

# The People's Movement

BY HARRY POLLITT

*[We print below two important sections of Harry Pollitt's Opening Address to the Fifteenth Congress of the Communist Party of Great Britain, which was held at Birmingham on September 16-19, dealing with the People's Movement in Britain and the standpoint of Communists in relation to Democracy. The full text of the Address, with its treatment of the situation and problems of policy in all fields, will shortly be available. —Ed., LABOUR MONTHLY.]*

A SUCCESSFUL STRUGGLE against Chamberlain demands the co-operation of all sections of the people and of all organisations that are alarmed and discontented with his policy.

The situation creates a common anxiety and raises common tasks.

Let us look at the people of Britain. There are 12,000,000 workers engaged in the leading productive and transport organisations. 5,000,000 of them are organised. Many millions of the remainder are young workers. Many of them are women workers. These two sections are holding increasingly important jobs in the new industrial processes. How are we to capture the imaginations of these people, not only for trade union organisation, but for sustained interest and a hope in a leadership other than the negative dead oppressive bullying of the boss and of Chamberlain? They live in new housing estates, work in new factories, uprooted from the tradition of the Labour and Trade Union movement. The leadership of a People's movement would swing them into action and arouse their interest, and, as was found in France, rally them to the Labour Movement.

What is holding them back? The feeling that these organisations are just as dead and unresponsive to their needs as Chamberlain and his gang. They may not at the moment subscribe to Socialism; but they want economic security, peace and democracy.

Of course these are the predominant people in Britain. They represent perhaps 30,000,000 souls including the children who themselves are being held back and restricted by Chamberlain's "Economy" measures.

In the Agricultural community, there is an astonishing lack of effective political or industrial organisations or leadership for the protection of the agricultural workers, small farmers and smallholders against the big vested interests which so mercilessly exploit them.

We have also in Britain 11,000,000 belonging to the professional and middle-class sections of the population, ranging from doctors to advertising agents; from clerks to teachers; from artists, writers, to

small shopkeepers and business-men. All of them are concerned at the effects of the economic crisis, at fascism, at the menace of war, and at the lack of opportunity and advancement open to them at the present time. Many of these sections for the first time are becoming organised or demanding the right of organisation.

There is a growing disillusionment inside the Tory and Liberal Parties at the present results and future consequences of Chamberlain's policy.

Inside various sections of the Pacifist movement there are deep differences of opinion and recognition of the fact that to say "No More War" does not prevent war breaking out.

Amongst Protestants and Catholics there is uneasiness at the brutal and repressive methods that fascism adopts to prevent religious teaching and expression, and resentment that Chamberlain's policy helps the fascists to carry through their attack upon religion by force.

Who can afford to ignore the power and influence of the Left Book Club, and how in the two years of its existence it has directly affected the thoughts and actions of tens of thousands of people in the struggle against the National Government and for solidarity action with the peoples of Spain and China.

It is politically very short-sighted not to recognise these developments and to ignore the importance of bringing all these sections of the people and their organisations into co-operation with the Labour Movement.

It is necessary to recognise that at the present decisive moment neither the working class alone, nor these other sections of the people are able by themselves with their present divided forces to bring about the immediate changes in policy that are required and that can lay the sure basis for defeating Chamberlain.

The ruling class in Britain has always carried through the policy of "divide and conquer." Once again, the most reactionary sections of monopoly capital are trying to carry through this policy in order gradually to establish fascism in Britain.

The chief task of the moment is to put an end to the policy of the Chamberlain clique and to reach an understanding over a common programme in the interests of all who are directly affected. We should regard them all as equal comrades-in-arms against the common danger, the common enemy, and in the struggle for their common interests.

The Labour Movement, which is better organised than other sections of the population, is also more experienced in struggle, and therefore should recognise as a duty the bringing together of all useful forces. The best method to accomplish this goal is to unite as many sympathetic people as possible within the Labour Movement itself.

How can the working class win the valuable support of all these sections of the people and the various democratic, peace and religious organisations that so many of them are identified with?

Should we set up some hard-and-fast scheme as to how it shall be done? By no means.

There can be no greater error than to believe that you can mechanically transfer the political and organisational forms of the People's Front from one country to another.

In Britain the movement towards the People's Front will be on the basis of British conditions and circumstances.

The final form this will take in Britain will depend on conditions at home and abroad, but it is essential not to confuse the United Peace Alliance, or any other form of wide front for peace, with a People's Front such as is in being in France and Spain at the present time.

The difference between France and Britain for example, is that in France there was a direct attack on democracy in 1934 which definitely brought the working-class parties together, and out of this the extension of a united front between them, to other political organisations.

In the French Chamber of Deputies it has been possible for the various parties of the Left to reach an agreement and work and vote together. But neither of these stages has yet been reached in Britain.

Unity has not been established in the working-class movement, the process of differentiation in the Tory and Liberal parties which may lead to new political combinations and groups against Chamberlain is only beginning.

But as the whole situation develops, as dissatisfaction with the Chamberlain policy grows, if the Labour Movement is united and actively fighting Chamberlain, then the differentiation amongst millions of people not organised in any political party, as well as in the Liberal and Tory parties, will increase and take a more crystallised form that will place the organisation of the People's Front as a practical and immediate proposal.

Meantime, we Communists, while explaining patiently the nature of the People's Front which will take a particular British form in this country, only when the conditions for it are ripe, will unhesitatingly advance our immediate proposals to meet situations as they arise. This is why during the March crisis, when the opposition to Chamberlain was at its height, we proposed that all the Labour and democratic organisations should get together and defeat Chamberlain and form a People's Government.

This is why we supported the proposal of a United Peace Alliance as advocated by *Reynolds News*.

Neither the proposal of a People's Government, nor United Peace Alliance, constituted a People's Front such as was definitely constituted in France and Spain, before their present Governments came to power.

They were based on the need for the coming together of all lovers of peace in a mighty alliance to defeat Chamberlain.

It was not the People's Front; but it may be one of the forms

through which the People's Front could be achieved in Britain.

An electoral *bloc* between the Labour Movement and other democratic forces could also extend its basis and help forward the movement towards a definitely constituted People's Front.

There has already been a great deal of discussion both inside and outside the Labour Movement on the question of the United Peace Alliance and the People's Front. This is all to the good, but it needs to be accompanied by action now.

No opportunity should be lost in any locality in the country to develop forms of co-operation in all kinds of issues which concern the most diverse sections of the people. For in this way the basis can be laid for the wider national movement.

It is not easy to bring this about. All kinds of difficulties have to be overcome. Powerful vested interests stand in the way. Prejudices and doubts strongly assert themselves. There are tendencies to be combated which see only the past and not the terrible menace of the present situation.

Unity both inside and outside the Labour Movement has to be fought for patiently and persistently. The vanguard of the working class has to lead this fight. To steel itself against disappointment and defeat.

The enemies of unity are strong. But we are stronger still if we but realise our power and act in a spirit of confidence.

It is no light responsibility which history will place upon those Labour leaders for hindering the unity of the working-class movement, and its development into the wider combination of all the democratic and peace forces in Britain.

### *Communists and Democracy*

It is said that democracy, so long as it rests on the basis of capitalist economy, is not worth defending. It is worth while dealing with this in some detail.

Democracy is not, and cannot be, simply a resounding phrase used to cover up every sort of roguery and deception as the fascists and pro-fascists pretend. It was Lenin who recalled to a generation that had forgotten Marxism that democracy was always class democracy ; further, that democracy under the conditions of a capitalist economy was immeasurably inferior to the democracy of the Soviet, to democracy under conditions of a Socialist economy. Nevertheless he pointed out that the best State form under capitalism was democracy, precisely because it gave the best conditions for the development of the workers' struggle for emancipation.

Yet in these last few years we have witnessed a complete vulgarisation of what Lenin said. The question has been put as though democracy, democratic rights, democratic liberties, did not matter at all to the working class or to the mass of the people. There have even been some in the Communist ranks who have talked as though we

were indifferent to the form of capitalist rule ; while others, not Communists, have said that since both Britain and Germany are capitalist countries, there is not a ha'porth to choose between fascism and bourgeois democracy.

This vulgarisation and downright distortion of the standpoint of Marxism has been aided by the anti-democratic propaganda carried on from within the ranks of the Socialist parties during the last 30 years. In this Bernard Shaw is one of the most serious offenders. This old Fabian, unlike his teachers the Webbs, began his attack on democracy by pretending it was merely a device of the rich to rob the poor and has ended by stretching out his hand to Hitler and Mussolini.

Shaw could fall into this utter confusion and drag others into it, because he denied the class struggle basis of Socialism.

Now we have modern vulgarisers of Lenin, mouthers of so-called revolutionary phrases, reaching the same standpoint as the last degenerate phase of Shaw's opportunism. In the theoretical field the Right-wing and the " Leftist " standpoint have concurred, just as on the political field the Right-wing of the Labour Party are wooing the " Leftist " I.L.P.

Let us repeat it, and never forget it, that democracy, even under capitalist economy, offers the best field for the development of the class struggle.

We think the British machinery of Government is **anything** but perfect ; it gives any amount of opportunity for a small group of the very rich to put their will across as the will of the people. But it also gives the people opportunities and therefore we must defend it and use it to the utmost. Democracy does not mean the abandonment of the class struggle, but freedom to carry the struggle forward.

Democracy in Britain has always been a bread-and-butter question. The demands of the Chartists were democratic demands for one vote for every man, for annual parliaments and so on ; but the Chartist leader Stephens was right when he said the Charter was a " knife and fork question." The workers who rallied behind the Charter wanted the vote, because they wanted to end their economic slavery, their twelve-hour day, to end child-labour in the cotton mills and women's labour in the mines.

Having won the vote in 1867, the workers in further struggles were able to force through laws giving better conditions to miners, to factory workers, to seamen ; in 1875 they won the right to picket. And after they had gained a firm legal position for the unions in 1905, British workers were able to win big strikes for wage increases and shorter hours in the year before the War.

Democracy is not abstract. It means that the people have definite rights—the right to organise, the right to strike, the right to vote, the right to free speech. These rights are weapons without which the

British people would be no better off to-day than they were 100 years ago.

These rights did not drop from heaven. Men died to win them. To-day the people hold big demonstrations in Trafalgar Square. Only 50 years ago, in 1887, a worker named Alfred Linnel, was killed by the police in the fight for free speech, and the right to hold meetings in the Square. Britain's great tradition of freedom was won in the teeth of Britain's rulers. The town workers won the vote in 1867 after a fierce battle in which they were led to victory by the British section of the First International. "Without us," Marx wrote proudly, "the Reform League would never have been founded, or would have fallen into the hands of the middle class."

Many fell in the fight for free trade unions. The Tolpuddle Martyrs were sent to Botany Bay in 1834 ; the London Gas Stokers went to prison in 1872 ; William Gallacher and the Clyde leaders in 1916 ; Mick Kane and the Harworth miners in 1937.

Nor can we say that once these rights are won by struggle they are safe for ever. They always represent a concession which the capitalists would like to take away. After the General Strike, the capitalists, led by Stanley Baldwin, took advantage of the opportunity to attack trade union freedom. In 1927 they cut down the right to picket, outlawed most forms of sympathetic strikes, and took away the right of Government servants to organise in free trade unions.

The right of the unemployed to be maintained had to be defended in a series of bitter fights against the threat of compulsory Labour camps, and the fight is still in progress.

And not only nationally, but locally, the struggle for democracy is always going on. In this city of Birmingham in 1936, the Lucas factory owners had succeeded in getting an effective police ban on the distribution of trade union leaflets at that factory. It was our Party which broke that ban, challenged the police at law and established the right of trade unionists to use this important method of organising against the speed-up and sweating in this town.

Democracy means the rights won in the factories and pits for trade union and workshop organisation.

As our comrades who remember war-time conditions on the Clyde and in the engineering shops well know, democratic rights and control of shop stewards to stop slave conditions were fought for bitterly. Nowadays again they are threatened.

This is the frontier of working-class democracy which lines up with the lines of the Ebro and of the Soviet Union.

Again traitors are at work in high places and in our movement. We will defend our rights, until we have at last complete democracy, Soviet democracy.

The people of the Empire are making history to-day in tremendous battles against British imperialism. They are fighting only for a less

miserable life and the elements of democracy. Chamberlain has met them with prisons and guns.

Those that tell us there is nothing to choose between fascism and bourgeois democracy should take the trouble to find out what the workers suffer in fascist countries. Facts leak out even in the official figures. In 1936, the Italian people ate one-third less sugar, one-fifth less cereals, one-fifth less fruit and vegetables than in 1926-30. In Germany  $3\frac{1}{2}$  million workers earned less in 1936 than the unemployment benefit of 1932. On Government building schemes the Nazi factory inspectors report that a 12-hour shift is often worked and sometimes even 15 or 16 hours a day. In the metal industry they report the working day is 10 hours now. That is what can happen when the working-class organisations are smashed ; you can go back in two or three years to the labour conditions that existed a hundred years ago !

To-day, Germany is mobilised for immediate war, but comrades in Germany are carrying on a heroic fight against war under conditions of fascism. The people can only read the Nazi press which screams about "Czech Bloody Terror Gangs." Unless they will risk imprisonment, they can only listen to the Nazi wireless, which tells them that Czechoslovakia is attacking Germany. It is illegal for them to hold meetings against the war, to demonstrate against it, to strike against it. That is what the destruction of democracy has meant for Germany.

Does anyone think that the members of the British battalion, to whose imperishable memory we have paid tribute, went to Spain to fight for democracy in any other sense than this ? Does anyone imagine that they went there and gave up their lives for some abstract democracy, or for some sham version of democracy as practiced by our ruling families ? Did they die to make "democracy" safe for millionaires, for the Rothermeres, Londonderrys, and the rest of the ruling families ?

They gave their lives in the service of a democracy that meant concrete things, economic and political rights and liberties for the workers and the mass of the people—in a word, for those things which fascism destroys and which the millionaires are daily attempting to filch away from us.

And our party, too, can take its stand in the forefront of the fight for democracy against fascism, because we defend each democratic right, whether economic or political ; because we know how to combine the fight for each demand of each section into a common struggle ; and because beyond the fight for maintaining democracy, we see clearly and point the way, on this basis, to the struggle for Socialism.