

## **Czechoslovakia: the choice before us**

Though the *Daily Herald* paused in its campaign on behalf of Czechoslovakia to speed Mr Neville Chamberlain on his way to Hitler with a "Good luck, Chamberlain!" and congratulated him on taking a course "which will receive general support" (*Daily Herald*, September 15<sup>th</sup>), it was as plain as a pikestaff that Chamberlain was quite prepared to abandon the Czechs if he thought that by so doing he could safeguard the interests of British capitalism. Now the *Herald* says this is a very dishonourable action, but when did any ruling class ever trouble about such trifles? The German ruling class in 1914 never hesitated a moment about violating their guarantee of Belgian neutrality. Nor did the British hesitate to make pledges to the Arabs which they never intended to keep. Then they double-crossed Italy, first bribing the latter to desert its own ally, Germany, and afterwards letting Italy whistle for payment when the time came to divide the loot at Versailles. And when has any capitalist politician ever kept faith with the working class?

Yet the *Herald* could not think of anything better to say to the workers than tell them, in effect, to trust Chamberlain!

### **Britain Not Ready for War**

Chamberlain was not thinking about the problems of the Czech ruling class--except, perhaps, that he was wondering exactly how they could be induced to lie down quietly while the sell-out took place. (It is really very wicked for victims to be armed and able to put up a fight; they should be defenceless, like the Abyssinians.) What, no doubt, weighed heavily on Chamberlain's mind is that Great Britain's re-armament is a long way from being finished and it would be very awkward indeed if Britain were to be forced into war at such a time as this. Among other things, Chamberlain's own reputation as a politician would suffer a fatal blow, for he could hardly hope to persuade his masters or the electorate that his Government has efficiently handled the re-armament programme in the two years since he became Prime Minister. The guiding line of British foreign policy in recent years has been to prevent, if possible, any widespread conflict which would be certain to endanger the power and possessions of British capitalism and which would offer little prospect of gain in the event of victory--itself a very uncertain factor. Later on Chamberlain will feel readier to take a strong line, or, of course, events might force Britain into war against Germany in spite of Britain's efforts to avoid, postpone or localise hostilities.

### **The Tragedy of the Present Position**

The real tragedy of the present position of the workers here and abroad is that they are hopelessly confused and divided, most of them even unaware that there is a Socialist attitude to war. In Great Britain most of the argument only centres about the two traditional views of ruling-class foreign policy. On the one side is the isolationist view: "let the Empire line up with USA and keep out of European wars". It is marred for the capitalists by the awkward fact that Empire trade routes are very much bound up with the Mediterranean, and no method has been discovered of taking the Mediterranean out of Europe's way and turning it into a British lake. The other view is the old Balance of Power doctrine: "keep the Continent divided into two more or less equally strong groups, and help the weaker side in case of need". Although names have changed, and there are various positions intermediate between these two, not

only Britain's capitalists, but also most of Britain's workers cannot see any alternative policy; except the Communists, who simply echo whatever from time to time accords with the interests of Russia's rulers.

### **Save Democracy by War**

The Labour Party's view is that the workers should in the last resort be prepared to go to war to save Czechoslovakian territory and independence. It has a strong emotional appeal. It is natural for generous-minded people who do not think clearly to be indignant at what looks to them like the aggression of a big Power against a small one, especially when the existence of democratic institutions and trade unionism are involved. It is the same appeal as was made in 1914 for "Poor little Belgium", but though the British ruling class were and are very vitally concerned with the independence of Belgium they are not so much concerned about Czechoslovakia, so this time the Government and the Labour Party are at the moment on opposite sides. Socialists say that the workers should not be on either of these sides, but should be thinking about a line of their own.

The first step towards clear thinking is to recognise that a majority of the Germans in Czechoslovakia favour the idea of being inside Germany. They have lived under Czechoslovakian democracy, suffered prolonged misery from industrial depression and unemployment, had to put up with some not very serious disabilities imposed on them by the Czechs, and have finally been swept off their feet by Hitler's promises and his appeal to their nationalism. Foolishly but fanatically they believe that Paradise awaits them on the other side of the frontier. As a matter of cold fact, Hitler would probably be able to alleviate their economic distress and unemployment a little, at least, for a time, just as he did for the workers in what was Austria. Socialists would tell them that they ought not to take short-sighted views and sell themselves to the capitalist Nazi movement for the sake of some small immediate advantage. But the Labourites, including the Czech Social-Democrats, cannot convincingly tell them that, for is it not the essence of Labourite philosophy that workers should concentrate always on the immediate advantage and the petty concession and look with favour on nationalism?

Capitalist democracy and reformism are not enough. The workers in most lands have tried them and are not satisfied. Along comes some glib talker about the efficiency of dictatorship or some patriotic fanatic who can stir their emotions with talk of racial superiority, and they desert their old democratic allegiance. Now it should be clear why Socialists say that war to save democracy is a snare and a delusion. By huge sacrifice of life, and assuming that Germany lost the war, it might be possible to force the Sudeten Germans to remain in Czechoslovakia. It might be possible to drive out some of the existing dictatorships (but not all of them, because some at least of the countries arrayed against Germany would themselves be dictatorships--for instance, England and France would possibly be able once more to buy the Italian Government). Would that bring Socialism nearer? Would it even "make the world safe for democracy" (remember the old 1914 catch-word)? No, the workers everywhere would still be poverty-stricken and insecure, still political cannon-fodder for the first Fascist mob-orator who came along promising to rescue some new national minority from alien tyranny and save them from the horrors of capitalist democracy. Whichever side wins, war leaves the real problem unsolved and, indeed, by creating still more national hatred, it makes its solution more difficult than ever.

The real problem is that of rallying the workers to something which will hold their allegiance against all spurious appeals and hold it for all time. Only Socialism can do that. Only Socialism is worth struggling for.

**Socialism at any other time, but not now**

One final word. The Labour Party and the Communist Party are again preaching the doctrine that everything else must give place to the problems of Fascism and Czechoslovakia. Forgotten are all the other "urgent immediate demands" which filled their programmes in past years. Socialists are not impressed. For one thing, in the eyes of the Labour and Communist Parties, there never was a moment when Socialist propaganda was timely. During war they will want all energies turned to killing "the enemy". During peace they always want to concentrate on disarmament, the "means test", old-age pensions, or the "vital" question of pushing out one Government administering capitalism in order to put in another, differing chiefly in name.

The job of Socialists *at all times* is to propagate Socialism and organise for the conquest of political power in the country in which they happen to live, in unceasing opposition to capitalism and all its agents and parties. We do not wish good luck to Mr Neville Chamberlain, nor do we seek war to save Czech capitalism or British or any other capitalism. We say, hasten the day when the British workers, along with the workers of all countries, can drive from power Chamberlain and his foreign capitalist friends and enemies, both democratic and Fascist, and establish Socialism.

(October 1938)