

# The World of Labor • Industry & Agriculture

## An Eventful Year in British Trade Unionism

By J. T. MURPHY.

DURING the last twelve months an entirely new attitude has been adopted by trades union officialdom of Great Britain towards the criticisms levelled by the Communist Party. I say "new" in the sense that a great change has been made, and not from the point of view of originality. Two years ago a handful of Communists at the Trades Union Congress succeeded in making an exhibition of the trades union leaders. For months the Communist Party had been campaigning in the union against the lack of real leadership, the sectionalism in union organization, etc. We were demanding a greater centralization of power in the hands of the General Council of the Trades Union Congress in order to bring greater forces into action in time of strikes. We had succeeded in getting a resolution thru one of the unions supporting our proposals and it came before the Congress for discussion.

Then we witnessed an amazing spectacle. Smillie of the Miners Federation was in favor, the somewhat halfhearted about it. Hodges of the same organization opposed it. Clynes of the General Workers opposed it. Thorne, a leader of the same organization, was in favor. And so it went on from union to union. The leader of the union who was on the General Council was in favor. The leader of the union who was not on the General Council was against in all cases. And everybody could see that all of them were really scared at what was implied and preferred to speak of the Council as an instrument for peace. Of course the proposals were defeated but the parade of these people on the platform was something to be remembered. It was evident that for the first time the Communists had got them on the run.

### The Bureaucrats Retreat.

The next year they were better prepared with changes of their own along the lines of making inquiries and testing the feelings of the union membership to see how far they would go. The Communists came to the attack again and it was due to their attacks on the trades union leadership that the "Back to the Unions Campaign" was initiated. Since the transformation of the old Parliamentary Committee of the Trades Union Congress into the bolder sounding General Council of the Trades Union Congress these attacks as well as the position into which the trades unions had drifted, made it imperative that the Council should function in a much larger fashion.

The characteristic weakness of the Council is due to the fact that it was never intended to function as a fighting organization. While all the big unions such as the Miners Federation with its million members, the Railway Union with its 350,000, the Transport Union with its 400,000 were all affiliated, they never let any of their power go into the General Council.

They always reserved autonomous rights to decide what was best for their union and took care at any Trades Union Congress that no decision would be taken committing them to any general action which might involve joint struggles. Joint propaganda? Yes. Joint strike action? No. They safeguarded this position still further by always selecting the chairman of the Council from one of the weakest unions, say from the Boot-makers Union or the Musicians Union. Never have they given the weight and prestige of one of the big unions to the leadership of the Council and the whole union movement.

The new critics caught them unready but without power to put anything thru. Had the Communists rested content with criticizing the actions of the Council they could have been treated as disruptionists and denounced, but to face a proposal that they (the Council) should have more power and responsibility was an awkward proposition which had to be dodged. They dodged it by referring to the rank and file of the particular union, knowing quite well that there were sufficient interests at stake in the unions to get the proposal turned down.

### Side-Tracking the Unemployed.

But it was clear to them that something more must be done. The Unemployment Movement had become a factor during 1922 that they could no longer ignore. Again the Communists were busy denouncing them for the isolation of the unemployed and demanding that they take action for joint campaigns of employed and unemployed workers. They had given lip service to the unemployed at previous congresses, permitted an unemployed worker to address the Congress, taken up a collection and wished them good luck. This would not do. They were being denounced and losing prestige. Fortunately for them at this stage the Secretary of the General Council, Mr. Bowerman, was retiring. He had never been anything more than an ornament and it was a general relief to everybody that age was solving a problem for them. A new General Secretary was needed capable of meeting this new opposition with well thought out counter moves. They found the man in Mr. Fred Bramley.

### Enter Fred Bramley.

Bramley is no fool. He is clever in all trade union affairs and has a fairly intimate contact with all phases of the workers movement. He is a member of the Furnishing Trades Union and is a chairmaker by trade, tho how many years ago it is since he worked at this job I do not know. For years he was a Clarion Van propagandist when Blatchford was pioneering "Birtain for the British." Later he became a union branch secretary, made himself acquainted with the cooperative movement and the Labor Party. He claims to be "moderately advanced" and as everyone knows, this type is very valuable for negotiating with the "Left." He can always

tell them that "he thoroughly understands and admires them, and will help them to the best of his ability to work out 'practical' proposals."

So the 1923 Congress introduces us to Mr. Bramley as the General Secretary and the first experiments in the "new Policy." He at once proceeded to take out the sting of the Communist contention that the General Council isolated the unemployed. There was danger that the joint Council proposal which had been pressed upon them was going to be ignored and a further justification of Communist criticism would be placed on record. Bramley averted that and set to work not only to discount our criticism but to take the sting out of the unemployed's propaganda. A Joint Council? Certainly. A joint campaign on behalf of the unemployed? Certainly. The negotiations were spread over several months in which the whole aim is to extract from the unemployed proposals any sting which might appear to be "too revolutionary" and give it the color of "practicability." The final outcome is

"The Unemployed's Six-point Charter," which reads:

We Demand:

1. "Work or effective maintenance for all unemployed workers, and increased government assistance to be provided thru the trades unions. All unemployed relief to be completely dissociated from Poor Law administration."
2. "The immediate development of government schemes of employment to absorb the unemployed in their own trade at trade union rates of wages and conditions."
3. "The establishment of state workshops for the purpose of supplying the necessary service or commodities to meet the requirements of government departments."
4. "The reduction in the hours of labor necessary to absorb unemployed workers, the normal working day or week to be regulated by the requirements of the industry."
5. "The establishment of occupational training centers for unemployed workers, providing proper training with effective maintenance, particularly for unemployed boys and girls and able-bodied ex-service men."
6. "The provision of suitable housing accommodations at rents within the means of wage earners, and the proper use of existing houses."

Only on one of these demands did Bramley from generalities to a specific demand and that was on the scale of unemployed pay. In the leaflet issued to explain the "Charter" an effective piece of propaganda is conducted which throws a vivid light on social conditions in England. It asks the question "What is effective maintenance?" and answers by comparing costs of the maintenance of criminals and inmates of Poor Law institutions. It says:

"Mr. Neville Chamberlain informed the House of Commons on August 1, 1923, that the cost per head in Poor Law institutions was £88-5s-3/4d per year.

On Poor Law scale two adults would cost ..... £176  
Two children (equal to one adult) ..... 88

Total cost per annum ..... £264  
Total cost per week (approx) £ 5

"Mr. Bridgeman, late Home Secretary, informed the House of Commons on August 2, 1923, that the cost of maintaining a convict in H. M. Prisons was £111 per year.

On the convict scale two adults would cost ..... £222  
Two children (equal to an adult) cost ..... £111

Total cost per annum ..... £333  
Total cost per week ..... £6, 8s

"The Unemployed Workers have suggested the following scale for unemployed maintenance:  
Man and wife, per week £ 3-  
Two children, per week ..... 18s

Total cost per annum ..... £ 3-18s  
Or an annual cost of ..... £202-16s

"The question arises: Are Unemployed Workers entitled to maintenance equivalent to that provided for Poor Law inmates and convicts in H. M. Prisons?"

This is really good propaganda, but it will be observed that Bramley has successfully avoided committing the General Council to the scale as a demand and hid himself in generalities as a means of escape when challenging as to whether this is the demand of the trades unions.

The other leaflets are not so specific as this one. They are similar to the demands as quoted above. The Unemployed Organization and the General Council conducted joint meetings and demonstrations with these as their platform. But coincident with the campaign, the Labor Government initiated a measure for the abolition of "the gap" in unemployed insurance pay. This gap means that unemployed pay was made for a number of weeks, say twenty-six weeks, and then the unemployed worker received

nothing from the state insurance for a period of three weeks.

The idea behind this was to drive the workers to "really look for work." The effect was to drive to the boards of guardians for Poor Law relief. The unemployed seized hold of this grievance to make great demonstrations to the guardians. Now that the "gap" is abolished the unemployed receive unemployed insurance pay all the year round and the agitators at the Boards of Guardians are accordingly diminishing. So between the action of the Labor Government and the policy of the General Council the sting has been taken out of the unemployed agitation and it has become quite constitutional and peaceful.

### The Trades Councils' Movement.

A similar maneuver has been conducted in relation to the agitation for the re-institution of the Trade Councils. Again on the initiative of the Communist Party a movement was set going to make of these local organizations of the trades unions a rallying center for activity and struggle.

Trades Councils arose early in the nineteenth century as local combinations of unions in strikes and lock outs. They unite the unions of all industries in the council. They paved the way to the Trades Union Congress and at first were constituent parts of the Congress, but when the national trades unions became a force, they feared that these local combinations operating in the National Congress might be instrumental in checking the power of the growing bureaucracy in the unions and on the motion of John Burns, who pleaded that many unions were being represented twice over in the Congress thru the Trades Council, they were dismantled.

The national unions thus scored a big victory and for many years the Trades Councils were either isolated or turned into electoral machinery for parliamentary aspirants. Two factors helped to revive interest in them again after the war. The growth of the Labor Party and the sectional defeats of the unions. The Labor Party is based on the unions and as it grew in power the leaders became exceedingly conscious of the fact that without a strong individual membership subscribing to their program their position as leaders in politics was becoming precarious. The number of middle class people anxious to join the Labor Party encouraged them to launch the campaign for individual members as distinct from mass affiliation of the unions.

This led to the neglect of industrial matters by the Trades Councils during a period when the unions were suffering heavy defeats thru sectional action. The Communist Party pointed at once to the fact that they had machinery to hand in the Trades Councils for uniting the workers in common struggle and made capital out of the fact that the Labor Party had contributed to the weakening of the situation by concentrating the Trades Councils on electioneering at the expense of the industrial struggles. The agitation spread until a few months ago a national conference of Trades Councils was held in Birmingham led by Comrade Pollitt, an executive member of the Communist Party. This conference demanded re-affiliation to the Trades Union Congress amongst a number of other demands, both political and industrial. Again Bramley on behalf of the General Council, countered the proposal by calling a conference of the Trades Councils "with a view to the better co-ordination of the work of the Trades Union Congress and the Trades Councils." This was a much cleverer move than that adopted by his predecessors who had wanted to stamp out any such activity from the beginning.

The conference met and Bramley presented them with a series of proposals which ignored the principal demand of the Trades Councils and yet made a very plausible alternative. Instead of direct affiliation to the congress, he argued that it would make the congress too cumbersome and it would be better if the National Committee of the Trades Councils set up at the conference were represented on the General Council. In addition, in order to destroy the impression that the councils were of no value to the Trades Union Congress, they should become the means of distributing the literature of the congress, and joining with the General Council in trades union recruiting campaigns in the various localities. The Trades Councils are discussing these proposals at the present time and no doubt will have made a decision by the time of the Trades Union Congress in September. Their weakness lies in the fact that the trades unions control the union funds and they have no sufficient resources to develop rapidly in opposition to these maneuvers. With a few slight modifications, it is most probable that Bramley's proposals will carry thru and once more the reformist elements will have at least temporarily drawn the sting from the agitation.

### The Left Wing Program.

A third big development is the response of the General Council thru Bramley again to the agitation for

a left wing program in the union movement. During the last twelve months there has grown a considerable ferment amongst the trades union leaders. Such men as Hutchinson of the Engineering Union, Hicks of the Building Workers' Union, Purcell of the Furnishing Trades' Union, Bramley of the Locomotive Engineers' and Firemen's Union, Cook of the Miners, have been ventilating their views in the columns of the "Labor Monthly" and the "Workers' Weekly" on the need for a left wing program and a new direction for the Trades Union movement.

Bramley thought things over, searched in a business-like way thru the records of the Trades Union Congresses and sorted out the resolutions of national importance that had been passed by succeeding congresses stretching over a period of years. Then, combining his research work with the more recent decisions, he crystallized them into a program which he proposes to place before the Trades Union Congress as its "Charter." Some of the demands appear most revolutionary, but the Charter must not be regarded as having anything to do with the means of getting the demands into operation. But first read:

### "The Workers' Charter."

1. Nationalization of the land.
2. Nationalization of the railways.
3. Nationalization of mines and minerals.
4. Hours of labor — a legal maximum working week of 44 hours.
5. Legal minimum wage for each industry or occupation.
6. Pensions for all at the age of 60.
7. Pensions for mothers with dependent children.
8. Adequate provisions for unemployment, with proper maintenance for the unemployed.
9. Establishment of training centers for unemployed boys and girls, with the extension of training facilities for adults during periods of depression.
10. Provisions of proper housing accommodation.
11. Improved facilities to be provided by the state from elementary schools to universities.
12. The extension of state and municipal employment for the purpose of prompting social necessities and service.

There have been resolutions passed affirming each of these demands at one time or another in the Trades Union Congress.

The Charter will no doubt be passed at the next Trades Union Congress. All the propaganda thunder will have thus been stolen from the 'left' and their complaints dismissed by reference to the Charter. It will drive them to the issue of constitutional versus unconstitutional action. The Trades Union Congress led by the General Council will say "Here is our program of demands. It is impossible to secure them without the people vote for them thru parliament. It is the duty of those who now complain to awaken the unions to a sense of its parliamentary responsibility. Practically all the unions in the Trades Union Congress are affiliated to the Labor Party and we should strengthen its hands by a powerful campaign in the unions. The alternative is unconstitutional action against which the Trades Unions have set their face. Unconstitutional action means acting contrary to the rules and regulations of the unions and we are the custodians of these rules and regulations. Do you suggest that we should break our own trade union laws established thru many years of struggle?"

The "Charter" therefore represents a clever move to place the whole of the left wing in the trades union movement into an awkward position, with most of their immediate demands agreed upon insofar as they have put them forward as program demands for the unions. When placed in relation to the Unemployed Charter and the Trades Council proposals it represents the culmination of twelve months' strategy against the awakening left wing of the unions. Parallel with it there has been a consistent campaign against strikes and for industrial peace, goodwill between the workers and the employers. At the same time the General Council has been tolerant towards the unofficial strikers while disapproving of their actions. For example when the capitalist press came out with a vicious campaign against the Communist Party and the strikers during the recent unofficial strike on the railways, Bramley issued a statement to the effect that this was a useless and misleading campaign and that it was usually found that workers did not go on strike for fun. Invariably there was a good foundation for every strike other than mere agitation. In every one of the strikes of recent date, he stated, the workers who struck their work had been and were suffering under intolerable conditions and if those who complained of the strikes really wanted to see these unofficial outbreaks stopped they must join with

the unions round the conference table and remove the grievances by improved conditions of labor.

The Minority Movement Arises.  
This rapid changing of position, of stroke and counter stroke is leading us quickly to exceedingly important developments. The formal acceptance of the demands from the left wing of the movement has its limits. To accept them may mean for a time that the central authorities in the Trades Union Movement has succeeded in driving the left wing to new positions. But acceptance has also its obligations. And the limits of their policy are nearly reached. This is made clear in the replies of Bramley concerning the unofficial strikes. Here he is brought up against the actual struggles of the workers against the bosses and has to call to the employers for help. So long as the demands of the left were within the limits of propaganda and inter-union relations he had scope for maneuvering. Now he must appeal for "goodwill" where there is none. The failure of the bosses to come to his aid simply intensifies and strengthens the position of the left wing in the unions who are insisting on a fighting policy and organizing their agitation in the development of what has become known as the Minority Movement.

This movement is the result of the initiative of the Communist Party. Starting with the most important industries, such as mining, engineering and transport, the party propagated the idea of organizing the union locals on the basis of immediate demands such as improvement in wages, shorter working hours, nationalization of certain industries, etc. In the mining industry the campaign has been particularly successful and the Party can say without hesitation that the election of A. J. Cook to the secretaryship of the Miners Federation of Great Britain is directly due to its initiative thru the Miners Minority Movement. The measure of our progress in the Engineering unions is indicated in the success of Comrade Tom Mann in the recent ballot in the Engineering Union for Parliamentary candidates. Mann topped the poll.

But more significant still is the development of shop committees in the railway workshops which led to the recent unofficial strike. For more than two years the men working in these workshops have been the victims of the inter-union wrangling between the craft unions and the National Union of Railwaymen. The Communist Party declared that the only possible means of combatting this state of affairs was to create workshop committees and use them as a driving force against the union bureaucracy. The strike came before the workshop committee organization had spread thru the country. From this point of view the strike may be deemed premature. But with this point of view we are not particularly concerned. True the strike was defeated, but it has given an impetus to the campaign for the shop committees and exposed the leaders of the unions as treacherous reformists.

What answer can the General Council of the Trades Union Congress or the trades union bureaucracy give to this new development. It is useless to accuse the Minority Movement of the aim to smash the trades unions for they are continually campaigning for new leaders and slowly getting them. It is useless also for them to reply that they have put the demands of the Minority Movement on their program, for the demand of this movement is to fight for the program as well as to propagate it. A number of leaders are already affected by this new development and are sensitive to any accusations against their willingness to fight. The coming Minority Conference to be held in August of this year will be of immense importance and will indicate how far we have got in the development of this oppositional movement. It proposes on the basis of a common program of action to unite all the minorities into one big Minority Movement. If it is successful in this task the fight between the 'left' and the 'right' is likely to become hotter and hotter within a comparatively short period and affect the Labor Party profoundly.

### The Labor Party "Left."

Immediately after the last general election and the formality of the Labor Government things pointed to the formation of a left wing in the Labor Party out of the Scottish members of parliament from the Glasgow I. L. P. This project was scuttled thru the inclusion of Wheatley in the Labor Cabinet. By this means MacDonald took the sting out of it, and its actions became more and more feeble. At the recent Conference of the Independent Labor Party, at which all its members were present not one offered the slightest criticism to MacDonald's betrayal of Socialism. It was profoundly clear from that moment that any opposition to MacDonald would have to begin in some other direction. The failure of these lead-

ers drove the issue back to the masses themselves.

The Minority Movement is the answer. Rising out of the economic struggle under the leadership of the Communist Party it forms the foundation of the oppositional movement to MacDonald's Labor Imperialist Government. This is the section of the working class movement which is the first to feel bitter resentment against the union bureaucracy and the Labor Government. At first it is stronger against the union bureaucracy than the government and for that reason digs itself deeper into the Labor Movement. It feels that it is the union bureaucracy that is letting them down in the actual fight before the Labor Government is called into action. For this reason the movement surges against the union leaders before it reaches the government driving some to fight for and some to fight against them. Those leaders who want to line up with the workers develop a resentment against the government because they feel that it is making the situation more difficult by the continual pleas concerning the difficulties of a Minority Government. These are becoming susceptible to the criticism of the Communist Party and begin to feel that their interests are bound up with a leftward movement. Then the fact that the Labor Party is composed in the main of all these unions causes a draught within its ranks which would rapidly fan the flames of discontent were it not for the moderating influence of MacDonald's excuse—that he has not a majority in parliament. This is the one big factor which militates against the rapid development of a left wing force in the Labor Movement directed against the Labor Government. If the Labor Government does not try to hold on to office longer than next year's budget we shall not see a very large political opposition in the Labor Party for a considerable time, and the oppositional movement will be directed against the Trades Union bureaucracy which in turn will endeavor to give it a political direction by holding out the golden dream of what will come when Labor has really a majority in parliament.

This latter maneuver is the only reply that the Bramleys can give to the growing Minority Movement in the unions. To a large extent it will carry weight in the minds of the workers but it will not stop the movement growing. On the other hand it will help the Communist Party to give the Minority Movement a deeper political consciousness. The Communist Party is the only body which has nothing to fear from these developments and everything to gain. It is laying the foundations of a revolutionary opposition to reformism in a manner characteristic of British Labor thruout its history. The Labor Party itself sprang from the trades unions as their experience destroyed their belief in the capitalist parties. Today the revolutionary opposition to reformism is developing in similar fashion as the actual experiences of the unions show the futility of reformist policy and leadership.

The Trades Union Congress, meeting in September, will be able to look back upon an eventful year and be brought face to face with new developments in all the large unions. It will try to escape under the influence of its parliamentarians. The voice of the Minority Movement and the Communist Party will be heard. The parliamentary reformists will succeed in carrying the Congress with them without leaving any lasting impression. The Congress will pass and the forces I have described will take their course leading to a first class battle between the protagonists of Reform versus Revolution for the leadership of the labor movement.


### Calles Stays Awhile.

HAMBURG, August 21.—President-elect Plutarco Calles of Mexico will stay here until Friday, when he will go to Berlin to be received by his friend, President Ebert. A good time will be had by all.

### From Alphonse to Gaston.

VIENNA, Aug. 21.—Chancellor Siepel of Austria today sent a congratulatory message to German Chancellor Marx on his supposed success at the London conference. Siepel thinks it guarantees world peace at last!

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