
BRITISH LABOR AND THE WAR

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THE speediest victory of Britain and Britain's allies over Hitler is not the special interest of one class or section of the nation, but the common interest of all classes and sections of the nation. This common aim unites widely differing classes and parties, however much they may be opposed on other issues, in a single common task, the organization of the full strength of the nation for the defeat of Hitler. Just as the world alliance unites widely differing states and nations, so the counterpart of this unity of the world alliance is the unity of each nation composing the alliance. The national unity is indispensable for victory over Hitler. A united nation ensures the maximum strength for the speediest defeat of Hitler.

This collaboration of all sections of the nation, of normally opposed classes, parties and organizations, constitutes the united national front for the defeat of Hitler. It finds expression in the united endeavor of the national war effort. In industry it finds expression in the cooperation of employers, management and workers for maximum war production. In the political field it finds expression in the cooperation of parties in parliament and in

elections, and in the support of a Coalition Government of National Unity, based at present on the Conservative, Liberal and Labor Parties. The Government has received national support as the representative of national unity.

The weakness of the national front as at present developed is its formal character of a collaboration only of the official machines of the older parties; it makes no attempt to reach out to the vast web of organizations of the people, social, economic, sporting, religious or political, of youth and of women; it makes no attempt to draw in the practical participation of the masses of active men and women of all parties and of no party. Hence the tendencies of many men and women who are awakening to political life and interest in the conditions of the war and seeking new forms of political expression, to be drawn in the wake of the various new "independent" groupings which crop up like mushrooms, often with very dubious antecedents, and which in fact, whatever their professions, cut across and break up national unity. This has been noticeable in recent by-elections, where the obsolete and unsatisfactory system of selection of candi-

dates to represent national unity, not on the basis of the combined choice of all the democratic organizations in the constituency supporting national unity, but by the nomination of a caucus of whichever of the older party machines regards the constituency as its "property" on the basis of a seven-year-old claim, has led in several cases to a revolt of the electors, the defeat of Government candidates representing national unity and the return of "independent" candidates, although this by no means reflects opposition of the majority of electors to national unity for victory over Hitler.

These tendencies are a dangerous warning signal. The disruption of national unity, even though beginning under the impetus of progressive desires and impatience of a section of the electors, would in fact play into the hands of the powerful reactionary forces which carried through the old policies of conciliation to fascism, which are still heavily represented in the existing Conservative majority in Parliament, and which, although not daring for the moment to proclaim their aim in the open, are on the look-out for any signs of the break-up of national unity to resume their intrigues and combinations for the pursuit of their old aims under new forms.

All serious anti-fascists and supporters of decisive victory over Hitler need to recognize that the inadequacies of the existing united national front, and the legitimate criticisms which can be brought against its present working demon-

strate the necessity to strengthen it, and to strengthen the Government as the representative of the democratic anti-fascist will to victory of the people, and not to weaken it. The disruption of national unity only serves the interests of Hitler.

The transition, which is thus now imperative and urgent, from the present largely formal united national front, which in respect of organization mainly exists on top, to the real living unity of the entire nation, drawing in the active democratic participation of the masses of men and women and of the mass organizations of the people, depends above all on the role of the working class movement. Only a strong, active and united working class, rallying and drawing into activity other sections of the people can constitute the core of national unity. Without this, national unity is distorted and crippled. This is the key to the problems of the present political situation in Britain.

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The tasks which the working class movement needs to fulfill within the common national front for the defeat of Hitler correspond to the character of the conflict and represent the highest level of responsibility in the long record of struggle of the working class.

First, the organized working class should be the strongest champion, organizer and defender of national unity for the defeat of Hitler. Against all hesitations and vacillations in their classes and sections of the nation; against all intrigues of adventurist and pro-fascist ele-

ments for the disruption of national unity; against all moods of passivity, half-heartedness, defeatism, war weariness, flinching from action and sacrifice, or Leftist impatience, either in its own ranks or in the unorganized masses of the people, the strength, unity and leadership of the organized working class should be the most powerful bulwark and rallying center to lead, unite, inspire, hold firm and draw into active participation all sections of the people.

The workers know from twenty years of experience the necessity of unity against fascism. Fascism has previously advanced, not by its superior strength, but by the division of its opponents. The unity of all opponents of fascism is essential for victory. This lesson has been driven home equally by the experience of Germany, Austria and Italy, where the division of the working class and democratic forces permitted the victory of fascism; and by the experience of France and Spain, where the unity of the working class and of the People's Front stemmed the advance of fascism, until inner weakening or international disunity again broke the front; no less than by the example of China, where the national united front has for five years been able to hold at bay the armed power of Japan and prepare the conditions for future victory. The establishment of world unity against Hitler, on the basis of the world alliance and of the unity of each nation engaged in the common fight against the fascist enemy, has already brought within view the doom of the

Nazi regime and of the Axis aims of world fascist domination. Only the disruption of this unity, division in action or hesitation to bring into play the decisive combined strength of united action, could delay this doom. Therefore the maintenance and strengthening of this unity, both of the world alliance and of each nation fighting in the common cause, and unshakable opposition to every attempt to disrupt this unity or weaken united action, are the dearest interest of the working class in this historical moment. In this life-and-death struggle the working class can afford to lose no allies, however partial, hesitant or vacillating. The working class stands out and must stand out as the most determined upholder of national and international unity for the military defeat of German fascism.

Second, the working class should not only be the most active upholder of the united national front for the defeat of Hitler, but should also be the most active driving force within the united national front. The working class has its positive contribution to make in the sphere of policy, program and leadership. In every field of the struggle, in strategy, in political mobilization, in war production, in social and economic organization, in colonial policy, in diplomatic policy, in propaganda, in the questions of war aims, the most active struggle needs to be conducted for the measures which are necessary in the interests of the world alliance for speediest victory over fascism. The working class movement has the power and

the responsibility to take the initiative in the fight to win support for these measures within the united national front and for their adoption by the Government.

Concretely, in the present situation this means that the organized working class movement should take the lead in the fight for a combined inter-Allied strategy for maximum common action and full utilization of existing forces in order to speed victory, that is, specifically for the Second Front on the Continent of Europe; for the strengthening of the Government by the elimination of the remaining Munichite Ministers and the drawing in of the most resolute, energetic and capable democratic anti-fascist representatives; for the intensification and speeding up of war production by unified planning and effective public control of all war industry under a strong Ministry of Production, and ruthless over-riding of all sectional and vested interests which hamper maximum production; for the enforcement of a closer approach to equality of sacrifice in social and economic policy; for the protection and extension of democratic rights and press freedom for the purposes of anti-fascist mobilization of the people, while operating more stringent measures against fascist and pro-fascist elements and propaganda; for winning the cooperation of the Indian people by the recognition of the independence of India and the establishment of a representative Indian National Government capable of mobilizing and organizing the defense of the Indian people as an

equal partner in the alliance of the United Nations; for the strengthening of political and diplomatic collaboration with the Soviet Union, both in the conditions of the war and in the settlement following the war; for the strengthening of democratic anti-fascist collaboration with the people of Europe enslaved by Nazi rule, and the repudiation of all aims and policies which hinder such collaboration; and for all similar measures which strengthen the anti-fascist alliance, protect its democratic anti-fascist aims and speed victory.

All these are measures which are urgently necessary for victory over Hitler, but in relation to which there is still hesitation, indifference or resistance within the united national front. It is essential to develop an informed public opinion in support of these measures within the united national front, to organize mass pressure in order to overcome reactionary resistance and strengthen the hands of the Government for carrying them out, and to secure their adoption by the Government as the representative of national unity. The working class movement has here a decisive role to play in voicing, leading and organizing the fight for such measures.

Third, the organized working class movement has a special responsibility, in relation to the requirements of the war effort, to protect the standards, conditions and rights of the workers and of the masses of the people. In the interests of the major immediate aim of victory over Hitler, the

workers have had to make many concessions, which under other conditions would have been stubbornly contested. It is the concern of the organized working class movement to see that these concessions are not exploited in the sectional interests of monopoly capital; that the compulsory powers, which have been freely used against the workers, are equally used, wherever the needs of the war dictate, against big capital, and that, within the limitations of war conditions, the standards and health of the working people take precedence as the first charge on all available means of consumption, in place of the present excess consumption expenditure of the upper incomes and propertied sections.

For this purpose the working class movement needs to take special concern for the improvement of the pay, conditions and allowances of those serving in the armed forces and their dependents; the leveling up of old age pensions, widows' pensions and other social service benefits; the improvement of women workers' wages and conditions with the aim to realize effective equality of pay, and the raising of the wages of low-paid sections; the revision of taxation to take all excess incomes above a certain level, and raise the exemption limit for lower incomes; the extension of rationing and price control; the protection of the rights of the workers in the factories; the protection of working class and democratic rights of propaganda and organization, etc. Similarly in the necessary changes in industry the working class organ-

izations can alone judge the best ways and methods to combine the two objectives of maximum production with the safeguarding of the rights and interests and future claims of the workers. All these questions, while the initiative and guidance in solving them must come especially from the working class movement, are no separate interest of a section, but the vital interest of the united war effort, for the purposes of democratic anti-fascist war and for the protection of the future.

Fourth, the strength, unity and active leading role of the working class movement are the best guarantee, not only for the realization of the present maximum war effort and united strategy for victory, but also for the future, for the character of the settlement which will follow the war, for the character of the organization of the world after the war, and for the democratic and social advance which must follow victory over fascism. The working class movement, as the representative of the working people and of the true interests of the nation, has the responsibility to see that the efforts and sacrifices of the people shall not be exploited for reactionary aims, throwing down a Hitler in order to set up some alternative form of reaction; that the settlement which follows the war shall correspond to the democratic anti-fascist aims of the people for the realization of the freedom of nations and the organization of a durable peace; that friendship and collaboration with the Soviet Union and with all the progressive forces of the world

shall be maintained and carried forward; and that the economic and political concessions of the workers during the war, the concentration of monopoly capital and of executive powers necessitated by the requirements of the war, shall not become the basis of the intensified subjection and exploitation of the workers and enthronement of reaction after the war, but that, on the contrary, the advance shall be carried rapidly forward toward the aims of the working class movement, the aims of social liberation. No paper plan and no paper document can guarantee this. The hatching of elaborate plans of post-war reconstruction at the present moment before the premises are present, can easily take on a reactionary hue, or become a diversion from present urgent tasks. Only the real relations of social and political forces at the conclusion of the war will determine the outcome. Only a powerful and united working class movement can ensure that the outcome shall correspond to the interests of the working people. But this depends on the present strengthening, achievement of unity and fulfillment of its present political role of the working class movement. The present determines the future.

In order to fulfill these tasks, the working class movement needs to be strong and united, and with a policy and leadership capable of responding to present needs. The workers need to build up their organizations, trade union, political and cooperative; to achieve unity and overcome sectional barriers and

divisions; to pursue actively a policy and program corresponding to the urgent needs of the war; and to develop effective political leadership. The picture of the outstanding role which the working class movement can and should fulfill in the present situation is still far from the picture of what has so far been achieved. Within the framework of national unity there is not yet working class unity. This is a grave and dangerous contradiction which undermines national unity and shifts the balance in favor of reactionary forces. All the difficulties of the present political situation arise from the fact that there is not yet a strong and united working class movement fulfilling that active and leading role within the united national front which it can and should fulfill. Hence the manifold "independent" groupings are enabled to press their competing claims for the support of the people, and to confuse and weaken the popular forces for the ultimate benefit of reaction.

The experience of the critical years leading up to the present war already demonstrated the truth of this. Why was it possible for the policies of "non-intervention" in Spain, of Munich, of conciliation to Hitler, of refusal of the British-Soviet Pact and sabotage of collective security to be carried through by the Chamberlain Government, in spite of the overwhelming strength of popular opinion against them (87 per cent poll for the British-Soviet Pact, eleven million vote for the Peace Ballot for collective security, etc.) and the actual division of the ruling class, sown in the

division of the Conservative Party? Only because the organized working class movement failed to fulfil its task of rallying and uniting the working class and democratic forces in a common front or People's Front, which would have been capable—as opponents of the policy at the time recognized—of defeating Chamberlain and compelling a change of course. It is now widely recognized that if this policy, which was advocated at the time by the Communist Party, had been followed, we should be in a different situation today, and we should have probably been able to avoid the present war or, had it come, to have met it from the outset in a far more favorable situation.

Today the representatives of the organized working class movement are participating in the Coalition Government for the defeat of Hitler. But this participation of individuals in a War Ministry, with little evidence of important influence on the major questions of policy, is far from equivalent to the active participation of a strong and united working class movement in the common national front, presenting its proposals and program for the common cause, mobilizing public opinion, and able in this way, both directly and through its representatives (whose voice would become strong as the voice of a mighty united movement with popular support), to exercise its due and powerful impress on the combined policy finally adopted by the Government. The weakness of the present situation, which is acutely felt by Labor supporters throughout the

country, is not so much a question of the character of the individual representatives participating in the Coalition Ministry, as of the fact that this personal participation is regarded as a substitute for the participation of the working class movement in the national front, and is even made the occasion for closing down the political activity of the working class movement with consequent tendencies to decline of membership and stagnation of organization, in this moment of most intense crisis, fateful issues and highest responsibility for the whole future of the movement.

In consequence, the criticism is sometimes expressed by some labor supporters that the mistake lies in the participation in the Coalition Government, and that the solution is for labor to come out of the Coalition. This, in the present situation, when labor is in a minority in Parliament, and there could be no question of labor alone representing national unity, is equivalent to the denial of the necessity for national unity for the defeat of Hitler. Such a policy would play straight into the hands of reaction and the pro-Hitler forces. The maintenance of national unity, and of a Government representative of all political sections which stand for victory over Hitler is essential for victory over Hitler and is therefore the vital interest of the working class movement. The fault does not lie in the participation in the Coalition, which is indispensable in the present relations of political forces, but in the policy pursued. The remedy does not lie in the dis-

ruption of national unity, and of the Coalition Government founded on its basis, but in the strengthening of the active role and positive leadership of the working class movement in the national front.

Similarly the criticism is sometimes heard that the labor movement is "dead," that there is stagnation, apathy and passivity in the localities, that organization has fallen to pieces, and that the masses are turning elsewhere; and the conclusion is drawn that the future must be sought in some new "independent" "non-party" grouping or formation without roots in the organized workers or their mass organizations. This gloomy picture of the present situation of the organized working class movement is not a true picture. It is one-sided because it sees only what is going down and not what is rising; it sees a process of change and transition, which is the stirring of new life, as a process of decay and death. It is not the labor movement that is going down, but only old policies and methods which are discredited; new forces are rising to carry forward the movement and respond to present needs. Our task must be to assist this advance, and to clear away the obstacles which still stand in the path of further advance.

The workers are not quiescent. There is in fact abounding life and activity of the organized working class movement, even though still partial, and even though still held in by many limitations. The rise of trade union membership to over six million represent the highest level for twenty years. Organiza-

tion and activity in the factories are more strongly developed than they have ever been, and are full of vitality, with plentiful evidence of keen enthusiasm and mass participation. Sales of working class literature have multiplied many times over during the war, and there is a new and serious reading public among the workers. The Communist Party has more than trebled its membership since the outbreak of war, and more than doubled it in the most recent period, reaching a total of fifty thousand active individual members, a new type of development in socialist organization in this country. On the basis of its policy expressing the plain common interests of the workers and of the entire nation in the present struggle, it has been able to organize campaigns, meetings and demonstrations, with the participation of representatives of all sections of the working class and democratic movement, which have won striking mass support exceeding previous levels of political campaigning and in certain cases exercising a perceptible influence in the political situation (campaigns for the removal of Margesson and Moore-Brabazon, for the Second Front, etc.)*

* The Trafalgar Square demonstration for the Second Front in March, 1942, organized by the Communist Party, exceeded any previous level of demonstrations in Trafalgar Square, according to the testimony of the veteran Ben Tillet, ranging over the memories of sixty years since the great demonstrations of the eighties in the early days of the modern political working class movement. Thirty-five thousand participated in this demonstration; in the succeeding Trafalgar Square demonstration of the Communist Party in May, 1942, accompanying the Communist Party National Conference, fifty thousand participated, and unanimously voted a resolution supporting the Communist program for the Second Front and other measures directed to the aim of victory in 1942.

There is therefore no ground for deducing a decline in political interest of the organized workers from the recent decline in membership and local organization of the Labor Party. This is only a reflection of the policies pursued during this period, the closing down of activities, and the harmful effects of the system of bans and exclusions. The removal of these causes could rapidly show a different picture.

The conclusion is evident. If the relatively small numbers of the most politically conscious workers organized in the Communist Party and the united movement have been already able to achieve a degree of mass response untouched by any other political party or organization, how much more could be achieved if the entire organized working class movement were brought behind these demands and mobilized in united activity on a common immediate program?

What is needed? The first necessity is to establish effective working class unity in action. The still continuing opposition of the Labor Party leadership to cooperation of the different sections of the working class movement in the present urgent common fight, and the imposition of the system of bans and exclusions within the political labor movement, with extension to the trade union sphere in respect of trades councils and in some unions, are less than ever defensible in the present situation. Despite the progressive step forward of the establishment of the British-Soviet Trade Union Committee, the policy of hostility to working class unity

within Britain has even been intensified in certain respects since the establishment of British-Soviet unity. An extreme example of this policy has been shown in the attempted banning even of British-Soviet Unity Committees, broadly based on the cooperation of all parties and organizations, political and non-political, under the leadership of the civil authorities, for the promotion of friendship and collaboration between Britain and the Soviet Union—on the grounds that cooperation between Labor Party members and Communists on a common committee and a common platform must not be permitted, even for the common aim of the fight against Hitler. This policy is neither in the interests of national unity for the defeat of Hitler, nor is it in the interests of the working class movement. Fortunately, the bans have not always been successful, and cooperation is extending in practice, in accordance with the healthy sense of the overwhelming majority of the working class movement; but it is still heavily impeded by the present disciplinary measures and the absence of cooperation on a national scale.

The aim of the policy of refusal of unity and disciplinary division of the working class movement is directed to place an artificial barrier between the vanguard of the working class and the main body, and thus seeks to prevent that interaction which is indispensable for the health and growth of the movement as a whole. The Communist Party has established its permanent place in the life of the working class

movement as the representative of a growing body of politically conscious workers, and can make its distinctive contribution and fulfil an increasingly valuable role in the development of the working class movement as a whole. To attempt to prevent this by disciplinary regulations and threats is to attempt to stem the advancing tide of the working class movement. The refusal of unity and the system of division of the working class movement enabled Hitler to come to power in Germany. The same system serves the interests of Hitler in Britain today. It is necessary to make a serious attempt to overcome the present difficulties and find the way to establish united action and the free functioning of a united working class movement, by the cooperation of the Labor Party and the Communist Party, and the removal of those disciplinary bans on cooperation which paralyze the local working class movement or prevent the democratic election of representatives and expression of opinion within the working class movement. The establishment of such working class unity in action would enormously stimulate the growth, self-confidence, enthusiasm and revived activity of the entire working class movement.

Second, such working class unity in action needs to be based on a common immediate program. It is necessary to adopt a common program of action of the united working class movement corresponding to the present needs for the hastening of victory, and to be campaigned for within the framework of the

united national front. The question of working class unity is not merely a question of organization; it is a question of policy. At present there is dangerous disunity in practice, and the authority and responsibility of the working class movement is thereby weakened. Despite the formal participation in the coalition, there is lack of convinced understanding of the necessity of national unity within the local sections, as recent by-elections have shown. Adventurist elements from outside the working class movement are able to take advantage of this confusion to win support for their careerist aims or for groupings hostile to the interests of national unity against Hitler. Trends alien to the working class movement, whether chauvinist or pacifist, are able to take advantage of the passivity to penetrate and win support. When some representative leaders associate with the agitation of a Vansittart; when others are associated with pacifist groupings which are in fact pro-fascist in their policy; when Labor electors withhold support from candidates representing national unity and their leaders hesitate even to appear on a platform in a by-election to recommend national unity; then it is obvious that such demoralization is weakening to the working class movement and prevents it from fulfilling the role which it should fulfil in the national front. The adoption of a common immediate program and campaign of a united working class movement, expressing the urgent necessary measures for speediest victory over Hitler, would rally all

sections of the workers in support, end the weaknesses and vacillations, and lead to the very great strengthening of the working class movement and its political role.

Third, the campaign of the united working class movement needs to be developed with the active cooperation of all sections on the basis of the common program. For this purpose the extension of working class activity, and the protection, restoration or extension of the necessary democratic rights for anti-fascist propaganda and agitation are essential.

Such a revival of working class activity, on the basis of the establishment of working class unity and a united campaign, would not merely strengthen the working class movement and the fulfilment of its role in the national front, but would greatly strengthen the entire national war effort and the will to victory. The strength and the unity of the working class rally wide sections around it. The common program of the united working class, expressing the present needs of the struggle against Hitler, and embodying the necessary

measures for victory, would win an enormous response from the entire nation. The establishment of working class unity on the basis of such a common immediate program would basically change the political situation in Britain and open up a new perspective in the war. This path would lead to the most rapid achievement of a combined strategy, the opening up of the Second Front in Europe, and the accomplishment of those accompanying necessary measures which would help to accelerate the realization of victory.

More than this. A strong and united working class movement in this country would thus help to create the most favorable conditions for the speedy victorious ending of the war against Hitler. At the same time it would represent the most effective force on the side of the people for tackling the problems which would follow such a victory.

In proportion as we fulfil our present tasks, and build up the strength of the working class movement in so doing, we shall be strong also to face the future.