

Reformism In Full Swing

By J. T. MURPHY

EDITOR'S NOTE.—Interest in the British labor movement is intensified by the setback given the Ramsay MacDonald labor government in parliament on Monday. In order to understand the British situation you must read these articles by J. T. Murphy, British Communist and trade unionist. They will appear in the DAILY WORKER during the remainder of this week. Today's installment is as follows:

EVERY day that goes by is simply crammed with incidents justifying every prediction and every word of criticism the Communists have made with regard to the Labor Government. Within a single month of office all the cards are on the table: "Labor Imperialism," "Empire Development," "Industrial peace," "social insurance," "sops for the workers," "national agreements," "wages boards," etc., etc., in short every possible measure to stifle the spirit of revolt. And the Trades Union bureaucracy are at one with the Labor Government in carrying this policy thru. The dock strike settlement is illuminating in this respect.

Compromise Strike.

The strike ended on a compromise. A compromise that could have been secured without the strike. The terms of settlement were practically agreed upon before the strike begun. Mr. Shaw proposed the compromise which was the main feature of the settlement, secretly, with the difference of four weeks only on the settlement of the second shilling.

The dockers demanded 2 shillings at once. The terms are 1 shilling now, another 1 shilling per day beginning of June. Mr. Shaw proposed the latter to begin at the end of June. But there had to be a strike for the benefit of the leaders. Bevin and Tillet had to win back the confidence of the men and make an attempt to smash the Stevedores Union which had captured many of the Transport Union's members in the unofficial strike of last year. They got the strike, magnificently complete. And then began the developments.

Promptly the Labor Government initiated the Industrial Court of Inquiry in accordance with the policy of fostering conciliation and preventing strikes, or when strikes do occur to confine them to very limited channels. At once Bevin seized the position for lime light and the court abruptly closed with Bevin the winner. The chairman and the Minister of Labor brought the contending parties together and the same night the terms were arranged. But the men refused. They had been told there would not be any compromise whatever and resented the slightest climb down with so complete a hold upon the situation.

Government Strike-Breaking Agency. The Prime Minister had already announced that the Government was taking every necessary measure to safeguard the food supplies of the "nation" and had the nucleus of an organization ready for the job. Then the Postmaster General, Mr. Hartsorn, one time leader of the South Wales Miners' Federation, proceeded to secure voluntary labor, that is blackleg labor to remove the foreign mails. The police proceeded to protect the blacklegs. The naval ratings were called in to help.

Meanwhile the union leaders proceeded to control the men. And this is how they did it. Bevin spoke as follows to the delegate conference which was returning to the districts to reverse the instructions of the men. "The Government is responsible for the moving of mails. They have re-

frained from using soldiers, naval ratings, blacklegs or force of any kind. But they are being driven up against it, and soon will have to take the choice of exercising their powers or going out of office. That was the choice and there is no need to beat about the bush. We discussed the position with the Government . . . I want you to see the influence on our judgement in the course of the developments that have gone on."

Three days later Bevin had won. The Labor Government had won and the transport workers believed they had won a lot. And so they had. Following upon the Locomotivemen's modification of the reductions which were being imposed upon them they had by direct action won back nearly to the position of 1922 when their wages were 12 shillings per day with the cost of living 79% higher than 1914. Now they were 11 shillings per day with the cost of living at the same figure. By the time they get the next 1 shilling there is every probability that the cost of living will have risen at least another five points and nullified the second shilling as a gain. Nevertheless they have broken the back of the offensive on wages and given an impetus to all other workers to be up and doing. And the demands for increases in wages are rolling in from all directions.

But let us look more closely at the terms of settlement. The first six clauses deal with the wages questions and the adjustment of piece work prices, overtime rates etc. thereto.

Terms of Settlement.

7. **Local Joint Committees.** Local Joint Committees shall on the request of either side, consider, with a view to arriving at local settlements, the following matters: a) Time workers differentials when working to or from pieceworkers. b) The adjustment of piecework rates which are deemed too high or unduly low. c) Adjustment exceptional working conditions, providing that the decisions and minutes issued by the National Joint Council shall not be displaced locally. d) Questions of safety working and general conditions affecting health.

8. **Local Joint Committees** shall meet within seven days of written request by either side to consider etc., etc. . . . Failing agreement within one month from such request or other time mutually agreed upon matters shall be deemed to have been referred to National Joint Council and its findings shall be deemed final and binding on all parties.

9. **Decasualisation.** The parties to this agreement shall agree to appoint a sub-committee, the Minister of Labor to appoint an independent chairman . . . to examine the proposal for a guaranteed week with a view to arriving at an agreement to give effect to the Shaw report.

10. Either party to this agreement desiring to amend or end the agreement shall give one month's notice. Upon such notice being given the parties shall meet forthwith to discuss the position. Failing agreement at the end of one month from such notice the parties may extend by agreement or either party may give fourteen days to terminate the agreement.

12. This agreement shall be considered as a modification of the national agreement of May 5th, 1920 and subsequent conditions attached thereunder.

With the concessions on wages and the promised inquiry into the decasualisation question the leaders have won the confidence of the men. With the creation of the above machinery and the popularization of the Industrial Court, the leaders and the Labor Government have now got their grip upon the transport workers for

a long time to come. They have gained the machinery of conciliation to stifle strikes, to delay them and to strangle them.

Milk and Water Laborites.

Immediately they had succeeded the Daily Herald opens with a campaign for Courts of Inquiry. Here we are told, within a few short weeks a miners strike will be upon us. Why not a Court of Inquiry now and avoid all the distress and dislocation of industry which strikes entail? We are told to look at the Steel Smelters Confederation, the highest paid workers in the country operating with a sliding scale which goes up or down according to the cost of living, and they have had no strike for forty years. Look at the National Union of Railwaymen, how they are settling things without strikes. In this policy the General Council of the Trades Union Congress is lending every assistance and is turning to account its latest concession to the revolutionary workers of the unemployed committees. It has begun thru its joint committee of the Congress and the Unemployed Workers' Committee to take the sting out of the movement by giving it a respectable constitutional agitation with the sting drawn out of the demands. It is clear that the concession to the Unemployed is part of the big concerted move to maneuver the whole working class movement into a truce with capitalism. The final debate on Poplar adds strength to this contention.

Poplar Debate No. 2 Rent Bill.

John Wheatley, the Minister of Health scored a "parliamentary triumph" but he delivered, on behalf of MacDonald, a most hefty blow at the workers of Poplar and everywhere else where they had been actively fighting for the guardians to line up with the Poplar policy. He turned the tables on Asquith and the Tories but failed utterly to take his stand with the Poplar guardians and fight the opposition as a class war fighter. His case was purely a parliamentary case, on the rights and wrongs of the procedure he had taken with regard to cancelling the order which nobody had been able to enforce. He said: "Let me summarize what I have been saying. I have not surrendered Poplar. I do not intend to surrender Poplar. I have rescued MY department from a state of degradation. I have put my department in a position in which it can and will enforce the law and do so fearlessly because impartially and fairly. . . . I am willing and anxious, as is the Government, to reform the Poor Law, and particularly the Poor Law system of London, at the earliest possible moment and in doing so I will see, if I am in office, that the rights of the poor and the principles of Popular Government are protected in the measure submitted to the House."

In an earlier part of the speech he declared, "I am not defending the Poplar Guardians. That is not my business or my duty."

Lansbury was left to face the brunt of this part of the business and it seems to settle very definitely the fate of Wheatley in the cabinet of MacDonald. To decline to line up with Poplar when every section of the opposition were attacking Poplar and cared not two pence whether the Poor Law was reformed or not so long as Poplar could be discredited in the eyes of the people, may be good parliamentarism in the MacDonald school but it is damned poor class war fighting.

Poor Law Reform.

Indeed his final declaration on the Poor Law reform is a complete surrender to the Liberals who are only becoming enthusiastic about poor law

reform because they feel that the only way to defend the spread of Poplarism which is growing in the Boards of Guardians is to transfer the functions of granting relief to Councils where they feel the capitalist forces have a firmer hold. From being an outspoken critic of MacDonald, Wheatley is becoming his most powerful ally, may be later to supersede him, but only to pursue more vigorously the policy of MacDonald.

This he is making obvious on his building schemes. Planning to build on a large scale and cheap which will catch the eyes of the multitude he desires the stability of capitalism over a period of years in order to carry out the dilution scheme with regard to skilled labor in the building industry. He is therefore asking for a building scheme extending over fifteen to twenty years with a working agreement between employers and workers without the slightest inroad into the powers of the capitalists.

That he has got great scope with the housing problem no one can dispute. In 1911 nearly 5 million persons in Great Britain lived more than two in a room; over 1 million in Scotland alone were living more than three in a room. (The Government standard of overcrowding is more than two in a room, living rooms included.) If the surplus persons had been removed from the overcrowded houses and re-housed in 5-roomed houses on the basis of 10 persons to a house 200,000 new houses would have been required in 1911. By 1914 there was an absolute shortage of 320,000 working class houses. During the war practically no houses were built except in overcrowded munition areas. At the end of the war the shortage was 520,000. Under the Addison scheme (1919 to 1922) 176,000 houses were built. At the present time it is estimated that there is an absolute shortage of at least 800,000 houses, without making any allowance for an improvement in standard.

These were the conditions that forced up the rents. In 1915 the Government in war time introduced the first rents restriction act. This was continued until the summer of 1923 when the government announced its policy of gradual decontrol until 1925 when all control was to be removed. The act limited the landlord to increasing his rent not more than 40% above pre-war plus any increase in rates. Nor could the landlord turn out a tenant without finding alternative accommodation. The new policy permitted the landlord to turn out the tenant without providing alternative accommodation if he bought the house before June 1923 and wanted it for himself or child of his over 18. That would mean also that control of rents would lapse as houses were released.

Outdoing Liberals in Liberalism.

This week a private members Bill was read twice and is likely to be adopted by the Government as a Government Bill fathered by Wheatley, which proposes to extend State control until 1928 and impose new restrictions on the landlords right of recovering possession of the house. It further proposes to cut the 40% above pre war rent to 25%. That this will be popular outside there is not the slightest doubt. Add to this the proposal for 9 shillings-per-week-houses and it will be seen that the Labor Government is straining every nerve to win mass support and win confidence by social amelioration. They are striving to outdo the Liberals in Liberalism. Partly for these motives and partly for motives of international politics the question of the 48-hour week is receiving immediate attention.

Thursday: The 48-hour Week.