish this successfully.

The system of constituencies in Britain reinforces this lesson. There is no second ballot, and division of the anti-government vote can give the seat to the government on a minority vote, as is already the case in over thirty constituencies. Labor's strength is in the industrial areas of North England, Scotland, and Wales. A big increase in Labor's vote in these areas would not give a majority in Parliament. In Southern England (excluding London and the Midlands), that is, in the predominantly agricultural, rentier, and light industry areas,

where Labor organization is weak, the government holds 218 seats and Labor only thirty-five. If Labor were to win two-thirds of all government seats in the industrial North, in Scotland, and Wales, but fail to change this situation in the South and the Midlands, it would not win a majority. In these latter areas, remains of the Liberal Party still play a considerable role. Combination with the Liberal and general democratic and peace elements, is essential for a rapid victory at the next election.

This is to calculate only on the basis of existing electoral proportions. In fact, however, the effect of unity, of working-class unity and of the unity of a broad democratic peace front, on a positive immediate program, would awaken into political activity masses of the 7,500,000 non-voters, who could determine the issue, as well as millions of hesitant "National" voters. The example of France has shown this stimulating, mobilizing, and creative influence of unity and the People's Front in giving new confidence and strength to previously disheartened and apathetic millions.

The situation in Britain thus points clearly and urgently to the necessity of a people's front around the central core of the Labor Party and a united labor movement. The realization of this is undoubtedly spreading fast, and there is reason to hope that big changes may be realized in the whole political alignment in Britain. But there is no ground for easy optimism, especially in view of the shortness of time. The forces of opposition are still strongly entrenched in the dominant Labor and trade-union leadership; and these undoubtedly prefer the role of "loyal opposition" to Chamberlain rather than the heavy responsibility of leadership of all the working-class and democratic forces against the ruling finance-capitalist oligarchy in Britain and the consequent responsibility of government in a period of crisis. There is therefore a very big fight ahead to realize working-class unity and the people's front or peace alliance in Britain before it is too late; and the most that can yet be said is that the forces in support are gathering more strongly than ever before. On the outcome of this fight depend heavy issues for the whole future of Britain and the world.

Q. E. D.

TOKYO, JUNE 3.—Lieutenant General Seishiro Itagaki, regarded by many as the best field commander in the army, was named War Minister today with a mandate to bring the Chinese war to a quick end. . . .

"General Itagaki and General Rensuke Isogai were the Japanese chieftains at Taierhchwang. Chinese attacked ferociously and the Japanese army retreated. It was called, and was generally believed to be, the most humiliating defeat that a Japanese army had suffered in the 2,598 years of Japan's military history."
—United Press, June 3.