

# The Nationalist-Labour Pact in South Africa

*The following article explains in detail the circumstances of the Pact entered into between General Hertzog, the Nationalist Republican, and Colonel Cresswell, the Leader of the South African Labour Party....The correspondent to the London Times a few weeks ago, refers to an interesting incident that occurred during the Congress of the Transvaal Nationalist Party, held at Pretoria, just a week after General Smuts left for London. It appears that two of the Nationalist Leaders, Treiman Roos and Piet Grobler, laid special emphasis on the Republican aims of the Nationalist Party, which provoked Colonel Cresswell, speaking the next night at Johannesburg to declare, "Secession was not a matter for argument, and that the question of membership within the Commonwealth was a matter of affection to the overwhelming majority of English-speaking South Africans."*

*Mr. Barlow, the other Labour Leader, was more emphatic in his protest, and declared, "he would carry the fiery cross into towns and veld against Republicanism."*

*The Labour Party conference is due to be held at Pretoria on New Year's Day, when the Pact will come up for discussion.*

*Comrade Danchin's article is an informative flashlight on the circumstances of the Pact.—Ed.*

## THE MEANING OF THE ANGLO-BOER WAR.

**W**HEN historical materialism laid down its verdict, that the prime causes of all political actions and social adjustments are to be traced to economics, it was not unaware that in the majority of cases the elementary economic cause is hardly evident to the superficial observer. In South Africa, perhaps, more so than anywhere else, in view of the intensity of the class struggle, it is difficult to obtain clarity of vision. Here nationality and a multiplicity of confusing factors are inextricably mixed with political struggle. To unravel the political tangle of to-day, it will, therefore, be necessary to go back at least to that event which has brought into being and shaped the course and character of the political alignment of the present moment. This event is the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902.

Historically, that crisis had a double significance : it marked yet another stage in the imperialist expansion of England, and it removed the last traces of feudal power in Southern Africa. Feudalism, as a system was, however, showing signs of its rapidly approaching dissolution, even before this war. The invasion of the Transvaal by mining capital, and the sudden influx of townsmen that followed the introduction of large scale mining, added on to the collapse of the old system of pastoral agriculture, and the consequent ruin and proletarianisation of hundreds and thousands of farmers, would eventually have brought about the fall of the old order. Had the population of the Transvaal been of a homogenous national character, this event would have taken place on the familiar lines. But the two classes being also cleanly divided on a parallel national basis, the Boers could only symbolise in the fall of feudalism, the extinction of their national independence, and they fought the war accordingly.

The overthrow of feudal power having been achieved by means of an imperialist war of conquest, the ideological residue of the struggle was entirely different from that left after a more natural transference of state power from one class to another. The national solidarity engendered by the desire, and the ideal eventually to regain independence were now, for a time, to prove stronger than all the acuteness of class division. In this manner, the forcible annexation of the Boer republics by British imperialism succeeded in diverting the course of historical progress by several decades. And this was not the case among the Dutch only, for, instead of organising for struggle with their capitalist masters, the English town-dwellers, too, postponed all action until they should first achieve undisputed loyalty to the Empire.

### SECESSION VERSUS LOYALTY.

The grant of self-government in 1907, did little to remove the barren national division which paralysed all advancement. When the four provinces decided three years later to form the Union of South Africa, it seemed as if at last the obstacle had been overcome by British Colonial diplomacy having gained another triumph on the South African field. Botha and Smuts, two of the most prominent of the Boer leaders, had seemingly succeeded in uniting the whole Boer nation under their leadership, thus marshalling them, too, under the banner of capitalism and imperialism. This treacherous and unstable policy was, however, soon to be repudiated. The National Convention had hardly concluded, when it began to be realised that the self-deceptions and illusions of its

atmosphere would be unable to be translated into reality. The first concrete example came two years later, when an irrevocable split occurred in the Union Cabinet. The very self-same problem which had with so much rejoicing been proclaimed as solved for all time was now again showing its powerful presence. Over the question of a "two-stream" or "one stream" policy, later clarified into "secession versus loyalty," General Hertzog, Minister of Justice, was expelled from the Cabinet in April, 1912. And thus the embryo of the National Party of to-day came into being.

Based for the time being on what was declared with endless insistence to be a personal conflict, the success of the new Party was extremely limited. Gradually, however, it began to assume definite shape, Hertzog collecting a group of deputies around him in the Assembly. But when Smuts and Botha entered with much zest into the business of suppressing the 1914 rebellion, thus demonstrating their true character of traitorous imperialist lackeys, the Boer masses of South Africa began to shake off the effects of the powerful influences of the dope which had swamped them and carried them off their feet at the time of the Union.

From now onwards, the progress of Nationalisation began to be rapid and phenomenal. In the October, 1915, elections over 20 seats in the Union Parliament were won by Nationalists, then still called Hertzogites. In the two general elections of 1920 and 1921, they captured 45 seats on each occasion, and if this year's elections to the Transvaal, Cape and Free State Provincial Councils are any criterion to its present strength, it is assured of gaining over 60 seats, or nearly half the total representation. It is a growth of extraordinary rapidity, and testifies to the strength of the mass feeling behind it, and to the near approach of a decisive struggle with the dominating capitalist power.

### THE LABOUR PARTY.

Reference has already been made to the national composition of the town population, and their supreme concern for the precious "British connection." This, however, did not altogether deter them from showing occasional opposition to their chosen masters, the Rand mining magnates. The rise of trade unions soon after the Boer War, and the struggle of the workers for better conditions had, however, to precede the definite formation of a working-class political party. Such a party was formally launched about 1907, and had as its first membership numbers of British and Australian ex-soldiers, who had come out to South Africa with the forces of occupation. The Party, as was inevitable, drew its inspiration

from the two countries in which its membership had received its political training and experience. It was, therefore, from the outset a body of opportunistic and constitutional petty-bourgeois reformists without backbone.

The experiences of the Miners' strike of 1907, and the general strike of 1913, had the effect of inducing the general mass of the workers to recognise the strength of political action, as apart from industrial, and a great number of trade unions became affiliated to the Labour Party. This welcome accession of strength was, however, largely nullified by the still greater influx of petty bourgeois elements, which followed the deportation of the nine strike leaders in January, 1914. The storm of indignation which swept over the country at this typically dictatorial action of Smuts brought about the biggest political landslide in South African history. When the elections to the Transvaal Provincial Council were held in March, the whole candidature of the Smuts party on the Rand and Pretoria was overwhelmingly defeated, and the Labour Party, hitherto a small fraction of five or six members, found itself with a majority.

This desertion by the petty bourgeois masses of the ruling party reacted immediately on the professional politicians and careerists. They swarmed into the now popular Labour Party, eventually dominating its councils, and directing its policy. When the great war broke out in August, the Labour Party was as big and ramshackle as the Second International itself. After holding the fort for nearly a year, the more class-conscious elements, who opposed the war, were expelled. Bankrupt of political courage at all times, and hopelessly ignorant of the courses of the struggle in Europe, South Africa's Labour Party leaders willingly became ready tools in the hands of reaction. Several of them went on active service, Mr. Cresswell himself serving as colonel under General Smuts in German East Africa.

The expulsion of the left wing section, which had kept the flag of international solidarity flying, just before the Parliamentary elections of October, 1915, however, did not save the party from the political attempt to demonstrate its loyalty to imperialism at all costs, but it was outbid in Jingoism by the Unionist and S.A.P. Parties, and suffered almost complete extinction. Nevertheless, this eclipse was destined to be temporary, for the basis for a mass party of the town population was there, and was rapidly being strengthened by the progressive disintegration of the Unionists. At the elections in March, 1920, this was unmistak-

ably demonstrated by the return to Parliament of over 20 Labourites.

### THE RAND STRIKE, 1922 AND AFTER.

Such was the position in country and town when the year 1921 closed. Trusting to the neutralising effect of its respective opponents, the Chamber of Mines with the full support of the Smuts' Government, launched the famous series of ultimata which precipitated the greatest labour upheaval in South African experience. Not only did the proposed cuts in wages make deep inroads in the dearly won war gains, but the Chambers' demands contained the deadly threat of ousting thousands of white workers by their systematic displacement by cheaper coloured labour. Angry protests at this intention of ultimately destroying "white South Africa" by greedy oversea financiers anxious only to make the gold mines "pay," began to pour in from all sides. For the first time the country rallied to the support of the towns, and actively assisted in the struggle by sending regular supplies of foodstuffs to the strikers.

On the political plane, too, the vital urgency of unity in face of the common foe, was realised effectively, although not formally, by Nationalists and Labourites conducting a rigorous propaganda among the strikers, and the workers generally. The treacherous solidarity of the Smuts' Cabinet with the Chamber of Mines, which had roused the people to a fever heat of opposition was, however, not to be broken. The strike was allowed to develop, until it was possible to crush the heroic resistance of the workers by force of arms. In this final phase the country showed its further and continual support to the workers, by the refusal to respond of many hundreds of men called out for military service on the Rand.

The strike was crushed, but the common ideal of a "white South Africa" survived, and for the first time the two classes with a common interest, hitherto so effectively disunited by national prejudices and tradition, began to approach one another with the object of uniting their forces. The common experience of Dutch and English workers of capitalist brutality paved the way for a rapprochement, and it has with truth been said that the idea, of a united anti-Smuts front was first mooted in the prisoners' yard of the Johannesburg Fort. The situation created by the strike was unique for its clarity and clear cut class division, and the lesson was not lost even on the most backward. Barely a year after it was so tyrannically liquidated by the Smuts-

Chamber of Mines Administration, the Pact of the Labour and National Parties was an accomplished fact.

### WHAT THE PACT IS.

The brief correspondence between Hertzog and Creswell which formally brought into being the fighting alliance between their respective parties is clear and concise. With the exception of the Labour Party obtaining a pledge as a sop to its own imperialist following, that the question of independence will not be raised during the lifetime of the next parliament, the agreement is singularly free from ambiguities, evasions and bargaining. Aiming primarily, as it does, at the speediest possible overthrow of the Smuts Administration, it can quite well afford to let the future look after itself. At the moment it is essentially an organisation of combat, and, as such, it concentrates its attention on perfecting its organisation and marshalling and increasing its forces. In these respects it was signally successful in the recent Transvaal and Cape Provincial elections, in both of which bodies it now controls a majority of votes. These local successes provide an excellent augury for the near future, when the issue will be decided on the wider national basis.

The story of the Pact would, however, be incomplete without a reference being made to the short-lived opposition that it recently aroused in a section of the Labour ranks. When the annual congress of the National Party re-affirmed its desire to carry on the propaganda for ultimate independence, Mr. Barlow, Labour M.L.A. for Bloemfontein, with the usual blindness of orthodox Labour leaders, saw in this a breach of the Pact. His threat to fight for its severance induced the capitalist press to proclaim loudly both the end of the alliance and a split in the Labour Party. What it demonstrated was, however, nothing more than the inability of Mr. Barlow to grasp the meaning of even the simplest terms. He was promptly reminded of this by Colonel Creswell expounding to him what the Pact restricted its signatory parties to, and that propaganda for independence by the Nationalists or "socialism" by the Labour Party was not a breach of its terms either in the letter or the spirit. Mr. Barlow has since signified his approval and understanding of the Pact's meaning. It was a trifling episode, which the capitalist press and politicians, in their eagerness, to see the end of the dreaded combination, had magnified with their usual skill in this direction. Whatever opposition there had existed in the Labour ranks has for the most part now been overcome, and it is safe to assert that the next

congress of the Party timed for the early part of January, 1924, will adopt it almost unanimously. As for the National Party, it must be credited with an unwavering adherence to the alliance, which no amount of capitalist propaganda has been able to shake.

### THE FUTURE OF THE PACT.

To sum up, the Pact is the most cheerful event in South African politics for the past three or four decades. It signifies the final phase of the present epoch, and the near approach of the end of the domination of mining capital over the destinies of the country. Nevertheless, it presents certain features peculiar to and inseparable from a white civilisation in a country predominantly black, to which the Communist Party of South Africa, while giving the Pact all its possible support, has not lost sight of.

In the programmes of both the Labour and National Parties that bugbear of capitalist "statesmanship," the native "problem" is conveniently ignored, being obviously as "insoluble" to them as to the present rulers. In other spheres, too, the Pact has been silent on what it intends doing when it eventually gets into power, or how it will reconcile those parts of the respective programmes which are mutually exclusive. A formula will doubtless be found for smoothing over the less sharp contradictions, and a broad common programme for "the welfare of the people" will be inaugurated. Heavy taxation of the mining industry (successfully eluded up to the present), the settlement of poor whites on the land, and Labour legislation and State banks on the Australian model, will no doubt be the practical means of realising it. To Communists all the world over the capacity and scope of such measures for effecting any real improvement in the position of the workers are well-known. But the immediate urgency of ending the rule of Smuts and his party, coupled with the historical necessity of putting the petty-bourgeoisie in power, has decided the Communist Party of South Africa to throw in its lot with the Pact. Although its admittance into the alliance would be summarily rejected, it exhorts the workers to "vote Labour, failing which, vote Nationalist." It sees in the success of the Pact the undoing of generations of strenuous imperialist labours, the partial defeat of capitalism, and the eventual complete destruction (achieved by actual experience) of the deadly illusions cherished by the working-class to-day. And it therefore gives the Pact its glad support accordingly.

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