

Coming Fights in Britain

By Harry Pollitt

IT would be a big mistake to assume that because of the Labor Party success at the recent general election in Britain, that all trade union activity was likely to express itself more through the medium of Parliament now that there is a strong possibility of the formation of a Labor Government. As a matter of fact, it can now be placed on record that the British trade union movement is at last refusing to acquiesce any longer in the continual wage-slashing tactics that have been common for the last two and a half years, and all the signs now point to the unions commencing definite campaigns to get increased wages.

It has been estimated that during the last two years, the British workers have had their wages reduced over £600,000,000. This has brought about a condition of affairs unparalleled in the history of the Union movement. It was thought at the close of the war, that with over 6¼ million organized workers, a higher standard of living for all workers would not only be demanded but maintained. At the present time, the British workers are working harder and producing more for less real wages than ever before. Skilled engineers all over the country working a 47-hour week for a wage of £2/16/6; general laborers an average of 35 shillings per week; miners working 6 shifts a week, earning about £2/8/0; surface workers about mines considerably less than this figure; carpenters in shipyards, and shipwrights, also down to about £2/16/6 per week; while the official cost-of-living figures still show prices to be about 80% above the 1914 level.

The Railwaymen and Miners

The railwaymen are the only section who have been able to keep their wages anything like a decent figure, and they are at present facing a National Wages Board, where the railway companies are demanding further reductions of wages, which if agreed to would result in the railwaymen losing about another £4,000,000 per year. The three unions catering for railwaymen have decided to resist this demand, and if the companies insist on a reduction, then there is every possibility of a railroad strike, as all the three unions are agreed that no further reductions shall be accepted. In fact, the Associated Society of Locomotive Engine Drivers and Firemen have put in a counter-claim for an advance in wages, and at the Wages Board great argument was made on the huge profits that the railway companies have made during the past year.

At a special conference held in London on December 14th, the miners decided to take a ballot of all their members on the question of terminating the present wages agreement. This agreement forced on the miners at the close of the lock-out in 1921, has been described as the most pernicious wages agreement ever imposed on a section of workers. It has been championed by Frank Hodges, the secretary of the Miners' Federation, but opposed by practically every other responsible leader. It stands for the principle of relating wages to profits, with a guarantee that no miner shall work and receive less than 20% upon the 1914 rates of pay. When all costs of production are met the owners are guaranteed 17% standard profits. If these cannot be paid, the deficit goes against the various districts, and owing to the state of the market there are standing against the miners account accumulated arrears of profits amounting to millions of pounds Sterling, all of which must be paid off before the majority of miners can have any chance of an advance of wages. This means in practice that however much trade revived, it would be impossible for advances to be paid until arrears of profits were wiped off, and by that time trade would likely be bad again and the miners plunged into a state of perpetual debt to the coal bosses.

It has been common knowledge that 10 out of the 13 mining districts that make up the Miners' Federation of Great Britain have been on the minimum basis since 1921, and now they have had enough of this, and will terminate the agreement in three months' time. They will then demand an increase of wages, and no doubt the return of a Labor Government will see the introduction of a Minimum Wage Bill, but this will mean the complete opposition of the Liberal and Tory parties and the Miners will be forced to strike in the early Spring of 1924, in order to force the coal owners to pay a living wage. The continued lament of the bosses is that they cannot afford to pay higher wages. Yet for the year ending June, 1923, they made a clear profit after paying every conceivable cost such as wages, maintenance of plants, timber, compensation claims, directors' fees, etc., a sum of £24,500,000.

The Builders and Dockers

The members of the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives, have decided to put in a demand for an increase of 2 d. per hour, and this claim will be heard early in 1924.

The great unofficial dock strike of 1923, has had a sequel that demonstrates the far-reaching effect of strike action. This strike which was vehemently opposed by the Union officials, was caused through a reduction of wages which operated under a sliding scale agreement. At a special conference in November, the Dockers section of the Transport and General Workers' Union decided to make a demand in January, that an advance of 2 shillings per day should be conceded. A national agreement known as the Shaw Award expires at the end of 1923. A month's notice on either side is necessary either to end the agreement or to get some of the conditions revised. The dockers are going to get the agree-

ment revised, and this claim for an increase of 2 shillings per day is the first step in that direction.

Enough has been written to show that throughout the unions a new awakening is taking place, and that from the increasing pressure of the rank and file, the officials are compelled to go ahead. The great thing to be noted in our movement here, is the growing desire for common action, and the idea of a national minimum wage, now being popularized by the left wing elements inside the unions, is receiving wide-spread and general support. We face 1924 conscious of the coming struggles and confident that we have at last stemmed the tide of the capitalist offensive.
