

# British Rule in India

*Open Letter to the RIGHT HON. J. RAMSAY MACDONALD,  
Prime Minister of Great Britain, LONDON, ENGLAND.*

RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR,

The notorious "Bolshevik Conspiracy Case" of Cawnpore has ended with the conviction of the four accused present before the Court to four years' rigorous imprisonment. In the absence of any interference from your government, this conviction may be taken as the reply to the letter addressed to you on February 20th (copy to the Secretary of State for India), in which the questions of the legality of working class organisation and propaganda, and of an amnesty for those persons branded as "Bolshevik Agents," were squarely put. This letter failed to elicit any direct response. The Appeal subsequently addressed to you and your Government, and to the British Labour Party and proletariat, when the first news of the Trial was received—pointing out its true nature and significance as an attack upon the rights of political organisation and propaganda of the Indian working class, and requesting your intervention—met with the same fate. By permitting the Government of India to prosecute and convict a number of individuals on the charge of seditious conspiracy, because they stand accused of having made Socialist and Communist propaganda, and of desiring to organise a political party of the Indian workers and peasants, your Government has definitely aligned itself with the Imperial policy of its predecessors, and has gone one step beyond them in putting a legal ban on all future activities of a similar nature.

## ***THE REAL OBJECT OF THE TRIAL.***

The verdict handed down in the Cawnpore Court of Sessions goes far beyond the mere condemning of four individuals to four years' hard labour. It serves as a precedent to declare all Socialist, Communist and working class organisation and propaganda illegal and punishable as "criminal conspiracy." It was with this object in view that the case was undertaken, and this object has been achieved, with the connivance, if not given consent, of the British Labour Government. In spite of repeated efforts from many quarters, the latter has refused to intervene on behalf of the rights of the Indian working class, and the Under-Secretary of

State for India, replying to a question from a Tory member in the House of Commons, stated that : " The Government of India was taking all necessary measures to counteract the Communist propaganda of M. N. Roy." Similar facts can be cited to show that your Government is directly responsible for this infamous trial and conviction. You and your colleagues must, therefore, face the British proletariat with this shameful responsibility on your shoulders, and go down in history as the founders of a new Labour Imperialism which does not scruple to crush the struggles and aspirations of the Indian workers towards full social, economic and political emancipation.

You are certainly acquainted with the details of the case. Nevertheless, let me record its most important features. According to the Act of Accusation, it is alleged : " That there exists in Europe a revolutionary organisation called the Communist International ; that one of the objects of this organisation is the formation of affiliated organisations in Eastern countries ; that M. N. Roy is a member of the Communist International ; and that he conspired with the other accused to organise a working class party in India, and so deprive the King of his sovereignty !" The evidence upon which this grotesque charge is based are letters alleged to have been written and received by the accused, advocating the organisation of a political party of workers and peasants, and the published programme and other documents of the Communist Party of India, in which the establishment of a democratic republic is laid down, free from all foreign control. No overt act was alleged against any of the accused, nor could any incitement to criminal violence be shown, for terrorist activities are specifically denounced in these documents, and the means pointed out for the achievement of the goal is solely the organisation of a mass party of the Indian working class upon a programme calling for its full economic, social and political emancipation. It is true that the counter-revolutionary nature of Gandhism was exposed, and the cult of non-violence criticised, but it was not proved in any way that either the alleged writer or recipients of the letters committed any act in violation of the law, nor did anything but express their opinions in a perfectly constitutional manner.

While in the lower Court, the prosecution's case hinged exclusively upon the alleged endeavour of the accused to organise a working class party affiliated with the Communist International—in the Sessions Court, the accusation was shifted to other grounds. Not Communist propaganda, but " to conspire against the sovereignty of the King-Emperor," became the crux of the

case. The reason for thus shifting the ground is obvious. The storm of indignation aroused in Great Britain by this attack upon the constitutional rights of the Indian working class, led the Prosecuting Attorney to take his stand on other grounds. Yet even this unconstitutional and undemocratic charge, which served as the screen behind which to declare the organisation of a political party of the Indian working class illegal, has not been proved. First, the charge of conspiracy is in itself unwarranted, not only on constitutional, but on juridical grounds as well, no overt act nor incitement to overt acts having been shown; secondly, the charge has not been proved before a properly-constituted and unprejudiced Court of Law.

### **A MOCKERY OF JUSTICE.**

The whole trial, like the Act of Accusation which preceded it, was a mockery of justice and of constitutional rights. Jury trial is not the rule, but the exception in India, despite the fact that British justice has prevailed there for more than a century and a half. To avert the possibility of a trial by jury, as well as to avoid the full glare of public opinion, the case was filed in an obscure District Court, and the petition of the accused to have it transferred to one of the larger centres was rejected by the Government of India. Two of the three assessors appointed by the Government to help the judge, confessed to their imperfect knowledge of English, in which language the case was conducted. The objection raised by the Defence Council to this fact was overruled by the Judge, who declared that a knowledge of English was not necessary! What does this mean in the language of British justice, but that the assessors were not required to understand anything, and were there merely for the purpose of finding the accused guilty?

All the witnesses, with one exception, were police officers and government hirelings, and this single exception was challenged by the Defence Counsel as a police spy! The letters and documents produced as evidence against the accused, were seized in the mails by a system of free and unlimited spying on private correspondence over a period of two years, which was openly admitted on the part of the prosecution. The Chief of the Secret Service Department, who was likewise the chief witness for the prosecution, freely admitted that, though he was personally satisfied of the guilt of the accused, he could produce no evidence satisfactory to a Court of Law to support his allegations! **Yet a charge of conspiracy, based upon the alleged propagation of Socialist and Communist ideas brought against eight individuals on the**

sole evidence of police spies and government hirelings, has been confirmed in an Indian Law Court by the ruling of a British judge, and the accused sentenced to severe terms of imprisonment, despite the disagreement of the assessors, and the confessed inability of the prosecution to substantiate its accusations! Such is the nature of British Justice in India, when a similar charge brought on similar evidence would have been laughed out of Court or made the subject of a Parliamentary enquiry in Britain.

### **IS COMMUNISM LEGAL IN INDIA ?**

Though the Act of Accusation and the whole burden of the prosecution arguments were based upon the charge that the accused, in collaboration with others, had attempted to organise a working class party having for its object to "secure the political, social and economic liberation of the Indian people,"—an attempt was made, in response to protests from England, to conceal the real nature of the case by declaring that "it was not the intention to prosecute the accused because they held Communist ideas." The prosecution counsel then proceeded to define his idea of Communism: "Communism means, roughly speaking, a general sharing of everybody in everybody else's property!" Truly a classical definition of Marxism, about which apparently neither the Judge, nor the assessors, nor the counsels for the prosecution and defence, had ever heard. It was this profound ignorance of the very essence of scientific Socialism which accentuated the mockery of the proceedings, and contributed to the final gross miscarriage of justice resulting in the conviction of the four accused present before the Court. Had even an elementary study of Marxism enriched the legal arguments, it could easily have been shown that, granted the legality of Communism, (and the prosecution did grant it) the whole Act of Accusation and trial based upon it dropped to the ground, for nothing was alleged nor proven against the accused but that which is written in the programs of Communist Parties everywhere—namely, the overthrow of the existing system of government and its substitution by a working class government by means of a social revolution.

Thus, the charge of "conspiracy," based upon the use of the terms "revolution," "violence" and "force," must either be applied to Communist Parties everywhere, for all of them use these terms in describing the change from one system of government to another—or it must be dropped against persons alleged to be Communists in India. In view of the unequivocal statement of the prosecuting counsel, acting on behalf of the Government,

that "the organisation of a Communist Party in itself, is not a criminal offence"—the whole case against the accused falls to the ground, for they were accused, and convicted, on no other grounds than this. All the evidence brought against them to prove a "conspiracy," only tended to show: (1) That the accused were either Communists or acted in collaboration with Communists; (2) That they propagated a programme written by Communists from the Communist point of view; (3) That in accordance with this programme, they advocated the organisation of a political party of the Indian working class, whose object should be the attainment of full social, economic and political emancipation; and that (4) To this end, affiliation to the Communist International was advocated. So it is ridiculous to try to camouflage the real nature of the case, whose object was to stamp out the germs of a militant labour movement in India.

### **IS THE INDIAN CLAIM TO FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY UNCONSTITUTIONAL ?**

It soon became evident that such a prosecution of working class ideology and tactics in India, under the auspices of a Labour Government in Britain, would be too bald a violation of the fundamental rights of citizenship which ostensibly exist there. Despite the rigorous censorship on Indian news, reports of the trial began to leak out, and protests arose in Britain at this monstrous attack on the liberties of the Indian working class. It was at this stage that the prosecution deemed it wise to shift the ground of its attack, and to pretend that the accused were being tried, not as Communists and Socialists, but because of an alleged "conspiracy" against the sovereignty of the King-Emperor. The proposed Party of Indian Workers and Peasants would be smothered in its infancy, not because it was a working class organisation, but because it threatened to challenge British rule. The case for the prosecution now became: "Certain persons, believing in Communism, conspired together to give effect to their belief by means of criminal force." This charge is based on the authority of Clause I. in our programme, which calls for the "establishment of an Indian Republic, free from all foreign control," and on the use of the terms "force," "violent revolution," etc., which occur in the course of the exposition of the Communist ideology. **It should be remembered that no overt act or incitement thereto could be alleged against any of the accused.** It was deemed that any possible sympathy on the part of the British proletariat would be successfully alienated, if the accused were tried, not as leaders of the Indian working class, but as enemies of the Empire. This

was indeed a clever move, in view of the fact that a large majority of British workers still harbour illusions about the Empire, which so far as they are concerned, is but a gilded chain. Such a transparent stratagem could only succeed however, in a country like India, situated thousands of miles away from the militant working class movement of Europe, and where the few constitutional safeguards that exist can be brushed aside at will by the arm of an all-powerful bureaucracy. The judicious muzzling of the press kept the progress of the case shrouded in silence, so far as the outer world was concerned, and a snap judgment convicting the accused was allowed to pass without comment in the British Liberal and Labour Press, in a test case which will serve as a precedent for the future suppression of the Indian Labour movement. Is it a criminal offence to advocate the establishment of a democratic Indian Republic, free from all foreign control, by the use of force if necessary, granted that no overt act or incitement thereto can be proved?

The advocacy of the use of force, as opposed to mere constitutional agitation for the achievement of the social revolution, which is the admitted goal of all schools of working class thought, is the chief difference that divides Socialist and Communist tactics. Yet this difference in ideology and tactics does not render Communism illegal in other parts of the British Empire. The right of free self-determination for subject peoples, and the establishment of an autonomous government, is one of the principal planks in the platform of the British Labour Party (in power to-day as the Labour Government), and of the Socialist International to which it is affiliated. Where then, occurs the "criminal conspiracy," in having openly advocated a universally acknowledged right? The British lawyer for the prosecution, acting on the authority of the Government of India, which is responsible to the Secretary of State and the Labour Cabinet, urged the conviction of the accused on the plea that "the conspirators believed that British domination stood on the way to the economic and social emancipation of the Indian working class, and therefore proposed to destroy this domination." So it is only depraved Communists, who in India are convicted as "criminal conspirators," who hold that Imperialist domination is prejudicial to the welfare of subject people? A frank statement on this question from you, Right Honourable Sir, as the leader of a great proletarian party and of the Second International would be very illuminating, particularly in view of your attitude on the rights of the people of Georgia to freedom and self-determination.

## **DOES BRITISH LABOUR STAND FOR INDIA'S RIGHT TO FREEDOM AND DEMOCRACY ?**

The final argument of the prosecution resolves itself into this : " The Vanguard of the Indian working class stands for the overthrow of British Imperialism, because the economic and social emancipation of the Indian masses require it." Now the question arises—is this demand unconstitutional, looked at not only from the viewpoint of class-interest, but from the democratic angle of vision as well—an angle which you, Right Honourable Sir, profess to judge all questions, whether Home, Imperial or Foreign. Another question which occurs as a necessary corollary to the first, is whether your Government, as an essentially social democratic one, has done anything, or proposed to do anything, which can or will prove that the social and economic freedom of the Indian working class can be achieved within the framework of the British Empire ?

The programme of an Indian Republic, free from foreign control, is entirely legal and constitutional, if there is any meaning at all in the loudly-proclaimed doctrines of democracy and self-determination which are so dear to your heart. Yet you and your colleagues, supposedly wedded to these lofty principles, have scarcely arrived in office when you sanction the prosecution and conviction of eight individuals who advocate the same thing for India. We expected that under a Labour Government, the Indian workers would receive protection, at least in so far as the elementary questions of hours, wages and conditions of work were concerned ; we expected that the Indian masses would receive freedom of economic and political organisation and propaganda ; that the Socialist and working class movement would be freed from the illegal disabilities under which it has been placed by the autocratic powers of the Indian government. It was in this expectation that I addressed my first letter to you, soon after you assumed office. But contrary to these expectations, and true to the notorious treachery of social patriotism (in your case, imperialism), the persecution of the Indian working class became fiercer under the Labour regime. Strikes have been crushed without mercy, and peaceful and unarmed strikers shot down by the rifles and machine guns of the Imperial police and soldiery, acting under orders from a Labour Government in Britain. Yet its Prime Minister remains an adherent of Fabian pacifism, and speaks eloquently of the blessings of disarmament. At the very moment when British Justice, under the ægis of a Labour Government, was condemning four youths to four years' rigorous imprisonment

on the charge of "criminal conspiracy," for having advocated the use of force in ridding the Indian people of the ravages of capitalist imperialism—at that same moment, the forces of British law and order were shooting down unarmed strikers in the town of Cawnpore, a few hundred yards distant from the scene of this judicial mockery! If to use force be a criminal offence, then the British Government of India which was "established by force and maintained by force," is far more culpable than we! And it is you, Right Honourable Sir, and your Labour colleagues, who will one day stand at the bar of history to answer for the crime of perpetuating this reign of force!

### **IS BRITISH SOVEREIGNTY IN INDIA LEGITIMATE ?**

We are accused of having organised a "criminal conspiracy" against the domination of foreign capital, as embodied in British rule. Has it never occurred to our Imperial rulers, who were the Labour Party of yesterday, that you yourselves have questioned the legitimacy of British sovereignty in India? You, of all persons, require the least to be reminded in what fashion this boasted "sovereignty" was established, and of the fact that governments which have been established by force and which are maintained by force usually end by being overthrown by force. We are accused of conspiracy for having advocated the illegal as well as legal organisation of a political party of the Indian working class. If we work "illegally," it is because we are not allowed to do so legally, despite the recent declaration of the Government prosecutors that "the organisation of a Communist Party was not in itself, illegal." Is it legal, we ask you, to surreptitiously open the private post of free citizens, and to seize, copy or destroy their contents? Is it "legal" to ban the circulation of Socialist, Communist and working class literature; to set spies on the trail of Indian Communists from one country to another, after forcing them to live in exile from their native land? You speak of conspiracy! The British proletariat would have a thrilling tale to hear, if the organised conspiracy on the part of our Imperial rulers against the freedom and well-being of the three hundred millions half-starved, exploited and oppressed men, women and children of the Indian Empire were fully told! You speak very much of "Humanity," Right Honourable Sir. Where is that love of humanity manifest in your avowed intention to perpetuate the infamous domination of British Imperialism in India? When we are arraigned before a British Court of Justice on the charge of criminal conspiracy for having advocated the freedom of the



Indian people by the use of force, if needful, our only answer to your legal scribes and pharisees is : **"Physician, heal thyself!"**

### **HOW WILL YOU SOLVE THE "INDIAN PROBLEM?"**

We repeat, and we challenge you to repudiate this statement, that the economic interests of the colonial and subject peoples require the destruction of Imperialism. India, as a colony of the British Empire, is no exception to this law. While you and your colleagues are flagrantly violating the first principles of that democracy which you uphold, and persist in your brutal persecution of the Indian working class, your Government has manifested its desire to "solve the Indian problem," in the same manner by which Lloyd George "solved" the Irish and Egyptian problems.—by placating the native bourgeoisie! Indian capital will be permitted to combine with British capital to exploit and oppress the Indian proletariat and peasantry to an even worse degree than at present; the forces of "law and order" will be placed at their joint disposition to shoot down Indian strikers whenever necessary. Protection is being granted to Indian industrialists in the name of "Reforms," to win them over to the side of bureaucracy. By granting the demands of the Indian bourgeoisie, and taking into confidence the "elected representatives of the people," it means only that the upper strata of the population, hardly two per cent. have been admitted into the Imperial partnership, to share in the exploitation of the Indian masses! This is no Labour policy; it is the politics of Liberal Imperialism! Will the condition of the Indian workers be in any way altered thereby, except for the worse; and will it not be the final means of forcing the British proletariat, already the victim of chronic unemployment, to sink to the level of coolies? These are the politics of Imperialism, which you and your colleagues of the Privy Council have pledged yourselves to preserve and perpetuate. The success of this policy will mean the intensified exploitation of the colonial masses on the one hand, and the depression of the standard of living of the home proletariat on the other.

### **THE REAL SOLUTION.**

The only real solution of the fatal crisis in which civilisation finds itself involved, is the total destruction of Imperialism, and a change from the capitalist system of economy to a Socialist one. The rise of a militant working class party in India is one step towards this goal. By challenging the right of British capital to dominate India, under any pretext or in any disguise, the pro-

jected compromise between the British and Indian bourgeoisie will be frustrated, and Indian labour will act as the ally of British Labour in their common struggle for emancipation. This fact is clearly realised by our Imperial rulers, and therefore, their excessive nervousness over "Bolshevik conspiracy" and "Bolshevik propaganda." Our programme represents the objective demands of the Indian working class and once given the freedom of agitation and organisation, we would carry the masses with us. Hence this brutal repression, which is not only a violation of the constitutional rights of the Indian people, but treason to the British proletariat as well. If the Labour Government persists in denying the Indian masses a constitutional outlet for their grievances, they will be obliged to take refuge in the only weapon which remains to them—Force, employed as an instrument of freedom, to overcome force maintained as a tool of exploitation and oppression. And who shall dare to say that the Indian people will not be justified? Not the British proletariat, in whose name you are playing the role of the watch-dog of Imperialism.

In view, therefore, of the grave significance of the situation, I call upon you, Right Honourable Sir, in the name of the Indian masses, to reconsider your policy. I repeat the demands made in my first letter. Let the Labour Government come to the assistance of the Indian working class, instead of carrying on clandestine negotiations with British and Indian capitalism. Let the monstrous judgment of Cawnpore be reversed, and the accused set at liberty. Give the same rights and protection to Indian Labour as prevail in Great Britain—recognise the rights of organisation and propaganda on the political and economic fields. Lift the ban on Socialist and working class literature. Legalise the existence of trade unions, and equalise wages, hours of work and conditions of labour with those prevailing abroad. Grant a general amnesty for all political offenders, and declare the rights of the Indian people to self-determination and autonomy.

Only by such measures can the British Labour Government justify its pretensions to be a government of the working class, and be true to the principles laid down in its programme of Socialism. Will you have the courage, Right Honourable Sir, to inaugurate this new Labour policy upon the ashes of the old? The verdict of history awaits your decision.

(Signed) MANABENDRA NATH ROY.

Zurich, Switzerland,

June 5th, 1924.