

# THE TRADE UNIONS BILL: A PLAN OF ACTION

By HARRY POLLITT

**I**F ever the working class of Britain have had a supreme example of how the speeches and writings of the Labour leaders are the finest weapon in the armoury of the capitalist class in their attacks upon the workers, that object lesson has been fully provided in the discussion on the Trade Unions Bill. From start to finish it has been one continuous repetition of quotations supporting the clauses of the Bill dealing with strike action, picketing, and intimidation, from the speeches and writings of the MacDonald, Thomas, Snowden, Clynes leadership. This situation should do much to convince those workers who in the past have been a little impatient of the revolutionary movement, for having so strongly criticised these defeatist and treacherous utterances, which reached the final objective after the betrayal of the General Strike and the Miners' Lock-out in the infamous "Never again" articles that appeared in the Yellow Press, in the banquets and luncheons financed by the oil group to promote industrial peace, which the Labour leaders felt it their duty to attend, in the suggestion of Mr. MacDonald that there could be a Committee of Inquiry into certain aspects of Trade Unionism. These, plus the expulsion of Communists from the Labour Party and intensification of this policy this year, the suspension and disenfranchisement of branches of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers because their members had dared to attend Conferences of the National Minority Movement, the decision of the General Council to strike off from their records any Trades Council having affiliation to or association with the Minority Movement, all serve to show the Government quite unmistakably that the existing leadership is not only weak and hesitant, but also that it is far more concerned with fighting the militant workers than with fighting capitalism. It is just because of this realisation (and these facts must be hammered home in every working-class meeting) that the Government has dared to bring forward a Bill which completely revolutionises the whole conception of trade union organisation, policy, and tactics, and

which reduces the trade unions to the level of slave organisations.

Yet, so far-sighted is the existing leadership, so thoroughly does it understand the present economic position of British capitalism, so well does it read the international situation as a whole, that it expresses profound surprise when the Bill is finally introduced, that it has "exceeded their anticipations," that it "has gone further than they expected," and all the rest of the humbugging palaver which it has been the lot of the workers to have to listen to during these last three or four weeks.

When the Bill was finally introduced into the House of Commons, with what flourish of trumpets were we told that it would be fought line by line, and to the last full stop and comma ! With what servile appeal *Daily Herald* leading articles begged the movement to remain loyal and disciplined—to a leadership which has only shown itself capable of splitting the movement ! A Special Conference of Trade Union Executives meets and refuses to allow an old fighter like Alex. Gossip even to act in accordance with their own constitutional procedure of submitting an amendment to the official resolution ; a Special Conference, which in the main is content to be called together at a vast expense, not to hammer out a policy as a result of the considered contributions of the delegates as a whole, but just to receive a report of certain organisational measures that it is proposed to operate. Area Conferences of the rank and file are summoned, where the official General Council and Labour Party speakers are the big guns, but where tried and trusted fighters like A. J. Cook and Gossip are not invited to speak, and even where the workers themselves are not permitted to move amendments to the official resolution, which, for a piece of pious and meaningless phrasemongering, eclipses anything that has been produced on a serious question by the Labour Movement. Yet at every demonstration and conference that meets, the demand is made for organised obstruction in Parliament and preparation for a real General Strike. But these demands have been stifled by the official machine and platform. In the House of Commons the "fight" has been carried on. With what gusto it has been suggested that strikes against a "breach of contract" perhaps could be illegal, or a general strike against "the State" could be illegal ! How, in

their speeches, Clynes, Snowden, and Thomas have all pointed out how they "abhor" strikes, and have consistently placed themselves in the hands of the Government, which is able to and will make the fullest use of these statements. The long arguments of Labour's standing Counsel, Sir Henry Slessor, are expounded, and we defy any worker to read them and say he is any clearer after reading them than he was before.

There is parliamentary obstruction *and* parliamentary obstruction. What has been witnessed is only the sham thing—an attempt to conduct the most vital issue Labour has been faced with within the constitutional channels of parliamentary procedure. It is worthy of note that the London *Star*, a Liberal organ, while congratulating Sir John Simon on one of his speeches, warned him of the danger of being too closely associated with the Bill and so enabling the Government to quote this high legal authority as supporting the measure. What a humiliation to the Labour Movement that a Liberal newspaper can warn one of its prominent members against a situation that has already become nauseating as far as many prominent Labour leaders are concerned.

The only force that can smash this Bill and the Government is a strongly organised working-class movement. This strength can only be developed to the degree that the fight being waged is of a character that can rally the workers in ever-increasing numbers and strength to Labour's standard. To this end the parliamentary machinery should have been used to declare, positively and unmistakably, that the Government could do what it likes as far as this Bill is concerned. *The general strike will be maintained by Labour as one of the strongest weapons in its armoury. In the event of the railwaymen being asked to accept reduced standards, the whole working-class movement will be rallied behind them in defence of their present standards; that in the event of war being declared, the resolution of the Hull Trades Union Congress that a general strike should be called to stop a war would be immediately operated. Above all, that in the present Chinese war, the movement would at last make full retribution for its shameful betrayal of the Chinese workers and peasants, by even now giving the call to all workers to refuse to make, handle, or transport any more munitions, soldiers, or sailors for use against the Chinese workers and peasants.*

It is not enough for individual Labour leaders to declare at provincial meetings that they will take such and such action after the Bill has become law. It is in the parliamentary debate that these declarations must be hurled in the face of the capitalist Government. There must be an end to the sparring-about process that has gone on. Let the insolent challenge of the Tory Government be answered by the determination of our movement that the methods of struggle we have won as a result of generations of sacrifice will never be forfeited to any forgers' Government under any circumstances. Let the declaration be clearly made that trade unionists will stand for their inalienable right to decide what the trade unions shall or shall not do, that any outside interference is capitalist interference, and must not be tolerated. If this policy had been carried out, we venture to suggest that there would now be such a feeling throughout the movement that would make it possible to carry the campaign to its logical conclusion—a real general strike. The very fact that the Government have gone to the lengths they have in order to make the general strike illegal only convinces the serious-minded workers of the importance and necessity of this weapon to working-class organisations.

The present Bill is only the prelude to further attacks upon the wages and hours of the workers. Throughout the workers' ranks bitter and intense poverty prevails. Engineers and ship-builders are forced to demand increased wages; dyers, textile workers, and miners all have to face the immediate prospect of wage reductions. Unemployment is on the increase in the transport industry. Everywhere there is a great desire and demand to end the retreating policy that has so long been the order of the day. The Trade Unions Bill affords the means of rallying the whole working class behind the Trades Union Congress. Capitalism knows that the economic decline, now a marked feature of British capitalism, makes new attacks upon the workers' standards inevitable. They have therefore introduced this Bill to undermine further the trade unions and the Labour Party in order to make this task easier. It is no longer a question of the workers possessing their weapon, or being told that the remedy is in their own hands at the next General Election. It is a question of choosing now between smashing this Bill and the Government or slavery. In

this fight, therefore, there must be an end to all the shilly-shallying that has gone on. The active workers everywhere must redouble their efforts in order to force upon the leadership the responsibility of organising a complete general strike as the only real and effective weapon to achieve the downfall of the present Government.

We must demand a cessation of all further splitting tactics and heresy hunting, and organise a mobilisation of all working-class forces to defeat the Bill. The National Minority Movement has submitted to all its conferences the following programme of action, which still holds the field, and which should be compared with the defeatist policy of the existing Labour leadership:—

- (1) Local Trades Councils to be formed into Councils of Action, embracing representation from all working-class political and industrial organisations in the localities; these Councils of Action to have representation at all special trade union conferences called to discuss the Trade Unions Bill.
- (2) These Councils shall organise factory gate meetings, and mass demonstrations, and form Workers' Defence Corps to take all precautions for Labour's campaign to be carried on effectively.
- (3) Federations of Trades Councils shall be organised, or where in existence shall meet at once to co-ordinate the work of the various Councils of Action. Federations to have representation on the General Council during the present crisis.
- (4) Towns' meetings to be arranged to enable all workers and their families to make gigantic official protests against the Bill, and to be kept informed of the day-to-day fight.
- (5) All trade union branches and district committees to pass resolutions demanding that their Executive Committees shall take steps to ensure the following measures being carried out:—
  - (a) *Organised obstruction of all parliamentary business by the Labour Party.*
  - (b) *Immediate preparations by the General Council for a real General Strike, to answer the Government in the only possible manner.*
- (6) All meetings, pamphlets, and tactics as a whole to be linked up with the workers' real weapon of defence and attack—the General Strike.

It is the duty of every worker, seriously bent on the task of taking a real part in this great fight for the very right of trade union organisation, to give the above points serious consideration. If agreed with, they should then form the basis of our work in every organisation in which we have got influence.