

THE TRADES UNION CONGRESS

By HARRY POLLITT

THE Fifty-sixth Trades Union Congress, which meets at Hull this year, marks a new period in the history of the Congress. For the first time a definite and organised Opposition faces the existing leadership, and raises unreservedly the banner of revolutionary working-class politics in British Trade Unionism.

The Plymouth Congress was the culminating demonstration of the old regime. The Plymouth Congress revealed a complete failure of leadership; no attempt at a serious programme or policy or facing the problems of the movement, nothing but confusion and petty jealousies of sectional leaders. The exposure was so complete that the official leaders had themselves to confess the sorry failure of the Congress and their determination to make amends for the future. "The Congress," declared Mr. Tillett, "has been discovered on its ugly side." "It was not a Congress," said Mr. Sexton; "it was a laundry." "Most Trades Union Congresses," said Mr. Clynes, "have been good. Of the bad ones I have known this has been the worst." And Mr. Hicks stated in the *Daily Herald*: "The Congress has proved that what is needed is for about half-a-dozen trusted men to draw up a programme clear and direct, which can be the acknowledged trade union platform, and then a properly organised campaign to preach it."

What has happened since the Plymouth Congress? Can it be said that there has been any change in leadership? There has not. Certain tactical changes have taken place because of the developing outside situation, changes seen in the approach to the Unemployed Workers' Committee Movement and to the Trades Councils, and in the stand made at Vienna for the admission of the Russian trade unions into the Amsterdam International. But these developments have not been accompanied by any change in the character of leadership. On the contrary, all the old evils have

been repeated a hundredfold during the past twelve months. We have seen not merely sectional disunity in the face of the common enemy. We have seen a great union issuing manifestos to the capitalist Press against the strike of another union in the midst of the struggle, and actually calling its own members "blacklegs" for daring to come out alongside their fellow-workers on strike in the same occupation and employment as themselves. We have seen the General Council, not merely repudiating any duty to attempt to organise and unite the action of the unions, but once again performing its old mediating rôle and coming forward with proposals from the employers to recommend them to a union on strike which the union's own executive could only describe as a "gross betrayal" of the workers. We have seen prominent trade union leaders entering into Cabinet positions and forthwith proclaiming their sacred duty to suppress strikes, maintain blacklegs and call in the military in the name of the interests of the community.

The need for a complete change in policy in British Trade Unionism is greater than ever. This is the fight which must now be inaugurated at the Hull Congress to give a new direction to the movement.

For the challenging forces of the future are already at hand. The past twelve months have seen the increasing stagnation and decay of the old leadership. But they have also seen a great revival of working-class activity, to which the official movement has been wholly unable to give direction. This has revealed itself in the repeated and formidable unofficial strikes, no less than in the strikes forced on particular unions. The strikes which have taken place, both official and unofficial, give the lie direct to that favourite platitude of trade union officials that the workers have got no fight in them. On the contrary, they prove that the fighting spirit of the workers is not only unimpaired, but that this spirit, properly organised and led in a common movement, could be made to achieve a great victory.

What is the meaning of the unofficial strikes? Great play has been made against the unofficial strikes which have taken place. Yet every worker knows that no unofficial strike ever takes place unless the workers are driven by sheer desperation to take such

action. The unofficial strikes are the most damning evidence of the failure of leadership of the existing direction. They reveal the revolt of the workers against intolerable conditions and rotten leadership, and the readiness of the workers for the future struggle once a real lead is given.

This revolt has got to force its expression through the channel of the organised movement. Already the beginnings of a new development are visible. The organisation of the National Federation of Trades Councils as a means of working-class expression has developed such strength as to compel the General Council to enter into negotiations of its own with the Trades Councils. The Unemployed Movement has also compelled recognition from the General Council. Minority movements have developed in different unions, and in some cases won notable successes, as in the election of the official Minority Movement candidate to the miners' secretaryship. New tendencies are revealed in several significant resolutions which have found their way to the Trades Union Congress agenda, bearing on the General Council and the affiliation of Trades Councils and the unemployed.

The series of articles by leading trade union officials in *THE LABOUR MONTHLY* has also shown the stirrings in official circles created by the new forces and conditions. Here many prominent trade union leaders have recognised the seriousness of the situation. But it is a striking commentary on what has appeared that at the end of these discussions there has been no agreement amongst those writing these articles that they have any common programme or policy, or are prepared to take the initiative and use their influence and following to get something like a common agitation going. Mr. Hicks's proposal twelve months ago of a programme "clear and direct," drawn up by "about half-a-dozen trusted men," has not so far shown fruit. It is not here that the workers can look for leadership for the future.

The gathering of the new forces has got to find its own means. This is the achievement of the National Minority Conference held just on the eve of the Trades Union Congress. Here for the first time the revolutionary forces have met together in a common movement to shape their programme and face the existing leadership at the Congress as an organised Opposition with a

definite platform. The claims of working-class policy at home and abroad will be pressed forward at the Congress.

What are the issues facing the Hull Congress?

The first and most important issue facing the working class in Britain is the question of the Labour Government. This is not a question outside trade unionism, but the central question for the Trade Union Movement. Every question of working-class advance, of working-class policy, turns on the question of the Labour Government and the action of the organised workers in relation to it.

Modern conditions have compelled the recognition that trade union questions are inseparably bound up with politics. Even the most reactionary official no longer disputes this in principle. Economic and political forces far beyond the control of any single union govern the living conditions of the workers, and compel the workers if they are to go forward at all to be prepared to handle these forces. The example of the miners is the most vivid and significant example of this experience. The barest question of miners' wages and conditions has led straight to the economic reorganisation of the industry, to nationalisation, to Government action, to international politics. A powerfully organised section of the workers has been thrown from a leading position to the most desperate and pitiful straits by the play of international forces in bourgeois politics. On every side it is admitted that trade unionism alone is not enough, and that only a Workers' Government can solve these problems. The whole force of the working-class movement has been slowly turning in this direction. For this purpose the combined power of trade unionism has been organised into the Labour Party to win the power of government.

But what is the so-called Labour Government which has been set up, and which has won its way to power on the basis of the trade unions, doing now that it is established? Instead of taking a single step towards the only object of working-class organisation, the working-class conquest of power; to break the power of capitalism and establish working-class control of economic and social conditions, it is doing the opposite of this. It is supporting the capitalists against the working class. At home and abroad it has declared itself the servant of the capitalist State,

of Imperialism, of the capitalist army and navy and police, of all commercial and financial interests. It is supporting the imperialists against the subject workers all over the world, it is supporting the international financiers against the German and European workers, it is supporting the employers against the workers on strike at home. This has reached such a pitch that this "Labour" Government has even ranged itself in direct opposition to the trade unions on which it is based, so that we find the National Joint Council, officially representing the whole working-class movement, "deploring" steps which the Labour Government is actually taking.

If the Hull Trades Union Congress, representing the organised working class and holding the Labour Government in its power, fails to speak clearly on this, the most vital topic to the working class, it will have failed in its principal task. A Labour Government can only become a Government of the working class, serving the interests of the working class, when it is subject to the organised workers and represents their will.

It is not only necessary to declare definitely and clearly on the action of the Labour Government in industrial disputes, and its duty to regard itself, not as the impartial arbiter on behalf of capitalist interests, but as the active representative of the workers and their interests. It is also necessary to deal with the whole policy of the Labour Government at home and abroad, to outline the programme of measures which in the view of the organised movement it should adopt, and to declare the readiness for the whole power of the organised movement to be placed behind the Labour Government to secure the successful establishment of those measures.

Such a programme must be accompanied by a no less definite ultimatum to the Labour Government, laying down those lines of policy which it must abandon, or surrender power, failing which it will be repudiated by the organised movement.

Alongside the question of the Labour Government must be taken the question of war and the international position.

Never has the danger of war pressed so closely on the whole world. The imperialist rivalries which sought in vain to find a solution in the world war of 1914 and the ruinous "peace"

which followed it, are now, within ten years of the outbreak of the last war, preparing to plunge the world in an infinitely more deadly conflict which will endanger the whole future of the human race. The armament race presses forward in new forms, and the lead is being given by the British Labour Government.

The imperialist Powers are carrying out a world offensive against the workers. The Dawes Report represents the subjection of the German working class to the position of an industrial colony of British, French and American capitalism. The success of this measure, to the achievement of which the Labour Government has pledged itself, means the reduction of the German workers to the ten-hour day and starvation standards. By universal admission such a reduction will react directly on the standards of the British workers. The same applies to the policy of Empire development, opening out new fields of exploitation of cheap native labour, which the British Labour Government is also actively assisting.

A working-class policy which is not able to face these dangers is failing to face the greatest dangers before the working class. Only the international power of the working class, exerted in direct opposition to the whole power of international capitalism, can meet the present world situation.

The International Federation of Trade Unions of Amsterdam has passed resolutions against war, and even for international working-class action and the international general strike against war. But these resolutions are not worth the paper they are written on, any more than the old resolutions of the Second International, unless they are accompanied by a genuine fight against Imperialism now and active preparation for the future conflict.

The British Trades Union Congress, as the leading body of the Amsterdam International, has the duty to give the lead to other sections by showing the way to a direct and practical fight against armaments, against the capitalist army and navy, against imperialist politics and the Versailles Treaty, and for practical international working-class solidarity in union with the Russian revolution and the workers of Asia, Africa and the whole world.

At home the position facing the workers is equally urgent. The losses inflicted by the capitalist offensive have not been made

good. The defeat of sections still continues. There are still over a million unemployed; there are no definite signs of a trade revival; the wages of the workers are still below the 1914 level; food prices and rents are still exorbitant; taxation still imposes a crushing burden on the workers; workshop exploitation is keener than ever; production has been speeded up and piece-work prices cut to the lowest level; and machine production is continually displacing thousands of workers. The capitalists are forced by the economic crisis to use every effort to lower the cost of production.

What is the greatest need of the Trade Union Movement in this position? It is the need to be able, not merely to adopt general principles and resolutions, but to organise common action. The type of resolution proclaiming the six-hour day, introduced by the National Union of Railwaymen last year and carried by a two million majority, is the type of resolution that makes the Trades Union Congress a laughing stock. Everyone knows that it means nothing, and the union introducing it immediately after is negotiating spreadover agreements which eat away the eight-hour day. What matters is to adopt a common wages and hours policy, no matter on how modest a scale to begin with, and stick to it and stand together to carry it out. This is what every workers sees as plain as a pikestaff when he sees the employers playing with section after section. Let us start with a plain minimum wage of £4 a week and a forty-four-hour week. But let us then employ the common force of the whole movement to establish this, and accept no settlement for any section until every section is satisfied on the common basis adopted. This is the only practical immediate policy for trade unionism in face of the combined forces of the capitalists.

It is a practical question that the Congress has to face. Is it prepared to mobilise the workers in a campaign not merely for propaganda purposes but for fighting purposes in order to secure (1) a minimum wage of £4 a week; (2) a forty-four-hour working week; (3) the General Council's own proposals on unemployment as outlined in the Six Point Charter; (4) the suspension of all forms of luxury building and the taking over of every available empty residence in order to find accommodation for workers needing houses, and to speed up building of houses for workers?

We of the Opposition declare that a common fighting policy for demands such as the above must be adopted by the Congress.

To accomplish this will need a transformation of the present character of the Trade Union Movement. The anarchy of separate competing unions with hundreds of little autocratic executives and an unreal powerless General Council is utterly unfit to lead a united and disciplined working-class army. Amalgamation, necessary as it is, is far too slow and ineffective to deal with this question. The power of the whole movement has got to be centralised in order to combine its force. A General Council must be established with ruling power over all the separate unions, and responsible to Congress for carrying out the common policy adopted.

But along with the centralisation of the movement, if it is not to result in bureaucratic stagnation, must go a definite clearing of our aim and objective. The common organised force of the whole movement is needed, not simply for some immediate demand of wages and hours, but to carry out the common object of the whole movement, the advance to the control of industry. The objective of trade unionism must be set out clearly before the whole Trade Union Movement—namely, the control of production by the workers, by the workers engaged in production organised on the basis of production, from the smallest workshop to the highest directing board. Unless this is recognised as our supreme objective, trade unionism becomes simply a part of the daily apparatus of capitalism. To achieve this necessarily implies the political conquest of power, and the breaking of the power of capitalism, which means the dictatorship of the proletariat. The Trade Union Movement can only realise itself when it enters unhesitatingly into the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat, and organises all its forces for its objective of capturing the control of production. But this means organisation on the basis of production, which is organisation on the basis of the workshop.

Workshop organisation, workshop agitation and struggle, and the propaganda of the control of industry must be the supreme concern of the whole Trade Union Movement. This is the line of unity in the present confusion and division, and the line of advance for the whole working class. This, leading to and united with

the struggle for the dictatorship of the proletariat, is the supreme revolutionary objective in trade unionism.

To sum up. In the above I have outlined briefly six of the principal issues facing the Trade Union Movement at the Hull Congress. They are (1) the Labour Government ; (2) war prospects and the international situation ; (3) an action programme on wages, hours, unemployment and housing ; (4) centralised trade union organisation ; (5) workshop organisation ; (6) workers' control of industry.

Now let us turn to the agenda prepared by the General Council and see what we find. Is there any evidence of preparation, or even of a desire to face the problems confronting the working-class movement ? Is the Congress going to lead the way for the working class by resolutions on the " Humane Slaughtering of Animals " or " Civil Servants and Party Politics " ?

The General Council has prepared what it calls an " Industrial Workers' Charter." What is this Industrial Workers' Charter ? Is it an attempt to formulate a programme of action for the working class ? It is nothing of the kind. Throughout the proposals there is no hint of action or of any consideration how to face the immediate pressing problems of the working class. It is nothing but a collection of the old generalities, an attempt to crystallise many of the hardy annuals that come up at these congresses. It is a grand codification about as important to the working class as a manuscript out of the tomb of Tutankhamen. This Industrial Workers' Charter is in fact simply a piece of clumsy window dressing which will take in no one.

At the same time the General Council prides itself on the fact that it has been pursuing a policy of amalgamation (the results of which are certainly invisible without a microscope) and holds out to the working class the grand hope of ultimate trade union reorganisation in this way (when all official interests have been satisfied) in about a thousand years. But of the immediate needs of the working class for unity and common action now—not a word.

It is not along this way that the working class will go forward. The revolt against this leadership must be organised to victory. The National Minority Movement points the way. The urgent

needs of the situation compel the growing of the forces of revolt. The National Minority Movement must gather up all these forces under a common leadership until there is achieved a powerful mass movement which will sweep away the old leadership with its ideas of class-peace and limited trade unionism that can never bring the workers freedom from their exploiters.

Year by year the movement must grow until it is powerful enough to transform the present Trades Union Congress from being a picnic and annual re-union of officials into the Congress of the working-class movement which will unite and direct the workers in their fight and will relentlessly carry on the struggle to the final conquest of power.