

Lessons of the Labour Conference

by HARRY POLLITT

THE programme adopted at the December Conference of the Labour Party represents the appeal it will make to public opinion at the next General Election; but the issue that immediately arises is how far the Labour Party Conference equipped the movement to win a majority of the people to its support.

The Labour Party Conference did not develop the steps that are necessary to organise the whole form of the organised labour movement, to carry its own policy into practice, because its discussions were divorced from the background of the war and the political activities, and took place in a world that was far removed from the grim realities facing millions of our men in the armed forces all over the world.

One felt this most strongly during the discussions on election policy and post-war settlement. On the first, the lead given by Arthur Greenwood was declared by one delegate, to loud applause, as being "tepid, insipid and lacking in leadership." The discussion never once faced up to the really tremendous task that Labour will have to face at any General Election taking place between the end of the war in Europe and the opening of great new offensives against Japan, if it is to win the votes of the majority of the electorate. It was naturally overshadowed by the crisis in Greece, but this was no excuse for either the platform, or those delegates who were seriously concerned with winning power, to allow any other issue to rob the debate on General Election policy of its true importance.

The reply to the debate by James Walker, M.P., was confined to vulgarities and a coarseness which left every urgent political, tactical and electoral problem unsolved.

The known decisions of some of the most powerful Trade Unions in the country cannot be swept on one side in this way. The platform, working in close conjunction with the Standing Orders Committee, may think that by the clever and complicated way they manoeuvred the discussion on a united electoral agreement, enabled them to avoid awkward hurdles, but time will show that they have only succeeded in erecting bigger ones!

One speaker in this debate used a phrase that explains a lot of the doubt and confusion that exists in the Labour Party. Referring to the Executive Committee statement on the Electoral Policy, the speaker declared, to the applause of the Conference, that it "had already had an effect throughout the labour movement. They had begun to see the end of the long period of servitude, and life in local Labour Parties had begun to stir again."

What a gift to the Tories this expression of the role of Labour in the National Government is! To have served in a Coalition Government in the historic struggle against fascism, to have been responsible for developing policies and strategy, that have, in unity with the Soviet Union and America, brought victory in sight, is a "period of servitude." It means that Labour claims no part in this victory, that to have mobilised all its resources as Labour has done to crush fascism, that bestial force whose aim was to crush Labour, means only a "period of servitude," and the Tory Party are left in the field to claim the entire credit for having won the war. It is the very position they are hoping to establish when the General Election takes place!

During the discussion on Post-War Settlement other expressions were used which only succeed in strengthening

the hands of the Tories. One speaker after another made speeches in which for them German fascism has already been wiped out, without any possibility of any further come-backs or struggles. Indeed, they all expressed more concern for the "poor Germans" than for any of the victims of German aggression; and this exhibitionism reached its highest point when they yelled their disapproval of the very modest suggestion that the Germans should be made to give land to those Dutch farmers whose lands have been deliberately flooded with sea water and rendered unfit for cultivation for years to come by the Nazis in their retreat from Holland.

The policy of the National Government in Greece overshadowed everything else at the Conference. You felt it immediately you entered the Conference hall on the first day of the proceedings. Instead of the leadership allowing the conference to express its real opinion and embodying it in resolution form, they permitted the introduction of all sorts of bogies to scare the delegates into believing they were going to let the Labour Ministers in the Government down, the assumption being that these Ministers had fought against Churchill's policy. It transpired from Mr. Ernest Bevin's speech that the Labour Ministers were in full-blooded agreement with Churchill's policy and were parties to it. The result of this will manifest itself at the General Election.

When the debate opened, it was very reminiscent of the debate at the Edinburgh Labour Party Conference in 1936 on Spain, only in reverse. At Edinburgh the aim of the leadership was to scare the delegates against voting to end the alleged policy of non-intervention in Spain, by stating in pseudo-confidence "what they knew on the inside." At the London Conference the aim was to prevent any real mobilisation of the labour move-

ment to succeed in forcing, not a change in Government, but a change in Government policy to end armed intervention against Greek democracy.

But it was in this debate that one got the impression of the real feelings of the labour movement. Here are people who could move mountains if they were given the right leadership and a policy that would give them full confidence that it could win the support of the majority of the people. The feelings displayed in the debate on Greece revealed that the movement can be made so strong and united that, if the leadership knew how to use it, the policy of the Government on Greece could be changed now, and the Government itself changed at the General Election.

But what of the future of the Labour Party? We ask this question because so much of what took place in December will by this time only be of value to the historian. Events will change so rapidly, such tremendous military struggles and political changes will occur in Europe, that only a deliberately blind person would believe that the Labour Party will not be compelled to approach these problems entirely differently from the way it did in December, 1944.

The first thing to remember at every stage of the many developments that will take place is that winning the war comes first. Everything has to be placed against the gigantic military struggles. Remember the feelings of the millions who are going into action, to face death or be maimed for life, that we may live. Everything else is secondary to this. Consciously to develop a political crisis at this stage of the war is to play into the hands of the Nazis, and to create doubt and confusion amongst the armed forces. But this is not to say that no pressure has to be exerted on the Government to see that Labour's policy is carried through. It needs to be organised with

the strength and conviction behind it that Labour has made the greatest contribution and sacrifice for victory, and it is not going to see the common people robbed of the fruits of victory because the Tories place their reactionary interests before those of the nation as a whole.

Secondly, when the armistice has been signed, the fascists will go over to illegal forms of struggle against democracy and the United Nations. They will use their business, political and religious connections to prevent a peace that is a lasting peace, removing the terror and scourge of war for generations to come. This demands neither a Vansittart nor a "Tribune" peace, but a just and stern peace, such a one will be supported by all that is best in the ranks of the German people. We have to be on guard against the circulation of neo-fascist ideas in new forms and guises; because reaction never gives up.

Thirdly, after all the bitter experiences of fascism throughout Europe, the new states and governments now slowly evolving will experience many difficulties and set-backs. Europe is in the process of giving birth to these new states and governments. Britain's function is not to help produce abortions and miscarriages, but strong, healthy new governments that rest on the new democracy born out of the agony and travail of a Europe fighting for freedom. When the General Elections take place in the European countries, they will produce many surprises. Then, too, we shall need to be on guard against the attempts of reactionaries at home and abroad to try and prevent the will of the people prevailing, especially when votes for the policy of the Communist Parties reach, as they will, such great proportions.

The new conception of democracy that is being born all over the world is based upon the desire of millions to

give everything, use all their initiative and talent, in the fight to destroy fascist oppression and its collaborators. This it is which has brought out to the full from millions of unknown people, the organising ability, discipline and talent upon which the new states in Europe will be founded.

The peoples of Europe, after their fearful experiences, are not proceeding simply to restore the "old liberal democratic Italy," the "old liberal democratic France"; for it was the weakness of this kind of democracy that in the end gave birth to fascism. The new form of democratic advance is the national democratic front, based on the rooting out from all positions of power and influence all those who collaborated with fascism, and the creation of a new democratic government supported by millions and carrying out their policy.

The British and American people are responsible for seeing that those who act in their name in Europe recognise these facts, that they give no quarter to the old bad forces, that they learn to distinguish between the fascist and the anti-fascist, and that they rely firmly on the power of the new anti-fascist democracy, and do not try to keep it down as "too radical," "too Red."

Remember that to the Tories, the workers are always heroes when they are fighting and dying in wars, or rescuing their comrades in mining disasters, but as soon as they seek to defend democracy against pro-fascism, or come out on strike to prevent a reduction of their standards of life, they immediately become the "mob."

Fourthly, there is urgent need to use every minute at the disposal of the labour movement for the next General Election, whether it comes in spring, summer or autumn. The labour movement is not ready to face this supreme political test now. The Labour Party Conference was the best proof of that.

There is no real understanding of the character of the fight that will take place at the General Election. It is the most fateful in all our history. We shall face, not only such issues as Housing, Full Employment, National Insurance and all the other burning issues of work, wages and security, but also lasting peace, the avoidance of a new war, the political and moral destruction of fascism, the whole future of world humanity and very serious possibilities of the advance towards the conquest of power and the establishment of Socialism. Because of all these indivisible and vital issues, it will be fought more unscrupulously than any other General Election. Remember also that the General Election will take place at the end of the war in Europe and the beginning of the last struggles against Japan. Let anyone ponder over the significance of the soldiers' votes for President Roosevelt in the recent election there, and at once they will grasp the importance of this fact in the minds of the millions of men and women in the armed forces.

Some of the existing confusion in the Labour Party is due to the fact that the political intentions of certain Labour leaders are not yet fully known, there is too much gossip and doubt about where some of them stand. The sooner there is complete confidence on this point, the better for the Labour Party.

We shall waste no time speculating on either the name or the composition of the Government that will be formed after the General Election, but we certainly know the basis upon which the new Government comes to power. It must have an overwhelming majority of Labour and progressive Members of Parliament behind it. Labour must hold the key positions, whatever other adjustments are necessitated by the exigencies of the situation. There are already many in the

leadership of the Labour Party who know such a position will arise, but, like Brer Rabbit, "they lie low and say nuffin." The political aim in the General Election is crystal clear; it is to end a Tory majority. To do that is easier said than done, with the Labour Party in its present position.

If the Tory and Labour Parties place 600 candidates in the field, the Liberal Party 500, the Communist Party 50 and Common Wealth 60, then it is a gift to the Tory Party, as every honest student of politics will admit. It would be a fight in a very difficult situation with all sorts of new problems to be faced, and on the basis of an electoral system heavily biased in favour of returning a Tory Government with a minority of votes, but a majority of seats through three-cornered contests.

The Communist Party wants to avoid such a situation. It has made its proposals to discuss the position with the Labour Party. These are supported by the Miners Federation, Amalgamated Engineering Union, Electrical Trades Union, Fire Brigades Union, National Society of Painters, National Union of Vehicle Builders and Associated Society of Locomotive Engine Drivers and Firemen. Mr. Walker, M.P., will have to think twice before he can describe these Trade Unions—the cream of the Labour Party—one of which pays twice as much money into the Labour Party than any other Trade Union, as "blackmailers." It is also supported by thousands of national and district Trade Union officials, who are all deeply desirous of ending Tory rule and know that, given unity in the ranks of the labour movement, it can be ended.

The leaders of the Labour Party would do well to remember that before they can win the confidence of the electorate they have to be given it. They have won the confidence of their own membership, and

from evident at its recent Party Conference.

Fifthly, the Trade Unions have to take a more deep and positive interest in the leadership and policy of the Labour Party. The present unhealthy competition between the Labour Party and the Trades Union Congress should be brought to an end. Some Trade Unions are not sending their best men on to the Labour Party Executive Committee. They are not discussing sufficiently seriously the agenda for Labour Party conferences and putting down the appropriate resolutions. We want the most effective combination possible between workers by hand and brain, but this will not be achieved by the present struggles between Trade Union leaders and intellectuals, or Trade Union leaders and politicians. Nevertheless, so long as the Labour Party has its present constitutional basis, and relies so much on Trade Union money, the Trade Unions have the duty of setting the lead in the way they help to formulate and fight for their policy at the Labour Party conferences and bring their most capable leaders forward to act on their behalf on the Executive Committee of the Labour Party.

The contrast between some of the representatives of the Trade Unions on the General Council of the Trades Union Congress and on the Labour Party Executive Committee, speaks for itself.

The Trade Unions have also a duty to democracy in their own ranks. There is not a single Trade Union leader in the country who can deny that where members of the Communist Party are in leading official positions they are in the forefront in the fight to increase the number of trade unionists paying the political levy. There are Trade Unions from which the Labour Party is now receiving more money than ever before in its history, because

members of the Communist Party hold elected national positions.

Yet members of the Communist Party are denied the right to represent their Trade Unions on local and divisional Labour Parties, or at the national conferences of the Labour Party, and are denied the right to go on the Parliamentary panel of the Trade Unions. It is a position that needs to be ended in the best interests of the Labour Party itself. If Arthur Horner is capable of representing the Trades Union Congress at the American Federation of Labour Convention, and the Trades Union of the Latin-American Republics, he has the right to be allowed to represent the miners at the Labour Party Conference.

The trade unionists also have the right to a voice as to which of their members shall be put forward for the General Council of the Labour Party Executive Committee, as there is a similar need for ending the method of bargaining as to which Trade Unions are going to vote for various nominees on the General Council and the Executive Committee of the Labour Party.

These are all elementary democratic measures which the urgency of the situation and the interests of the Labour Party demand should be put into operation as quickly as possible.

Finally, and above all, there is the greatest need for strengthening the Labour Party itself. If ever any arguments were needed to prove how urgently the Labour Party needed the Communist Party (apart from the admissions of Herbert Morrison in his Huddersfield speech) they were provided at the Labour Party Conference itself.

The dissolution of the Communist Party would not be a success for unity, but a defeat for unity. We do not want to obtain unity with the Labour Party by back-door methods, by apologising for being Marxists and Communists.

What is needed is the recognition of two things. First that the Communist Party has something vital to contribute to the Labour Party, and that we can all work together without necessarily having to agree on every detail. The main thing is to unite and work for the common people and reach general agreement on what has to be done. We will maintain that fight and win that fight.

Second, that the Labour Party and the movement need the Communist Party, need Marxism, not on sufferance, but for the contribution which our Party can make. Our all-sided organisation of work in every field for a single objective, the uniting of agitation and propaganda, the leadership of political and economic struggles and the understanding of social changes and how to organise them—all these represent a contribution that is new and essential in the development of the labour movement.

The Labour Party needs the Communist Party in order that new members can be won for the Labour Party, Trade Unions, Co-operatives and the Communist Party, so that the movement can go forward in advancing the interests of the working people, in the teaching of Socialism and the constant fight for new mass developments towards its achievement, to strengthen the bonds of international solidarity between the workers of the world, and to help lay the basis through which can ultimately be created one single working-class political party in every land.

There is need for a great mass recruiting campaign for the Labour Party, the utilisation of every modern resource of propaganda to make its general line of policy known, for the whole country to be stirred by the

message of a strong and united labour movement, for a great increase in its finances through the conscious payment of the political levy, for new leaders to be given, their chance, for the Executive Committee to have more hatred of capitalism than it has of Communism. Then there will be reality about the fight for power. Then the masses will believe they are in earnest when they talk about a united labour movement. We of the Communist Party, while we will strengthen our own ranks because we know this is also essential to Labour's success, are ready at any time to meet the representatives of the Labour Party to discuss any question associated with the well-being of the labour movement as a whole. But let there be no mistake, there is going to be no question of the dissolution of the Communist Party. As the Labour Party Conference so clearly demonstrated, that would indeed be a crime against both the Labour Party itself and the labour movement.

If the lessons of the London Conference are now seriously discussed, if a new drive for unity and clarity on policy is made, if a common agreement is reached between the Communist Party and the Labour Party, then tremendous new prospects face the working people of this country. Then whenever the special conference of the Labour Party Conference is held, in the light of the situation at home and abroad and the responsibilities that rest upon all of us, we can face with supreme confidence any General Election in the knowledge that with unity in the ranks, unity on programme and candidates and methods of political campaigning, the end of the war against fascism will be followed by ending the rule of the Tories in Britain for all time.