

Ireland, the Labour Party and the Empire

After a long and bitter struggle, there is at last the prospect of peace in Ireland. The workers of Ulster and the South have fought with a fervour only equalled by the frenzy of the late world war, and are now to be able to see what it really was they fought for. If they hope for anything better than the fate common to ex-soldiers in all the countries of Europe—victors and vanquished alike—then disappointment awaits them.

Sinn Fein, behind a screen of fine-sounding no-surrender proclamations, appears to be preparing to forego the demand for full recognition of Ireland's status as an independent Republic; while the English Government, under the pressure of a variety of political and financial factors, considers the cost of continued refusal of concessions prohibitive, and offers a form of Dominion Home Rule.

The chief, the economic, causes of the dispute are not far to seek. The northern Capitalists, whose prosperity lies in their easy access to markets within or protected by the British Empire, could never submit to being cut off from the source of their wealth. Similarly, the numerically strong body of farmers and traders in the South, plundered and thwarted for centuries by successive English Governments, and seeing themselves, for the benefit of their competitors, denied the right of freely developing commercial relations abroad, looked to the victory of Sinn Fein as the precursor of a new era of expansion for their trade. Add to this the hopes of the younger generation for satisfaction of their hunger for land, hitherto inaccessible to them owing to foreign ownership and profitable use for non-agricultural purposes, and we have some idea of the material basis for the Irish war.

The workers were called upon to take up arms for objects far enough removed from these, "Protestantism and the Flag" or "Catholicism and Liberty," as geographical accident ordained: it was always the trade of the politician to provide plausible excuses. They responded with the usual disastrous results for themselves. Under the pretext of the necessity for presenting a united front to the external enemy, robbed and robbers, workers and employers, closed up their ranks to the manifest advantage of the latter.

Trade Union organisation was wrecked by internal dissension, or rendered innocuous in the larger interest of patriotism, that is, of the employers, whether Belfast shipbuilders or Southern farmers. Now, with the coming of peace, the class struggle will once more be forced to the front, and whether the wage-earners are in a position to resist attempts to lower their standard of living or not, they can at least learn the lesson of their recent folly. In Erin, no more than in this or any other Capitalist country, do war slogans or the sentiments of national brotherhood weight heavily where they conflict with profit-making.

The cessation of guerrilla warfare and the raising of martial law will provide a welcome removal of political and mental obstacles to our propaganda, but it must always be remembered that the form, the time, and the terms of the peace are in the hands of the Ruling Class. Theirs is the political control, and the accompanying

military power enables them to give or withhold, and to bargain as they think fit. On neither side have the workers the deciding voice.

As might be expected, the Labour Party, which has long put at the forefront of its programme the solution of the Irish problem, has something to say at this juncture which incidentally is of interest to us. The Labour Party, as also might have been expected by those who know that body, puts the case for the English Capitalist Class.

At the height of the conflict, when there was no sign of a weakening on either side, of or any kind of rapprochement, the Labour Party, somewhat vaguely it is true, stood for Ireland's right to Independence with but two qualifications: guarantees for the protection of minorities and against the possibility of future military or naval menace to this country. Now, however, that changed circumstances or changed feeling in the constituencies lead the Government to negotiate, the Labour Party withdraws from the attitude it had taken up. When war is the order of the day, it is useful but harmless in bye-election tactics to promise Independence, but when Capital decides to have peace and the actual terms are to be settled, the Labour Party is called to heel and must follow its masters.

Thus we have Mr. J. H. Thomas declaring (*Daily Herald*, September 2nd) that "no political party in England can hold out any hope of an Irish Republic." The *Herald* commented adversely on this "astounding" remark, and dismissed it as a private opinion only, not representative of the Labour Party.

Curiously enough, a week before H. N. Brailsford has written in the *Herald* under the title "Ireland and Sea-Power," expressing the same opinion in even more vigorous language, and it is with this that I propose to deal. *The Daily Herald did not comment on Brailsford's article!*

Brailsford is a Labour candidate, and in the *Labour Daily* which in this instance claims that it represents the real attitude of the Labour Party, he writes as follows (August 30th):

"The British Government (with the nation behind it) is, I believe, sincere in its readiness to yield everything except naval control . . . In plain words the issue for the British people is our world power. That is the only issue for which we ever fight . . . but it is an issue for which we always fight, and will fight. It was the issue in the world war; first, because the German navy challenged ours, and, secondly, because a German occupation of the Belgian coast must have interfered with our control of Dover Straits . . . For sea-power is the instrument of our economic expansion. Upon it rests our possession of half Africa and all India, and our ability to expand at will in China or elsewhere."

This is somewhat staggering, and one cannot help wondering whether the hundreds of thousands of out-of-work ex-soldiers are fully appreciative of the advantages that accrue to the through their "possession" of "half Africa and all India." To continue with the quotation:

"No instinct is so deeply rooted in us all (the exceptions are negligible) as the instinct which teaches us without talk or exhortation, or reflection, to guard our

naval ascendancy against any risk. None even of the sincerest advocates of the League of Nations (not even Lord Robert Cecil) had a word to say in support of Mr. Wilson's proposals for the freedom of the seas. No one criticises (I except the eccentrics) the virtual British seizure of Constantinople.

"One may feel sure in advance that while we may accept, or even propose at Washington, a limitation in shipbuilding, we shall not agree to abate by a single vital concession our unlimited and uncontrolled right to blockade."

Incidentally this throws an interesting light on the *bona-fides* of the League of Nations and on the use to the workers of it and its Labour Party backers. We notice, too, that the "eccentrics" are excluded from those Labour Party claims to represent. For my part, I must confess to being one of them: the deep-rooted instinct of guarding "our naval ascendancy" seems to have passed me by, and I simply never froth at the mouth at the mention of this bloody old Empire.

"We are ready to concede much . . . , but we will no more give up our naval stations on the Irish coast than we will give up Gibraltar or Malta or the Suez Canal. To do so would be to begin to give up world-power.

"On the ordinary level of thought (Tolstoyans, Quakers and Communists are the only exceptions) we are acting rationally. An independent Ireland would be a danger. Our next enemy at sea would assuredly occupy, or try to occupy, it. Belgium was not the only violated neutral in the last war. China, Greece, Persia and Albania were all used or over run. There will be no yielding here . . . and Irishmen who expect us to yield eventually will have to wait till our Empire is overthrown and our sea-power vanished like Germany's."

Have you grasped the full import of this frank statement of what the Labour Party stands for? The class privileges of the Capitalists are in question, and the Labour Party is forced into the open to defend them.

Of course, the Ruling Class will not allow the Empire to be endangered by an independent Ireland. The Empire is theirs, and they won't see their private property damaged, unless superior force compels. That is simple enough. They have the power, and use it to protect and further their interests against opposition from workers and other States alike. But what is the Labour Party doing in this?

They offer themselves as an alternative to the Coalition and are in great hopes of early success. We consider them worthy of condemnation for their past record alone, but are told we should give them a chance, and wait and judge by results. Well, here is their own promise of their intentions. The fulfilment may be worse; it can hardly be better. Not only Ireland is touched upon:

"The (Washington) Conference may then be futile, and, over the issue of Imperialist exploitation in the Far East, the naval rivalry will begin in earnest, and ultimately we may find ourselves involved even in war."

What does this mean in brief? Just this: The wealth of the Empire, built up by the toil and sacrifice of generations of British workers, is to remain what it now is, the

exclusive possession of our exploiters, and for their acquiescence in this the Labour Party is to be graciously permitted to take over the Government. Only nominally in power, they will be, in reality, as helpless as the Labour Governments in Australia, and will serve, as they are intended to serve, as the last defence of the Capitalist system.

Hoodwinked by a repetition from the mouths of their leaders, of the old fiction of the alleged community of interest between themselves and the employers, the workers are again to be privileged to defend the country they do not own, against all comers, from the Capitalists of USA to the Irish Republicans. Their reward will be the reward the unemployed are reaping now.

Did the last war concern the workers, or will the next? Does it matter to them that "our" naval supremacy should remain intact, any more than it matters whether Sinn Fein colours or the Union Jack fly over Dublin, or whether the German Black, Red and Gold, or the flag of Poland mocks their poverty in Silesia?

While the Capitalist Class dominates the civilised world, and owns and controls all the means of wealth production, the disposal of nations in this or that empire or sphere of economic interest is not the business of the Working Class. If you think the choice of war ministers as between, say, Churchill and Col. Will Thorne, to direct you to the slaughter-house, is worthy worrying about, then, of course, you will select your respective champions in the Coalition or the Labour Party.

If you don't, and if you consider it time that any fighting the workers may have to do, be done for their own emancipation from the system which makes wars inevitable, you will be well repaid for the devotion of a few hours to the study of Socialism. There is urgent need for you inside *The Socialist Party*.

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