



HARRY POLLITT

# English Trades Union Congress

## Swansea, 1928

By HARRY POLLITT

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**T**HE 60th congress of the British Trades Union Movement opened at Swansea on September 3rd, 1928.

There were present 621 delegates representing 3,874,842 workers, a decrease of 25 delegates, and 289,152 workers who attended the Edinburgh congress. This reduction is largely accounted for by the operation of the Trades Union Act, which makes it illegal for the unions catering for state employees to be affiliated to the T. U. C.

Ben Turner opened with the worst presidential speech that has been made at a Congress. It was largely reminiscent and completely regardless of the change in the economic situation that has taken place since the war. Not a word did it contain about the intensification of the capitalist offensive, the rapidly increasing unemployed army, the new attacks being prepared against all sections of transport and building workers, nothing but an expression of the pious hopes and sentimental moralising that are a standing disgrace to the leadership of the Trades Union Congress.

If ever there was a time when the Trades Union Congress through its chairman should have issued a clarion call it is now—a call for united resistance against further attacks, a call for the defense of the unemployed, a call for the reorganization of the trade unions on the fighting basis demanded by modern conditions, a call for workshop organization, for the trade union recruitment to build up powerful unions to fight capitalism, for effective international unity, a message of hope and inspiration to the toiling masses at home and abroad, exploited and held down by the armed forces of British imperialism.

The Trade Union Movement cannot afford to tolerate this happy-go-lucky leadership; it must be repudiated, and the new leadership created. Since 1921 the workers have lost £546,000,000 in wages reductions, thousands of the best lads in the movement are victimised, are hungry and worried out of their lives. Week by week the unemployed figures are mounting up to thousands, over a million on poor law relief, while the General Council with three exceptions sing "God Save The King" at mayoral banquets, and the president of the Trades Union Congress finishes up his presidential speech with the following "appeal":

"There is too much time and money spent in gambling and drink. The gambling and drink take toll in money of not less than £600,000,000 per year, and, in addition, there is the waste of mind and manhood. Oh, for a Father Matthew in our land (not a showman or a Pussyfoot Johnson), but a living man, with fire and enthusiasm to spread the gospel of temperance amongst us all, and especially amongst the richer classes, where drinking to excess is most pronounced."

For weeks prior to the opening of the Swansea congress

the unemployed had been organizing a march from the surrounding districts to demonstrate before the congress and to ask it to receive a deputation to place the case of the unemployed before congress. The general council sought police "protection" from the unemployed: the congress hall was like an armed camp, the officials had to be "protected" by the police from their own unfortunate members.

The demonstration was to march past the congress hall at 2:00 p. m. The congress did not resume its session on this occasion until 2:45 p. m., and the press came out with placards "Unemployed Bluffed," "General Council's Clever Strategy."

Immediately Ben Turner had finished his speech Arthur Horner had demanded that the unemployed be admitted, but only a third of the delegates voted in favour of his motion. Outside the demonstration went on, and from 2:30 to 8:30 Tom Mann, Sam Elsbury, Harry Pollitt, Arthur Horner, Wal Hannington and others, addressed a great meeting of the workers, and at 8:30 led a march all around the town of Swansea, with bands and banners. A really effective day's work had been done in spite of the united front of the general council and police force.

The congress then started its official business. Havelock Wilson's Union was solemnly expelled from congress. It had taken the congress a long time to do this! The Minority Movement were the first to demand it, but were scoffed at by the very men who have since been compelled by their actions to admit that we were right. Now that this expulsion has been effected there is a keen competition going on for the right to organize the seamen. Half-a-dozen rival unions are staking claims, all anxious to get official recognition. In the meantime the Minority Movement is going ahead organising a seamen's section, that will become the real basis for the seamen's organization of the future.

### Will Suppress Criticism

Arising from the expulsion of the Seamen's Union, the general council demanded increased disciplinary powers to deal with unions in the future which the present standing orders do not allow. No one is deceived by this demand, these powers are required by the general council more for application to militant unions like the Furnishing Trades, than for the reformist unions, and the workers will have proof of this within the next twelve months.

The trades councils through a resolution on the Agenda in the name of the Railway Clerks' Association, demanded affiliation to congress. The only support for this important resolution came from the left wing, but it was turned down

by an overwhelming vote. It is important to note this decision in the light of what took place afterwards.

The general council asked congress to endorse their decision that no member of the Minority Movement is eligible to attend any conference organised by the trades councils. The congress gave its endorsement. So we are faced with the interesting position of a "democratic" congress which refuses affiliation to the trades councils, which have to do all the detailed work of the general council in the localities, but dictates to them who shall be delegates to their conferences.

Congress went even farther. Every year there is a National conference of trades councils. This year's national conference passed two resolutions, one in favor of the trades councils organizing the unemployed, and the other giving the trades councils the right to nominate to the joint consultative committee their own delegates from the federations making up the trades council movement. These resolutions were adopted by the national conference of trades councils in spite of the opposition of the general council representatives who were present. These resolutions came up for endorsement at Swansea, and the congress turned both of them down with the full support of the general council. This situation will be used by the Minority Movement in its new campaign to secure the affiliation of the trades councils to the National Minority Movement.

#### Reactionaries For Mond

The discussions that took place on organization questions show how divided and sectionalized is the trade union movement of Britain. The strongest defenders of Mondism and rationalization are the bitterest opponent of any real measures to reorganize the trade union movement on an industrial basis. The resolution standing in the name of the Amalgamated Engineers' Union, demanding the establishment of a trade union commission to report on what structural changes are necessary, was only carried in the teeth of the opposition of those who declare that "rationalization of capitalism should be welcomed because it leads to raising the standard of living of the workers."

The next debate came on a resolution standing in the name of the Railway Clerks Association, which was carried by a great majority. It will have such far-reaching effects upon the British movement that we quote it for the information of the workers abroad.

"That this congress, believing that the best interests of the workers can only be served by solidarity and unity of purpose, policy and action, instructs the general council to institute an inquiry into the proceedings and methods of disruptive elements within the trade union movement, whether such elements manifest themselves amongst the unions or within the general council itself, and to submit a report with recommendations to the affiliated organisations."

The speakers in support of this resolution were careful to point out that it was not advisable to have discussions in Congress upon what methods should be used to attack the disruptive elements, but that the general council should give a lead to each of its affiliated unions, so that they can carry out the recommendations made.

This simply means that next year in all probability no delegate who is a member either of the Communist Party or the National Minority Movement will be allowed to attend the T. U. C. The secretary of the T. U. U., Mr. Citrine, in a statement to the press at the close of the congress quite plainly indicated the rigour with which this resolution will be applied. But it is intended to do more than attack the organized revolutionaries, it will be used against general council leaders like A. J. Cook, who on

the basis of this resolution will be suspended from the general council if they make any public comment on any action of the council, once it has decided upon a policy.

The congress has endorsed Mondism, the test for those inside the general council will come immediately, and I am confident that the only one to stick to his guns will be Cook, the others will simply not risk placing themselves under the ban that the general council will impose under this resolution.

The sum total of its effect will be to do the very thing it claims to avoid. It will cause disruption, splits, exclusion, and the destruction of democratic rights inside the unions. It will lead to increased non-unionism, because those at present outside the unions will refuse to join when they see the real role of the general council.

The resolution, it should be noted, was adopted before the endorsement of Mondism. This was no accident: it was the deliberate design of those who are fostering Mondism, because the revolutionaries must be attacked if the leaders are to deliver the goods to Mond and his allies.

It was strongly opposed by the minority, who exposed the real disrupters and splitters, those who stand for Mondism and the surrender of the trade union fight; those who refuse to give up their jobs after the workers have sacked them in four successive ballot votes as in the case of the Scottish miners officials; those who perpetuate craft and sectional unionism in face of a centralized capitalist enemy; but it had no effect on the voting—the result had been decided by the bloc vote long before the delegates came to Swansea, and the full responsibility for all the subsequent effects of this pernicious resolution will fall upon the heads of those delegates who allow themselves to be the pliant tools of a leadership that has surrendered the trade union struggle against capitalism.

There were fraternal delegates present from the American Federation of Labor, the Mexican Trade Union Movement, the Indian Trades Union Congress, the International Federation of Trade Unions, the Canadian Trades Union Congress, and Arthur Henderson representing the Labor Party.

With the exception of the Mexican and Indian delegates the whole of the fraternal delegations sang the same sweet song, the plea for unity on the basis of attacking the revolutionaries. The Mexican delegate made it perfectly plain that the Mexican Revolution had been won as a result of tremendous sacrifices by the trade unionists of that country, and that it would be defended by the Confederación Regional Obrera Mexicana, "but under no circumstances would outside interference be tolerated." This latter sentiment was in keeping with all the speeches which deprecated outside interference, and were obviously inspired.

The Indian delegate regretted the unfortunate differences that existed between the political movement in India and the British Labor Party, and hoped that a delegation would be sent from the Labor Party in the same way that the Trades Union Congress had sent the Purcell delegation last year. He also indicated how difficult it was for a young trade union movement like the Indian to decide which International it should join in view of the conflict between the leadership of the trade union movements of the world.

However, the merit of all these fraternal speeches could be gauged by the fact that the chief item of interest the Canadian delegate had to announce was that he had brought his wife and sister with him from Canada.

After this came the big congress discussion on the general council's report of its negotiations with Mond. Mr. Citrine was put up to move the endorsement of the council's

policy and in the course of a long speech made the following statement which is indicative of the frame of mind of the existing leadership towards current problem. Citrine claimed that the general council's leadership had been so successful that it had now converted the Mond group, the press and the public opinion to the recognition of the just claims of Labor. An amendment was moved to Citrine's resolution in the name of the Amalgamated Engineers Union. The speakers in support of this purely constitutional amendment were Brownlie and Swales, and they did not criticise the principle of Mondism, but only challenged the authority of the general council to enter into negotiations.

It was on this amendment that Hicks came in and made his speech. It was impossible to tell what Hicks was aiming at, and it was so lame and laboured in character that one of the delegates got up and demanded that the congress should be protected from having any more of it inflicted upon the delegates.

This was a fitting end to the attempted come-back of Hicks, who made no attempt to repudiate his Edinburgh speech, and did not take a clear line of opposition in principle to all that Mondism means.

There was a striking contrast between this speech and that of Cook, which immediately followed it. Despite statements such as "absolving the general council from any dishonest motives," etc. Cook's speech was a clear line of opposition to all that Mondism means.

His speech and that of the Communist, Tomkins, were the only two working class speeches made in opposition to the policy of class collaboration.

After this discussion came the debate on international trade union unity. To understand this discussion it is necessary to point out that the resolution represents a compromise between three unions, all three having a resolution on the agenda dealing with some aspect of international trade union unity. The resolution finally submitted to the congress was as follows:

"That congress, recognizing that the intensification of competition, the recent wage struggles which have characterized the workers' growing revolt, particularly in Europe and countries like India, the growth of national antagonisms, and the possibility of war, render more than ever necessary the need for international trade union unity, believes that the existence of two separate trade union internationals and a number of trade union centres unaffiliated to either is a source of weakness to the trade union movement, and prevents that movement from fully utilizing its power either to break the capitalist offensive against wages or to prevent a new war.

"This congress, therefore, calls upon the general council to summon a world conference of unions affiliated to both Internationals along with the trade unions not affiliated to either, in order to discuss ways and means of uniting the Trade Union Movement under one national trade union centre within each country, and internationally under the banner of one international. To assist in this project the Congress also requests the general council to work for the reconstruction of the Anglo-Russian Advisory Council."

The speakers were allowed five minutes each and no discussion was allowed unless it was in opposition to the resolution. It was because of this that Horner was forced to get in to criticise the resolution after Thomas's violent attack upon Russia and to tell the delegates that having the day previous voted in favor of class collaboration this resolution was something foreign to the mentality of the congress, and he was quite sure that the Russians would not touch them at any price because they stood for class struggle, whilst the congress stood for class collaboration.

The election of the new general council was then announced, and despite a terrific factional campaign against Cook, he succeeded in getting re-elected to the general council. There are three changes from the previous council,



ARTHUR COOK, Leader of the Miners' Strike and Left Winger At the Congress.

but they are not changes that will effect the movement in a "left" direction, as all of them will go with the right wing.

At the close of the congress the minority issued a declaration pointing out that after ridiculously short deliberation, the heads of the British trade unions who made up the congress had rejected international labor solidarity, had declared for co-operation with the employers led by those like Mond, "whose names stink in the nostrils of the workers they employ, because of their brutal methods of exploitation," had fallen in line with the wage cutting policy shown in the defeat through their treachery of the general strike, the break with the Russian unions, and the Trades Union Act.

The statement goes on to say:

"Our movement stands at the parting of the ways. We call upon the workers in the factories and unions to repudiate the Swansea decisions and to fight under the banner of the minority movement for united resistance to further wage safeguards for all workers now forced to work premium bonus and piece-work systems whilst fighting for their complete abolition, for strong factory committees, one union for each industry, extension of the powers of the trades councils, one united trade union international, the repudiation of industrial peace and class collaboration, and above all for the repudiation of the existing leadership and the election of new leaders pledged to fight capitalism and its allies now in control of the trade union movement."

On the basis of the above policy the Minority Movement is organizing rank and file conferences all over the country to explain to the masses the significance of the Swansea congress and contrast it with the Shoreditch conference of the National Minority Movement.