

The Position of the Parties in England

By J. T. MURPHY.

AFTER the defeat of the Baldwin government the stock of the Conservative party went very low. It did not improve matters for itself when it retained office and brought in a window dressing program consisting of items culled from the programs of the Liberals and the Labor party. All that it succeeded in doing was making clear to everybody that, apart from its protectionist policy, there was little to distinguish it from the National Liberals of the Lloyd George group. Especially was this emphasized when MacDonald proposed, on its one remaining plank of imperial preference, to leave all parties free to vote without the organized pressure of the party whips. There was nothing left for the Conservative party to do but to become the anti-Socialist propagandist body in the defense of property interests and to work for the discrediting of the Labor administration as a means of gathering the discontents of the Liberals who were class conscious and reorganize its forces pending an opportunity to take once again the lead on some patriotic issue.

During the first three months of Labor in the government it has failed to make much progress with its anti-Socialist propaganda, an it is a long way from having done much in the way of party reorganization. It has appointed a new organizer, who may have a good reputation for organizing tramways and tube railways, but he has not yet made up for the want of a program sufficiently distinctive to make the party a real inspiring force even amongst the defenders of capitalism. Its anti-Socialist propaganda has done it more harm than good, because it is so perfectly obvious that the Labor government is indistinguishable from a Liberal government except for the fact that there are men in its ranks who have been drawn from the working class. That, as a matter of fact, adds to the popular favor. It is looked upon as more democratic, more broadly representative than if the Liberal party had formed the government. The attacks upon the Labor government are strengthening it. The class hatred of the ardent members of the Conservative party has made them indiscreet and caused them to forget the people with whom they are dealing. The masses of this country are far from being as politically alive as the masses on the continent. The effect of the attacks only rouses the cry, "Why, hang it all, they haven't had a chance"; "Give them fair play"; "You are jealous because you are not in office." But no discussion of politics would follow from such remarks. No attempt would be made to understand the whys and wherefores of attacks or defense. It would simply be a question of giving "fair play" to the new lot.

This attitude towards politics is difficult for Europeans to understand. I will illustrate it still further in order to show the tremendous psychological factors against which especially a revolutionary party has to work, and how cleverly the capitalist class for the best part of a century have supplemented their efforts to keep the workers out of politics by developing the sports.

I remember well the scene at a Labor party conference in London when Mr. Henderson introduced Kerensky and refused a hearing to Litvinoff. He received a tremendous ovation. Had the platform been given to Litvinoff instead of Kerensky, he would have received the same ovation and welcome. It would not matter about the contrast in the politics of the two individuals. They were visitors and should be treated accordingly, given fair play to express themselves, a good cheer as a sign of good sportsmanship and permitted to depart. If the leaders thought it advisable to move a resolution in favor of the speech delivered, it would be passed and probably forgotten by all except the very small minority interested for or against it. It is this sentiment which both the Tories and the Liberals have roused against themselves and which is helping the Labor party to increase its influence enormously.

The reactions from this develop-

ment are growing steadily. The Tory party is driven to a policy of exaggerating the potentialities of the Labor party, and is busy raising the scare of Communism. And first one and then another of the Liberal party pass into its ranks, fearful of the drift of events. They see in the growing influence of the Labor party an awakening of the working class, which they dread. But nothing drastic may be expected from the Tory party as yet. The right wing is fostering its Fascist movement, altho it has not discovered its Mussolini. The Morning Post has definitely become the organ of this section, but Baldwin has not discovered his successor, either, and so the moment is not ripe for a bold, aggressive lead from the Tories. It has to re-gather its forceful leaders.

It is for this reason that so much attention is being given to Winston Churchill. In spirit and purpose, in class consciousness and hatred of the working class movement, he is as intense as the Duke of Northumberland and his Fascist battalions. But he is a more astute politician and more able in every way. He knows that the time is not yet for the scrapping of constitutionalism on behalf of the propertied interests. Constitutionalism is a big slogan for the rally of forces, and he has yet to get clear of the Liberal camp. He has accordingly taken up the same cries as the Tories, whilst playing with the language of the Liberals. The Tory party is playing up to him. In the recent election more than a hundred Here the leading party of the Labor Tory M. P.'s supported his campaign in Westminster, and now there is a proposal to find him a "safe" Tory seat in Liverpool. He can see quite clearly that the Labor party leaders have stolen all the thunder of the Liberal party and that he must find a new home.

The Liberal party is in a bad way, and Mr. Lloyd George sees this. So manifest is it that the Labor party has become the custodian of Liberalism that he is alternately pleading for an open Lib-Lab coalition and trouncing the Labor government for its departure from Socialist associations. He says that the Labor government has been rude to the Liberal party—in fact, insulting. It exists by virtue of the act of the Liberal party, and yet is attacking the Liberal party in the constituencies when the defeat of the Liberal candidate would mean only the substitution of another person and not another policy.

In his Llandudno speech this week he went frantic about the danger of losing the Liberal party. Time and again since the Labor government was established the Liberal party has been divided in its voting on the cruiser question, the Poplar question, on housing, and so on. It has really not functioned as a party. And frequently the smallest portion of the party has been with Lloyd George. He pleads then for the Liberal party to rally its forces as a party. Liberalism, he declares, as the representative of the middle classes, has saved Britain time and again from revolution. He says he cannot work with the Tories. The differences are so acute that it was made obvious to him in his experience with the coalition government that they were fundamental and prevented any rallying to the Tory party.

But he has forgotten, as the Liberal press seems also to forget, that it is the fact of the Labor government being a Liberal government, and its measures essentially the measures of the Liberal party, that, in order to distinguish itself and justify its existence, it has to vote and speak against Liberalism. The Liberal party is thus in process of dissolution, and every member of it is weighing his personal position. If he votes against Liberalism, how is he to justify his action to the electorate, especially when the opposition candidate comes forward with the same proposals which previously got him elected, with the additional advantage that he belongs to the party that is putting them into practice and has a wider popular appeal? Until the Labor party has gone thru a process of dividing its elements along class lines

there is no rallying ground for the Liberal party. Its prospects become less and less, with the possibility of a slice of it going into the Labor party, as well as others moving over to Churchill and the Tory party.

At this time the Labor party is the one party among those defending the interests of capitalism that is growing in strength and influence. Of that there is not the slightest doubt. It is attracting the middle classes, who have had their minds set at rest so far as dangerous Socialist politics are concerned. MacDonald has given them every assurance that they have nothing to fear. Socialism is a growth, a spirit, an attitude of mind, any old damn thing that will give you comfort when you are tired, inspire you when you are sad and increase your capacity for saying sentimental, sloppy things that don't mean anything. You can take part in an armament race and talk of brotherly love. You can . . . but there is no need to go on. The middle classes are feeling that the Labor Government is a jolly good thing.

The Labor Government is awakening a great interest in the working class. The abolition of the "gap" in unemployment pay and the other little items which I have mentioned previously have meant much to them. The handling of the industrial disputes and the settlements which have resulted in favor of the workers have given encouragement to the workers to forge ahead with their demands. The Labor Government has escaped from the bad situations it was developing, and any discontent which arose concerning its actions in the disputes has been laid to the account of the other parties, being in the majority in the Parliament. The blacklegging incidents have not been on sufficiently large a scale to create a general outcry. The traditional course of industrial disputes has accordingly been maintained without the masses seeing thru the policy that was being pursued by the Labor leaders. Prompt inquiries, spectacular debates, and then "practical compromise" and "fair play" have all done their share in giving a popular tone to the Labor Government in wide circles of the workers.

But there is a section which has had much cause for discontent and that is the section of the workers who have put all their hopes into the workers' movement. Those who have been active in the political party work are not so sure. They have grave misgivings that everything is not well. So many things have happened that they did not expect to happen. They feel discontented but are puzzled about this minority position and explain things away to themselves and others on the grounds of "giving the government a chance" and "not expecting them to do the same things as they would if they had a majority." But the discontent is there. Yet there is a strong loyalty. The trouble is that the whole movement is devoid of theoretical training and unable to explain its experiences even to itself.

The I. L. P. Conference at York this week shows the confusion in excelsis. Here the leading party of the Labor movement meets in conference. It isn't sure whether it is still a propaganda party or a party responsible for the political direction of the government. It has six cabinet ministers and 126 members of Parliament. The Premier is its leader. He feels no responsibility to the Party for the policy of the government. He gives a speech to the conference as if he were a fraternal guest and tells the conference that the government is doing its best, even goes to the extent of telling them to forget their socialist name, he prefers Labor in order to suppress all class distinctions. He gives them a lecture on moral uplift, on the spirit in which things have to be done, warns them against extremism, passes a joke or two, and is gone. There is great cheering, much patting on the back. There is no examination of policy, no question as to the significance of the actions of the Labor Government in relation to the fate of the working class, but a complete approval of the Labor Government and an adaptation of the Party to the demands of the government. Only once or twice was the

questioning voice raised—on pacifism and on the experts' report. The propagandist section wanted to stand for pure pacifism and immediately a leader arose and said that they must remember that they are no longer simply a propaganda body but that what they said today they had tomorrow to stand for in the Parliament. That came as a shock. And immediately the I. L. P., built upon quaker money, adjusted its conscience to the political requirements of the government and surrendered its old position. On the question of the experts' report it was the same. The report was never analyzed. The significance of its terms in relation to the working class was never mentioned. The old resolutions of the I. L. P. against reparations and indemnities were swept on one side. The question was explained that if this report was accepted there was chance of "securing a settlement" in Europe. If it was not accepted then things continued as they are. The action of the government was approved. Altho prominent men like Maxton who had been taking a distinctly different attitude in the Parliament to that adopted by MacDonald, were present not one of them led any criticism of the policy pursued or challenged MacDonald to face the music on any issue. Whatever the feelings of the so-called left wing of the I. L. P., its capacity for courageously and critically subjecting the policy of their party to a theoretical examination and challenging MacDonald on the floor of their own conference was gravely lacking. Indeed, to see the general ineptitude of the discontents in the presence of MacDonald is to get a forceful reminder that we are a long way from the clear division of forces in the Labor Party in terms of those who are prepared to pursue a class war and those who have surrendered to Liberalism, MacDonald has nothing to fear within the ranks of the Parliamentary Labor Party so far as any class war elements are concerned. There is plenty of blether but little capacity for raising an alternative leadership. MacDonald knew what he was doing when he drew Wheatley into his camp. He took the sting out of his wasp.

The only challenging force within the ranks of the working class, in short the only representative body of working class interests, is the small Communist Party. Every other party is hopelessly compromised as the defender of capitalism. Since the advent of the Labor government it has gained considerably in influence and made some progress in numbers. It has gained thru its activities in the strikes more than from its criticism of the government. It wielded considerable influence in the railway strike, the dock strike, the tramway and bus strike and got a tremendous advertisement in the Southampton and Wembley strikes altho there were only two Communists in Wembley and not even a party group at Southampton. Its criticisms of the Labor Government have been growing stronger week by week. On special issues such as in the armament debates, the air estimates and Indian repressions, it has come out vigorously. But the effect of these must not be wrongly estimated. It must not be thought that as soon as the voice of criticism is raised there is an automatic leaning toward the Communist Party. The value of the criticism will come later when experience has played its part. At the moment only a few are receptive. The majority resent criticism and regard it as "unfair." Nevertheless, it is slowly making itself felt and the confidence that is being created by the loyalty to the men taking part in strikes is getting the party a bigger hearing than ever before.

The conditions for the development of the party are only now developing on a large scale. And the party itself has a considerable distance to go before it is capable of taking advantage of all the opportunities that surround it. At the Second Congress of the Comintern there was no Communist Party. At the Battersea Conference in 1922 began the first attempt to get away from old socialist party forms and transform the party into a Com-

(Continued on next page.)

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(Continued from preceding page.)

munist Party. Right into the autumn of 1923 it was undergoing structural transformation, making a first attempt to apply the Third Congress decisions of the Comintern. During the whole of this period it hardly managed to hold its own members. New members joined the Party but old ones left as quickly. The whole of this activity has been in the midst of tremendous depression in the ranks of the working class. Still further changes were made as a result of the conference of the party executive with the Comintern E. C. in the middle of last year. It was not until the beginning of 1924 that it was possible for the developments then agreed upon to get moving. The main lines agreed upon were sound but it will take time for them to show the results we are after.

During the last eighteen months the party has concentrated so much on organization and the development of the circulation of the party paper, tried so hard to transform itself in terms of a paper scheme that the membership became tired. It needed new inspiration and enthusiasm. It was complained that the Executive was out of contact with the members and there was good grounds for the complaint. There had been no party conference for months, more than a year. It had been put off time and again. Finally we held a conference. Snags were removed. Preparations made for a Party Congress were afoot. The whole political situation changed and brought new vitality in the fight. And the Party has begun to grow.

But we have still to face the characteristic failing of the British movement as a whole. We have got to get past the stage of the purely propagandist party, conducting general propaganda, and become a political party of struggle. For this we need also a toning up of the quality of the party, the development of its theoretical equipment, in order to be able to diagnose correctly the significance of the political events that are unfolding and to deal with them concretely and with revolutionary purpose. All this will take time and require patience and persistence. But one thing is certain: That the party was never in a better condition than it is today, and it was never faced with greater opportunities for development.

The position of the parties is such that the two capitalist parties, the Liberals and the Tories, are still in turmoil and unable to take decisive action, and the Labor Party has begun to reveal to the masses of the workers concretely the meaning of "gradualism," while the Communist Party has become the one center to which the workers can turn as their eyes are opened to the great illusion.
