

THE EDINBURGH CONGRESS

By HARRY POLLITT

THE Plymouth Congress of 1923 marked the end of the debate arising from the defeat of Black Friday.

From then onwards the trade union movement began to move forward again. Then came in 1924 the strike wave, and the rapid emergence of a "left" wing headed by many General Council leaders, who outdid everybody else in their demand for "unity" and "a fighting leadership." By the time Red Friday in July, 1925, was reached, this movement was at its height, and the Scarborough Congress of 1925 saw resolutions adopted which would test the validity and sincerity of these left-wing professions, for if operated they would have meant a complete change in policy, organisation, and leadership.

The General Strike of 1926, however, was the big test. By this time it was clear that it was not intended to operate any of the Scarborough decisions. Indeed the Labour Party Conference which followed Scarborough, under the leadership of MacDonald, had already decided to stem and crush the developments in the T.U.C., and the operation of the Liverpool decisions was the answer to the pseudo-lefts in the General Council.

The betrayal of the General Strike was caused not by the right-wing leaders, but by the left wing's complete collapse. Then came Bournemouth with its "hush-hush" policy, and finally the special conference of trade union executives in January this year, when, just as on the Russian question at Edinburgh, there was complete agreement in the General Council as to the cause of the General Strike collapse and subsequent defeat of the miners.

Industrial Peace

The Edinburgh Congress therefore took place with all these developments as the background. Thus it was absolutely in keeping with the situation that the Chairman's address should register the complete capitulation of the existing leadership to their capitalist masters, in the hope that the "new spirit" might

be the means of buying off further attacks. It was no surprise to those who know him best that George Hicks should be the one chosen to make this capitulation. It is part of the settled policy of the MacDonald-Thomas combination to make "fiery left wingers" utter the pronouncements of their policy.

The Chairman's address was a plea for "Industrial Peace." Nothing more or less. Beyond its gratuitously patronising insults to our Russian comrades, it contained nothing worth noting. The whole of the more responsible capitalist Press hailed the address with delight, and the passage they fixed on is the same in every case.

We all know—employers as well as trade unionists—that the vexatious, toilsome, and difficult period through which we are passing is a transitional period. Much fuller use can be made under these conditions of the machinery for joint consultation and negotiation between employers and employed. We have not reached the limits of possible development in this direction. It is more than doubtful whether we have seen the fullest possible development of machinery for joint consultation in particular industries. And practically nothing has yet been done to establish effective machinery of joint conference between the representative organisations entitled to speak for industry as a whole. There are many problems upon which joint discussion would prove of value at the present time.

That quotation—the decisive part of Hicks's speech—is the swan song of the "left wing." It has been hailed by the *Manchester Guardian* as "A Move Forward," by *The Times* as "A Basis of Co-operation." It represents the policy of the General Council. The Industrial Peace answer to Baldwin's overtures deceives no one. The speeches of Bevin and Thomas and their resolution were only window dressing. Under cover of the Edinburgh Congress (and it was no coincidence that Messrs. Clynes and Brownlie, of 1919 "Produce More and Industrial Peace" fame, were put up to move the Vote of Thanks to George Hicks for his speech), when the invitation comes, as it will come, for the General Council to participate in an all-in national Industrial Peace Conference, there will be an acceptance of the offer in order that the existing leadership can put itself right with the electorate in preparation for the next election. For in essence the whole Edinburgh Congress was, from the General Council's point of view, a complete capitulation to the demand of the *Labour*

Party chiefs that everything must now be staked on the next General Election.

The workers need to be warned that this capitulation will not stave off new attacks on their conditions; on the contrary, under its cover plans will be laid to attack the workers on a larger scale than ever. As a matter of cold fact, the capitalists are showing their hand even while the workers' leaders, with tears in their eyes, are crying for Peace. At the last session of the Congress, Ben Turner, the President of the Textile Workers' Union, pleaded for a new spirit in industry, and wanted to know "what was wrong in wanting to work with good men of all classes." At the end of the next week, Ben's tears had moved the Yorkshire Textile capitalists so much that they served notices on his union to end the present wages agreement in November, when they propose to ask for a wages reduction. Quite rightly the *Herald* states this as a "Bombshell for Wool Trade." But what can they expect if the workers' leaders go out of their way to make the bombs? And if workers who object to being consistently betrayed call such leaders "traitors" or " betrayers," we are told it isn't British, or what is called fair play. Bah! the whole thing is simply nonconformist hypocrisy of the worst type. The rapid growth of the Minority Movement can alone succeed in wiping out this sort of policy.

After such a lead from the Chair, it was no wonder that the main features of the Congress should be classified under these four heads:—

- (1) The Attack on the Minority Movement.
- (2) The Break with the Russian Unions.
- (3) The Capitulation on the Trade Union Act.
- (4) The Refusal to deal with Havelock Wilson.

The Minority Movement

I can only deal with these questions briefly, as each really calls for separate and fuller treatment.

In two weeks the *Daily Herald* gave three of its leading articles to the Minority Movement. Any doubts that our movement was not a growing force inside the trade union movement were dispelled by the attention showered upon us by the official organ

of the T.U.C. This fact, coupled with the debate at Edinburgh, and the parting shot of George Hicks in the *Herald*, all show the fear that is developing inside the official bureaucracy.

When we were struggling for a foothold inside the unions, and battling for recognition, we were ignored ; but immediately our policy began to get widespread support, and in the face of official boycotts, suspensions, and exclusions, we began to win important trade union positions on the basis of our policy, a change took place. The success of our Fourth National Conference in August, and the well-organised work of the M.M. supporters at Edinburgh, have put the finishing touches on it, and now the fight is on.

It is a fight to a finish. There is no room for centrist positions. The issue is to save the Trade Union Movement from further defeats at the hands of a leadership that does not, and will not, recognise the new economic period that the movement is living in. It is not a question of personalities, or calling of hard names ; it is a question of explaining to the workers clearly and simply the issues involved, the methods that must be taken, and the organising of the will, and the power, to take them.

Not as outside, yelping, little unofficial bodies, but as a well-organised internal and integral part of the movement, utilising every channel of trade union machinery and organisation that lies to our hand. Not as a bunch of outsiders trying to dictate policy to the official movement, but as men and women, who are a part of the movement, trying in organised fashion to get support for our policy in the workshops, branches, district committees, national executives, and possibly the T.U.C. itself, so that the workers can discriminate and judge as to which policy and leadership meets the needs of the situation, and by their mass support get our present Minority policy the accepted policy of the movement as a whole.

The Break With the Russian Unions

It cannot be too often asserted that the break with the Russian Unions is not a break between the British and Russian workers. If a vote was taken to-morrow on the question of continuing the Anglo-Russian Unity Committee, there would be a tremendous

majority in favour. The fact that the *Herald* published protests against the break a few days after it was made is indeed significant of the feeling of the rank and file.

The five fraternal delegates at Edinburgh, who doubtless received their instructions to pave the way for a break, by insisting upon the right of all national trade union centres to have full autonomy, gave a classic example of "interference" in the domestic affairs of the British Movement when it was essential to create the atmosphere for a break. Not one member of the General Council had the courage to protest against the break. Thomas, Citrine, and Bevin exultantly declared that the General Council were unanimous for a break.

So here is the end of all the manifesto-signing and unity-phrase-mongering period. The General Council that has increased its hostility to the Russian unions in tune with the war preparations of the Conservative Government has gained a Pyrrhic victory at Edinburgh that even now the more far-seeing of them are beginning to regret. It was a victory for British "dignity," but that "dignity" covers the politics of MacDonald, Bevin, and Thomas, and the delegates, in staunchly upholding the nonconformist conscience, have delivered a weapon into the hands of the MacDonald-Baldwin bloc that will do irreparable harm, unless it is destroyed by the workers forcing a complete change of policy.

We declare that the break sanctioned at Edinburgh is not one between the British and Russian workers, but one between the British reactionary leaders playing Baldwin's game in the Trade Union Movement.

Over the heads of such a leadership will the British and Russian workers find ways and means of rebuilding a bond that will be unbreakable? We do not envy the consciences of those members of the General Council who have posed as friends of the Russians and who did not even dare to suggest that the General Council should attempt to make a political reply instead of shielding themselves in the baby game of "We won't play in your backyard."

The Trade Union Act

This debate was the most disappointing at the Congress. It was the logical result of the way the whole campaign against the Act

has been conducted. No settled policy, no common understanding, so that when we got to Edinburgh half the important unions had already decided what their own line of action was to be. The only anxiety being shown about the Act is not the question of the strike weapon, or the loss of the Civil Service trade unions, but the probable decline in income as a result of the new procedure in collecting the political levy.

Mr. MacDonald declares the proposal to alter the House of Lords as "a revolutionary act." No leader got up to say the same thing about the Trade Union Act. Only futile talk about it "meaning disrespect for the law," and Hicks's amazing speech in which all sorts of dark hints were thrown out as to how it may be defeated.

Everything was staked on the next Labour Government repealing the Act. But what if there is not a Labour Government at the next election? Then wait until the election after that. In the meantime the Capitalist attacks increase, the war danger grows apace and another 1914 looms ahead. This is really what the present position on the Trade Union Act amounts to. I am confident that had a special conference been held three months ago a policy of complete opposition to the Act and all its works could have been devised, and a fighting Trade Union Movement developed instead of being doped with the promises of a piloted Labour Government being the solution of their present difficulties.

The Seamen's Union

Perhaps the greatest searchlight on the outlook of the General Council is the fact that in their annual report, consisting of 203 pages, in which practically every issue of trade union activity is discussed, they could not find room for one paragraph on the subject of non-political trade unionism. Fifteen and a-half pages to the question of Russian relations; one page to the Minority Movement; scores of pages on disputes and demarcation questions; disciplinary action against Trades Councils affiliated to the Minority Movement, even though the Trades Councils are not affiliated to the T.U.C., but no thought of dealing with a union affiliated to Congress that has given £3,000 and voted

another £10,000 to try and smash another union also affiliated to Congress.

This is one of the most serious questions facing the movement. It is not because the miners are menaced: it is because it is but a short step from capitalist-subsidised unions to Government-controlled trade unions. The whole future of the movement is menaced by this first open attempt of the capitalists, through Wilson, to set up blackleg non-political trade unions.

The workers will not fail to notice how frightened the General Council were of dealing with this matter. They did not want it discussed in public, but they had no objection to discussing the Minority Movement or the Russian Unions in public; oh, no! that sort of thing earns them the applause and gratitude of the Press. Their capitalist friends would not be pleased if the same searchlight was thrown on Wilson's Union, its finances, associates and ramifications.

The position from which there is now no escape is, that the Edinburgh Congress which fought the Minority Movement, lined up with Baldwin against Soviet Russia and was afraid of fighting Wilson and his policy of splitting the trade union movement and setting up a rival Trades Union Congress.

Conclusion

The bright feature of Edinburgh was the recognition on all sides that the Minority Movement is the accepted opposition to the existing leadership. This is of great significance. There is no longer a struggle between rival and conflicting sects, but a straight fight between reformist and revolutionary leadership. At Edinburgh our supporters were alone in forcing debates on vital issues. There was not a challenging note, either on a resolution or the General Council's Report, which did not come from our supporters. The result was that all the way there were keen debates and good fighting. The very fact that the violent attacks on our movement were made is itself proof of our growing influence.

Inside the various delegations there were many big fights for the right of those who supported our policy even to be allowed to express their point of view. Many useful contributions to debates

were made because at last we succeeded in breaking down the cast-iron barriers that have hitherto prevailed, which compelled the delegations to agree to decisions reached before Congress itself met, and so stultify the whole proceedings.

We of the Minority Movement cheerfully accept the challenge of Edinburgh. The fight will be hard, tremendous obstacles will have to be overcome. We must clearly explain what the Congress decisions mean, and prove that the statement that the Minority Movement is hostile to trade unionism is a lie, but that the Minority Movement *is* hostile to a leadership that is heading the trade unions for further heavy defeats.

It is to prevent this that we shall continue with our work of utilising every constitutional channel of union organisation in order that the policy we stand for, as outlined at our Battersea Conference, shall be made the accepted policy of the whole movement. That policy briefly expressed is :—

- (1) To fight against the capitalist offensive with its wage-reducing and lengthening of hours policy, and its attempts to destroy trade union rights and practices.
- (2) To fight any tendency to leave or split the unions, and to wage an energetic campaign for a 100 per cent. trade union movement.
- (3) To show clearly to all workers the real role of the capitalist State in their struggles.
- (4) To fight for the unification of workers in factories, in trade union branches, trades councils, district committees, and to agitate for one union for each industry, a centralised General Council and a single Trade Union International.
- (5) To build up Minority Movement groups in every industry in the country in order that as a result of organised activity the policy, direction, and ideals of the Minority Movement shall be made the policy of the Movement as a whole.

The Edinburgh Congress marks the parting of the ways ; it is now a fight between those who stand for the Trade Union Movement becoming a more effective weapon in the immediate struggle for the advancement of the workers' economic conditions, and, finally, a weapon in the struggle for complete political power, and those who, under the guise of industrial peace and class collaboration, are heading the whole movement into the camp of the enemy.