The British Conference on World Trade Union Unity

By Wm. Z. Foster

If further proof were needed of the growing revolutionary spirit of the British working class, such proof was abundantly furnished by the Unity Conference of the National Minority Movement, held in Battersea Town Hall, on January 25th. There were present 630 delegates from all over Great Britain, representing more than 600,000 workers in practically every important trade union in the country. The whole thing was a blaze of revolutionary spirit. It was a striking demonstration of the spirit of international unity, now spreading like wildfire among the millions organized in the British trade unions.

The conference, which was made up of delegates from trade unions, cooperatives, unemployed, etc., was held in the face of sharp opposition. The old-line trade union leaders could see in it the handwriting on the wall for their antiquated system of unionism which has cost the British workers so dearly. The General Council of the Trades Union Congress, invited to attend, abruptly declined the invitation. The leaders of the National Union of Railwaymen and the Amalgamated Engineering Union (Machinists) went the General Council one better and sharply warned their members not to attend. The capitalist press profusely praised the reactionary leaders for this stand; suddenly the mouthpieces of the capitalists became militant defenders of “legitimate” trade unionism against the diabolical assaults of the left wing. They made much of the fact that Cook, recently elected left wing secretary of the national Miners’ Union, did not attend the conference and preside over it, as advertised. The reason for this was that when he agreed to preside the date for the conference was set for January 24. Later, it was changed to the 25th. This conflicted with an already scheduled important miners’ meeting which he could not cancel. But Cook sent a copy of his speech, fully identifying himself with the Minority movement. He said, “I am proud to be a disciple of Karl Marx and a humble follower of Lenin.”

More active opposition was offered by those tools of big capital, the British fascists. Before the meeting they plastered the whole neighborhood (which is the district of Saklatvala, the Communist M. P.) with posters screaming “To Hell with the Communists. Join the Fascists!” They also issued a couple of pamphlets bitterly attacking the Minority Movement. These were distributed widely. Then the fascists, representing themselves to be officials of the Minority Movement, secured access to the hall in the morning and sprinkled the place with foul-smelling chemicals.

The specific object of the Conference, in addition to generally furthering left-wing propaganda and organization in the trade unions, was to organize a great drive behind the R. I. L. U. plan for the calling of an international convention at which both the Amsterdam and Bed Internationals shall be merged and the world’s labor movement united. This drive for unity has developed powerful support in the British unions. The British trade unions are fast coming to realize that Amsterdam, with its policy of class collaboration, can do nothing for them. They are turning their eyes more and more to revolutionary methods, and Russia is an inspiration to them.

When the delegates of the Russian trade unions came to the Hull convention of the British unions, they were given a mighty ovation. They invited the British to send a delegation to Russia. This was done, and the British delegates got a still more wonderful
demonstration at the Russian Trade Union Congress. The British delegation endorsed the plan of the Russians for world unity. Moreover, they brought home a report glowingly supporting the Russian revolution and pointing out its achievements. The delegation was headed by Purcell, President of the British Trades Union Congress and chairman of the Amsterdam International.

These leaders, backed by the left wing generally in the unions, left Thomas and the other right-wingers gasping. But they have been unable to develop any real organization to meet the events. The General Council adopted their Russian delegation's report unanimously, and are preparing to set up an Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee to fight for world unity. This creates a ticklish situation in the Amsterdam International. The British unions are the backbone of that organization, and if the right wing, led by Outidge, Grosman, Joshua, et al., who are bitterly fighting against unity, attempt to block the combined efforts of the British Union Committee to fight for world unity. This creates a ticklish situation in the Amsterdam International. That would be a fatal blow to it and would definitely mark the ascendency of the left wing in the world labor movement.

The resolution adopted at the Battersea Unity Conference supported the policy of the General Council of the British trade unions. It said:

"International unity, to first capitalism, not to defend it, can only be achieved if the labor movement of all countries, and particularly our own, succeeds in forcing the Amsterdam International to agree to the convening, together with the R.I.L.U., of a world trade union congress. At this congress, representatives of all the trade union organizations affiliated to both the Amsterdam and the R.I.L.U., as well as those trade unions outside any international organization, shall be present. Only at such a world congress as this will it be possible to unity our forces. We must break with the policy of class peace, and collaborate with the League of Nations, that powerful instrument of capitalism, and create an international leadership fitting and willing to lead the battles of the working class against the capitalists, under the banner of one trade union movement."

The aim of the Minority Movement is to stir the masses and to swing them definitely into an irresistible demand for trade union unity, one that cannot be betrayed by weak or vacillating leadership. The resolution was moved by the veteran, Tom Mann, chairman of the Unity Conference, and it was seconded by another veteran, A. A. Gosspier, Secretary of the National of Furnishing Trades. Tom Mann looked younger than ever. He enthused the whole conference with his contagious vigor and militancy. Many speakers supported the resolution. I was struck by four features of their debate. One was their splendid ability as floor-men; quite evidently they were trade union militants of long standing. Another was their revolutionary understanding of Marxian and Leninist principles, still another was the definite close-to-home illustrations they gave on the need for unity. To them the fight against the Dawes plan was not a far-off thing but an immediate struggle. The third point that could only be solved by powerful and revolutionary organization. And, finally, I was struck with the compactness and homogeneity of the gathering. All seemed to think and react alike. It was such a contrast to the lack of homogeneity of our working class, made up of 50 races, with a multitude of jangling languages, religions, traditions, etc. The whole conference just breathed of the workshops. It was the real voice of the most intelligent and revolutionary elements of the working class.

In addition to the unity resolution, several other matters, more or less related to the immediate purpose of the conference, were handled. One of these was a very able report on the Sixth Russian Trade Union Congress, by Harry Pollitt, general secretary of the National Minority Movement. At the conclusion of his speech, Pollitt was bombarded with scores of questions dealing with every imaginable trade union problem in Russia: piece work, organization of women, children, the blind, condition of the cooperatives, unemployment, etc. The delegates betrayed the broadest knowledge of the situation and the greatest hunger for information. Such a demonstration would be utterly impossible at this time in a general congress. The leaders of the Labor Party were in the hands of reactionaries who have the pettiest kind of a petty bourgeois outlook, and, second, that the left wing is going herein to devote a much larger share of its efforts towards utilizing the great field for organization and propaganda presented by the cooperative movement.

The final resolution dealt with the present attempt of the government to put the railroad workers under military control. C. F. Cramp, president of the N. U. R., actually had proposed that this infamous measure be accepted if the government gives the unions guarantees that it will not be used to make the railroaders into scabs during strikes. But the rank and file are in most determined opposition to it. Any attempt to enforce it will surely be met by a great strike. Naturally, the Unity Conference pledged all help to develop such resistance. There were a number of delegates from foreign countries come to the conference to express their loyalty to the cause of international unity. Several ran dangers of imprisonment to reach the conference. Among those who spoke were Dandici, secretary of the C.I.T.U., of France, and representative of the R.I.L.U., Jim Larkin, son of Czecho-Slovakia, Miller of Germany, a delegate from India, and Jim Cannon, Comrade Cannon spoke for the Trade Union Educational League. He made a powerful presentation of the meaning of the meetings of the A. F. of L. to reenter the Amsterdam International. He also pointed (Continued on page 256)
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The world significance of the re-awakening that is now taking place in the ranks of British labor. He and the other speakers were tumultuously received by the conference.

Throughout the entire conference the program of the left wing in the trade unions was emphasized: amalgamation, shop committees, organization of the unorganized, etc. And these practical trade unions had made a effective way of piloting these as immediate, burning, bread-and-butter questions. The British workers are dangerously close to the hunger line. With them labor movement was a deadly serious thing. It would have been a revelation to many American revolutionists to see the extremely business-like manner with which the British workers went at their problems. A spirit of desperation that struck me was the entire absence of sentiment for dual unionism. One delegate, an I. W. W., spoke, and though he may have had secessionist ideas in his mind, he didn’t venture to give voice to them in this intensely trade union conference. All he did he was to kick against political action, and for this he was sharply attacked by several delegates, to the apparent satisfaction of the whole conference.

A Great Storm Brewing

Undoubtedly most important developments are impending in the British labor movement. The struggle for world unity is of itself tremendously significant. But the British labor movement has been bearing a double burden with its employers. Serious disputes are brewing among the miners, metal workers, and many other trades. A general feeling of discontent among the workers is evident. In no trade does it prevail quite as extensively as in the coal fields. The workers are striking the big coal rosters with tenacity and against all the workers in the United States.

The British working class is stripping for action, preparing for battle. Joining hands with the Moscow trade unionists, it makes its first move. The British working class is in the process of assuming control.