

The Situation in Egypt

[The following article, from a correspondent just returned from Egypt, gives a descriptive background to affairs in Egypt brought to the front this month by the successes at the polls of the Zaghulist Party notwithstanding the financial and material support of the imperialists to the present puppet government of Baldwin and Chamberlain. It confirms, from personal observation, all the Communist Party has said about affairs in Egypt, and shows the urgent need for a closer alliance of the native workers of the colonies with the working class movement in Great Britain.—Ed.]

IF there is one factor more than any other which emerges from a close study of Egyptian politics of to-day, it is that, in spite of the intense "atmosphere" created by the elections of the Delegate Electors and the close proximity of the final elections, yet there is no Party in existence in Egypt (in the sense which we English people regard a Party); all one can perceive is a national manifestation swaying the emotions of the people, mainly on the lines of national self-determination, with an attitude towards British imperialism grading from compromise to non-compromise. Even non-nationalist sections cannot be identified fully with favour of a pro-occupational policy.

In no country which is held down by the bondage of the British Empire is there such a great proportion of the nation against continued occupation, as is to be found in Egypt, and one would think that, on this point and on the question of resistance to the arrogant demands of the Residency following on the murder of the late Sirdar, Sir Lee Stack, it would be possible to bind the whole of the Egyptian community into one great Nationalist Party with a common programme and policy. What obtains at present, however, is exactly the reverse. The whole Nationalist movement is at the present time split into camps, each without any policy but one of recrimination of the leaders of the other camps, who are accused of weakness towards the Ministry and the Residency; but at the same time one has the conviction that, given the opportunity of office, these embryo Lloyd-Georges will pursue the same policy of facing both ways as did Zaghul Pasha in the last cabinet.

In the Egyptian press and on the platform, these bickerings and jealousies overshadow those great burning questions of the Sudan occupation and development and its inevitable effect upon

the economic life of Egypt. As for the general conditions of the great masses of workers and peasants, harrassed with a bondage which is little removed from the economic position of the slaves of ancient Egypt, who built the Pyramids—these long-suffering workers upon whose labour rests the whole fabric of the country are hardly given a passing thought. Condemned to labour from sunrise to sunset all the year round, seven days to the week, with never a holiday save perhaps on the festival of some dead shiek, toiling and moiling in the fields for the immensely rich Pashas who own them, and with but a beggarly pittance in return for their labour, the lot of the peasant is indeed a terrible one. Little better is that of the town worker. Artisan or labourer, man or woman, all have the last ounce of energy ground out of them in return for a wage which is insufficient to buy the bare necessities of life, and the housing conditions are dreadful in the extreme.

It would be a shock for those hordes of European parasites who flock over to Egypt to escape the rigours of winter, and who, guided by dragomans, go along the specially macadamised streets of the Mouski quarter (the native Arab quarters) where are the gaily dressed bazaars, if they could be induced to turn down the filthy back streets, as I have done, and see the vile middens called homes, where the Egyptian workers are condemned to live and be rack-rented by wealthy Egyptian property owners. To get an idea of the kind of "homes" where the workers live in thousands, one must call to mind the rows of privy dry closets which are still in existence behind slum property in many English towns. In size, structure and general condition, they resemble the Egyptian working man's castle as nearly as anything I have seen. Devoid of furniture, save perhaps a box and a few pots, the rags and mats are carried out into the open court by day and carried back to form the beds by night.

The question naturally arises, "How can any party exist which does not reflect in its policy and programme these crying evils of the common people, and aim at ending them, or at least alleviating them?" The answer to that question is that there is no Party in Egypt, and, therefore, no programme and policy. The great Zaghlul says of the Nationalist movement: "We are not a Party, we are the nation." And all the other leaders, Nationalist, Constitutionalist, and others, go on their merry ways, vilifying everybody else but their own followers.

In this most extraordinary town of Cairo, where, in spite of the great proportion of illiteracy amongst the population, there are more newspapers than are probably to be found in any other town of equal population in the world, day by day these papers come out attacking first this, and then that leader, and all the time Great Britain is quickly entrenching herself in the Sudan, exacting tribute from the Egyptian exchequer, and, with the proceeds of the spoliation, developing the barrages and reservoirs in the upper reaches of the Nile in the Sudan, which when completed will place the whole of Egypt at the mercy or the whim of any future Churchill, Curzon or MacDonald, by controlling the life-giving waters of the mighty River Nile.

In order to understand the immense importance to the Egyptian nation of the control of the waters of the Nile, it is necessary to remember that the land along the Nile Valley and at its delta, with the exception of a few oases or fertile spots scattered over the country, is the only fertile ground in Egypt. The total length of the River Nile in Egypt proper is about 600 miles, and by the construction of barrages, canals and dykes it has been made possible, by a stupendous expenditure of energy, to bring under cultivation approximately 9,250,000 acres of land along the valley. This land, especially in the neighbourhood of towns, is intensively cultivated and huge crops of vegetables, grain, fodder for animals, and, away from the towns, cotton is grown, the river itself forming the main means for transport to the sea, supplemented by the railway which runs along the whole of the valley from Alexandria and Port Said, to the interior of the Sudan.

Under normal circumstances, land which is cultivated on the intensive plan without being allowed to lie fallow must become exhausted, but this tendency in Egypt is largely (or has been in the past) counteracted by the annual flooding of the Nile which brought down huge deposits of alluvial mud from the African lakes and thus renewed the life of the soil. The interference with this annual phenomenon by the further conservation and arresting of the flow of the Nile by the construction of the enormous reservoirs and dams which are contemplated at Gezira and Makwar respectively in the Sudan, and the consequent retention in the Sudan of the mud deposits, raises a problem which seems to me of a very serious character for Egypt, and one to which little attention seems to be paid here. One can foresee that the cotton

and other crops, which have been reported to be worsening year by year, will suffer very rapidly within the next few years, and that in about seven years' time, Egypt will be faced with disaster if things are allowed to go their own sweet way.

In these circumstances, and in face of the absolute inefficiency of the bourgeoisie and intelligentsia to work out a common programme of action and their utter disregard of the suffering which must inevitably come to the workers and peasants in the years to come, some effort must be made to arouse the workers and peasants to a sense of their danger and their right to consideration. The country is crying out for a revolutionary lead, and the building up of a mighty Workers' and Peasants' Revolutionary Republican Party, which will sweep away all the effete and intriguing elements and take the lead in the political struggle against British Imperialism, now slowly embracing Egypt in a death grip.

The difficulties in the way of achieving such a Party are enormous at the moment. The Residency, Zaghlulists, Constitutionalists, Unionists, and all sections are united on one thing, and that is to crush every manifestation of Egyptian Labour's attempt to get a place in the sun. Trade unions have been completely smashed and hundreds of its members imprisoned. Every active member of the trade unions has been dismissed from his employment. The Communist Party has been raided, and its members cast into jail for long periods of imprisonment, houses searched, literature seized; in fact every vestige of rebellion is brutally put down. Even the students at the universities, the only virile section of the intelligentsia, have been prohibited under penalty of instant dismissal from their schools from taking part in elections or other political activity, and generally speaking a reign of terror exists here.

Let it not be thought, however, that by brutally smashing the trade unions and the Communist Party the authorities have crushed out the rebellious spirit of the workers. On the contrary, whilst the persecution may have frightened the more timid of the workers, it has acted like a breeze which has fanned the smouldering resentment of many workers into a flame of anger which will certainly break out again more fiercely than ever. With that arrogance born of the long-suffering toleration of the oppressed workers, Zaghlul Pasha, the willing tool of British Imperialism when in office, smashed the trade unions, suppressed the Alexandria strike

with violence and imprisoned trade unionists and Communists alike, and then with a piece of sublime cheek "created" a trade union of his own, a Confederation of the filleted variety, wherein the members are asked on joining to forego the right or intention to strike. This action has had the effect of driving underground what was hitherto open organisation, and from one's experiences of similar movements, it is easy to comprehend that behind the surface of things there is a growing determination amongst the best of the Egyptian workers to re-erect on a more sure foundation their own free organisations, which will go on from day to day, profiting from their past failures and defeats, and slowly but surely building up a movement which will at the crucial moment sweep forward to success.

In this task it is the privilege and the duty of their English fellow trade unionists to assist them by all the means in their power. This they can best do by carrying on an increased agitation against the British Imperialist policy in Egypt, and against the machinations of the State-subsidised Sudan Cotton-growers' Association, in which so many prominent English politicians are interested financially. It is also the duty of the British workers to endeavour to remove from the minds of the Egyptian workers that feeling of bitter disappointment and resentment occasioned by Ramsay MacDonald's handling of the Egyptian situation whilst in office, and to disabuse their minds of the opinion which is widely held by all sections of the Egyptian people that the British Labour movement, in which they had placed so much hope on its accession to Government office, would show in no uncertain manner that it was prepared to make an attack upon British Imperialism by introducing measures into the House of Commons calculated to grant the fullest right of self-determination for all subject races, and so assist the struggling masses in Egypt, Palestine, India and other colonies and protectorates which are at present under the heel of British Imperialist satraps.

The continuation by MacDonald of the pro-imperialist policy of the governments which preceded the Labour Government came as a staggering surprise and a bitter disappointment to the Egyptian people, and, so carefully is the news sifted before it reaches here, that it is understandable that the Egyptian nation believes that this retrogressive attitude of MacDonald and Co., with its gross betrayal of all that the Labour movement stands for in its programme and policy, has the unanimous backing of the whole

of the working class of Great Britain. They are unaware of the fact that there is an ever-growing left-wing of Labour in Britain lead by the Communist Party and the Minority Movement, which has bitterly opposed the Imperialist tendencies of the Labour leaders, that this movement is growing at an enormous rate and that, thanks to the constant propaganda of these bodies, thousands of workers in their trades councils, trade unions, local Labour Parties and other working class organisations are week by week registering their protests against the brutal suppression of the Egyptian people, and against the blatant imperialism of so-called Labour leaders. They do not realise that there is a different mentality growing up in the English working class movement—a mentality that no longer looks to the efficient exploitation of the colonial peoples as a means of providing higher wages or better conditions of labour for the British workers.

It is the urgent and vital need of the moment to work for the withdrawal of all British troops from Egypt, and for the complete separation and freedom of the Egyptian people from any entanglements or control by the British Empire.

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