

# THE WORKERS MONTHLY

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## The British Conference on World Trade Union Unity

By Wm. Z. Foster



FOSTER

IF further proof were needed of the growing revolutionary spirit of the British working class, such proof was abundantly furnished by the Unity Conference of the National Minority Movement, held in Battersea Town Hall, on January 25th. There were present 630 delegates from all over Great Britain, representing more than 600,000 workers in practically every important trade union in the country. The whole thing was a blaze of revolutionary spirit. It was a striking demonstration of the spirit of international unity, now spreading like wildfire among the millions organized in the British trade unions.

The conference, which was made up of delegates from trade unions, cooperatives, unemployed, etc., was held in the face of sharp opposition. The old-line trade union leaders could see in it the handwriting on the wall for their antiquated system of unionism which has cost the British workers so dearly. The General Council of the Trades Union Congress, invited to attend, abruptly declined the invitation. The leaders of the National Union of Railwaymen and the Amalgamated Engineering Union (Machinists) went the General Council one better and sharply warned their members not to attend. The capitalist press profusely praised the reactionary leaders for this stand; suddenly the mouthpieces of the capitalists became militant defenders of "legitimate" trade unionism against the diabolical assaults of the left wing. They made much of the fact that Cook, recently elected left wing secretary of the national Miners' Union, did not attend the conference and preside over it, as advertised. The reason for this was that when he agreed to preside the date for the conference was set for January 24. Later, it was changed to the 25th. This conflicted

with an already scheduled important miners' meeting which he could not cancel. But Cook sent a copy of his speech, fully identifying himself with the Minority movement. He said, "I am proud to be a disciple of Karl Marx and a humble follower of Lenin."

More active opposition was offered by those tools of big capital, the British fascisti. Before the meeting they plastered the whole neighborhood (which is the district of Saklatvala, the Communist M. P.) with posters screaming "To Hell with the Communists. Join the Fascisti!" They also issued a couple of pamphlets bitterly attacking the Minority Movement. These were distributed widely. Then the fascisti, representing themselves to be officials of the Minority Movement, secured entrance to the hall early in the morning and sprinkled the place with foul-smelling chemicals.

### The Urge to World Unity

The specific object of the Conference, in addition to generally furthering left-wing propaganda and organization in the trade unions, was to organize a great drive behind the R. I. L. U. plan for the calling of an international convention at which both the Amsterdam and Red Internationals shall be merged and the world's labor movement united. This drive for unity has developed powerful support in the British unions. The British trade unions are fast coming to realize that Amsterdam, with its policy of class collaboration and support of the Dawes' plan, can do nothing for them. They are turning their eyes more and more to revolutionary methods, and Russia is an inspiration to them.

When the delegates of the Russian trade unions came to the Hull convention of the British unions, they were given a mighty ovation. They invited the British to send a delegation to Russia. This was done, and the British delegates got a still more wonderful

demonstration at the Russian Trade Union Congress. The British delegates endorsed the plan of the Russians for world unity. Moreover, they brought home a report glowingly supporting the Russian revolution and pointing out its achievements. The delegation was headed by Purcell, President of the British Trades Union Congress and chairman of the Amsterdam International.

These moves, backed by the left wing generally in the unions, left Thomas and the other right-wingers gasping. But they have been unable to develop any real opposition to the course of events. The General Council adopted their Russian delegation's report

unanimously, and are preparing to set up an Anglo-Russian Trade Union Committee to fight for world unity. This creates a ticklish situation in the Amsterdam International. The British unions are the backbone of that organization, and if the right wing, led by Oudgeest, Grossman, Jouhau, et al, who are bitterly fighting against unity, attempt to block the combined efforts of the Russians and the British, it may result in splitting the Amsterdam International. That would be a fatal blow to it and would definitely mark the ascendancy of the left wing in the world labor movement.

J.T. MURPHY OF THE ENGINEERS' UNION (MACHINISTS).

It will

definitely mark the ascendancy of the left wing in the world labor movement.

The resolution adopted at the Battersea Unity Conference supported the policy of the General Council of the British trade unions. It said:

"International unity, to fight capitalism, not to defend it, can only be achieved if the labor movement of all countries, and particularly our own, succeeds in forcing the Amsterdam International to agree to the convening, together with the R. I. L. U., of a world trade union congress. At this Congress, representatives of all the trade union organizations affiliated to both the Amsterdam and the R. I. L. U., as well as those trade unions outside any international organization, shall be present. Only at such a world congress as this will it be possible to unify our forces. We must break with the policy of class peace, and collaboration with the League of Nations, that powerful instrument of capitalism, and create an international leadership fit and willing to lead the battles of the working class against the capitalists, under the banner of one trade union movement."

The aim of the Minority Movement is to stir the masses and to swing them definitely into an irresistible demand for trade union unity, one that cannot be betrayed by weak or treacherous leadership. The resolution was moved by the veteran, Tom Mann, chairman of the Unity Conference, and it was seconded by another veteran, A. A. Gossip, Secretary of the National of Furnishing Trades. Tom Mann looked younger than ever. He enthused the whole conference with his contagious vigor and militancy. Many

speakers supported the resolution. I was struck by four features of their debate. One was their splendid ability as floor-men; quite evidently they were trade union militants of long standing. Another was their revolutionary spirit and understanding of Marxian and Leninist principles, still another was the definite close-to-home illustrations they gave on the need for unity. To them the fight against the Dawes' plan was no far-fetched thing but an immediate bread-and-butter question that could only be solved by powerful and revolutionary organization. And, finally, I was struck with the compactness and homogeneity of the gathering. All seemed to think and react alike. It was such a contrast to the lack of homogeneity of our working class, made up as it is of 50 races, with a multitude of jangling languages, religions, traditions, etc. The whole conference just breathed of the workshops. It was the real voice of the most intelligent and revolutionary elements of the British working class.

#### Other Business of the Conference

In addition to the unity resolution, several other matters, more or less related to the immediate purpose of the conference, were handled. One of these was a very able report on the Sixth Russian Trade Union Congress, by Harry Pollitt, general secretary of the National Minority Movement. At the conclusion of his speech, Pollitt was bombarded with scores of questions dealing with every imaginable trade union problem in Russia: piece work, organization of women, children, the blind, condition of the cooperatives, unemployment, etc., etc. The delegates betrayed the broadest knowledge of the situation and the greatest hunger for information. Such a demonstration would be utterly impossible at this time in a general American rank and file trade union conference, stuffed full as the heads of our workers are with lies about Russia, propagated equally by our labor leaders and the capitalists.

An important resolution was one condemning British imperialism and declaring solidarity with the working classes and labor unions throughout the British Empire. With the British workers, the question of imperialism, like that of trade union unity, is a closeup and burning one. The leaders of the Labor Party were scorched by several speakers for their imperialistic policy when in power. Now the conservatives controlling the government are declaring that Labor has no



HARRY POLLITT OF THE BOILERMAKERS' UNION, NATIONAL SECRETARY OF BRITISH MINORITY MOVEMENT.

right to kick against the atrocities in Egypt, India, and elsewhere, because when it was in power it did the same thing. The Amsterdam International was also bitterly assailed for organizing only European workers and for leaving the workers in the colonies and weaker countries to their fate.

A resolution that created much interest was one dealing with the cooperatives. Flocks of delegates wanted to speak on this question, but the limited time cut the actual number of speakers to just a few. From these, however, two things became evident—first, that the cooperative movement of Great Britain is in the hands of reactionaries who have the pettiest kind of a petty bourgeois outlook, and, second, that the left wing is going henceforth to devote a much larger share of its efforts towards utilizing the great field for organization and propaganda presented by the cooperative movement.

The final resolution dealt with the present attempt of the government to put the railroad workers under military control. C. E. Cramp, president of the N. U. R.,

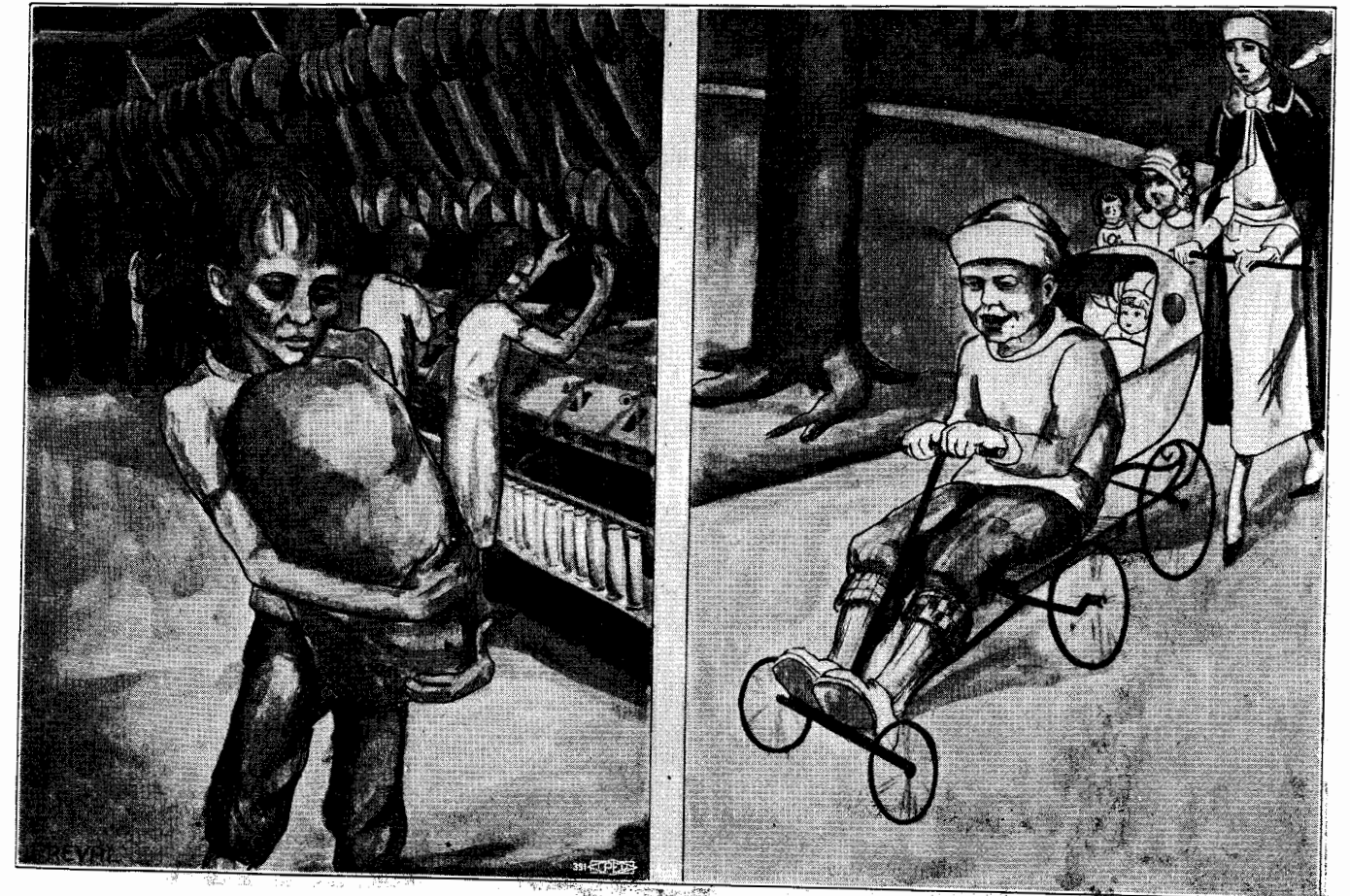
actually had proposed that this infamous measure be accepted if the government gives the unions guarantees that it will not be used to make the railroaders into scabs during strikes. But the rank and file are in most determined opposition to it. Any attempt to enforce it will surely be met by a great strike. Naturally, the Unity Conference pledged all help to develop such resistance.

There were a number of delegates from foreign countries come to the conference to express their loyalty to the cause of international unity. Several ran dangers of imprisonment to reach the conference. Among those who spoke were Dudilioux, secretary of the C. G. T. U. of France, and representative of the R. I. L. U., Jim Larkin, Hais of Czecho-Slovakia, Miller of Germany, a delegate from India, and Jim Cannon. Comrade Cannon spoke for the Trade Union Educational League. He made a powerful presentation of the meaning of the maneuvers of the A. F. of L. to re-enter the Amsterdam International. He also pointed

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## American Shibboleths

No. 1. EQUALITY OF OPPORTUNITY.



Drawn by Juanita Preval.

## The British Conference On World Trade Union Unity

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out the world significance of the re-awakening that is now taking place in the ranks of British Labor. He and the other speakers were tumultuously received by the conference.

Throughout the entire conference the program of the left wing in the trade unions was emphasized: amalgamation, shop committees, organization of the unorganized, etc. And these practical trade unionists had a most effective way of painting these as immediate, burning, bread-and-butter questions. The British workers are dangerously close to the hunger line. With them the labor movement is a deadly serious thing. It would have been a revelation to many American revolutionists to see the extremely business-like manner with which the Britishers went at their problems in the conference. The thing that struck me was the entire absence of sentiment for dual unionism. One delegate, an I. W. W., spoke, and though he may have had secessionist ideas in his mind, he didn't venture to give voice to them in this intensely trade union conference. All he did was to kick against political action, and for this he was sharply attacked by several delegates, to the apparent satisfaction of the whole conference.

### A Great Storm Brewing

Undoubtedly most important developments are impending in the British labor movement. The struggle for world unity is of itself tremendously significant. But the British workers are also heading for another big collision with their employers. Serious disputes are brewing among the miners, metal workers, and many other trades. A general feeling of discontent, a vague expectancy of no one knows what, prevails amongst the rank and file. The break will probably develop among the miners. And this time there will be no "Black Friday." This time it will not be up to the treacherous Hodges and Thomas. The powerful and rapidly growing left wing will have a say in the matter. When next the masses of British workers go into struggle, it will not be to face such a terrible debacle as they did in 1921. They will make some real advances.

The Battersea Unity Conference, marking as it does the rapid growth of the left-wing movement, is bound to be a historic gathering. Leaving aside certain important differences needless to outline here, it is roughly comparable to the left-wing conference in Manchester in 1900. That marked a turning point in British labor history. The militant left wing, spurning all plans for dual unionism, there laid the basis of a revolutionary organization in the trade unions and began a vigorous campaign to lead the deeply discontented workers into struggle against the strong and arrogant employers. Consequently they played a tremendous part in the epoch-making strikes of the miners, railroaders, and transport workers in 1911. The moving spirit of the Manchester 1910 conference was Tom Mann, and in Battersea in 1925 he is also a militant and central figure along with

Harry Pollitt, Tom Bell, George Hardy, Nat Watkins, W. Hannington, Jack Tanner, and the others.

Will history repeat itself? Will the Battersea conference be followed by a great series of upheavals as was the Manchester conference? I think so. Militants will do well to follow closely events in England for the next few months.

Another angle of great importance in the British labor situation is the developing struggle for power between the right and left wings. As yet the left wing, because of the sturdy rank and file spirit of independence in the unions, have had comparatively easy sailing of it. They have had no arbitrary expulsions to face, in spite of the fact that the National Minority Movement openly collects dues and per capita tax accepts the affiliation of local unions holds its conferences of regular delegates from unions, and uses other similar methods totally impossible at this time in the "hard-boiled" American labor movement. So far the reactionaries have not dared to begin expulsions. But they will not give up their power without a struggle. They will deal the left wing a heavy blow when they get a chance. And they will feel they have that chance in the coming great strikes, in which the left wing will play a vital part. They engineered one Black Friday, and they will engineer another, an even worse one, if they get an opportunity. But I am not at all pessimistic. If in the face of the renaissance now going on in the ranks of the workers, the Thomases, the Hodges', and the Clynes' try any such traitorous maneuver it will be the end of them and their kind in the British labor movement.

British Labor progresses by fits and starts. First it has a long period of stagnation, followed by a period of intense revolutionary activity in which great gains are made. Its whole history is a series of such periods. And it hangs on tenaciously to what it gains in its active phases. Seldom does it lose much of the hard-won ground. Its general tendency is ever onward and upward. The Battersea conference, taken in connection with many other indications, is an evidence that another period of intense activity is opening. A new period of struggle is beginning and it will be much more significant, more enduring, and produce more far-reaching effects than any that has preceded it. It will produce world-wide repercussions.

The British working class is stripping for action, preparing for battle. Joining hands with the Russians, it is taking its proper place in the vanguard of the toiling millions fighting international capitalism. And, in all likelihood, it will stand there loyally to the end. The British and the Russian workers joining hands! That is the great new alignment of Labor's biggest and best battalions. It is a combination that bodes ill for all exploiters. It surely means the establishment of trade union unity on an international scale, and a great intensification of the class struggle. It is a vital preparation for the final battle to overthrow capitalism and to establish the dictatorship of the proletariat.

## Communists Take the Lead in Minnesota

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conference plans were laid to call a state convention of the Farmer-Labor Party of Minnesota for March 20. In the past all conventions have been made up of representatives of local