British Imperialism and The Labor Movement

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WHATEVER might have been the illusions of the British workers about imperialism in the past, today the mask is off. Imperialism stands condemned as the greatest enslaver of the overwhelming majority of humanity (Chinese, Indians, Africans, West Indians, etc.), and the chief cause of modern wars, as witnessed by Japan's conquest of Manchuria, Italy's war on Abyssinia, Berlin-Rome intervention in Spain, Japan's invasion of China, Hitler's insistent demand for colonies and his most recent "peaceful" annexation of Austria.

All these events occurring in rapid succession have served to emphasize what Marxists have been saying for decades: that war is inevitable in the epoch of imperialism. But war is merely "a continuation of politics by other means." And, precisely for this reason, it is necessary to explain to the masses the real international situation.

Imperialism Leads To War

It is necessary to repeat to them again and again how the world, having been divided up among a few great powers, the "dissatisfied" or fascist states are now trying to obtain markets, sources of raw materials, outlets for capital, etc., from the "satisfied" or so-called democratic powers. This question can only be settled by war. Therefore, it is only by abolishing imperialism that we can eliminate the menace of war.

So it is in the interest of the workers, who suffer most from war, to hasten the downfall of imperialism by helping the colonial peoples in their struggle for national freedom as the first step towards real social emancipation. Furthermore, for British workers to think of building socialism without first getting power, i.e., getting rid of the capitalist class at home, is self-deception and it is even more illusory to conceive of getting rid of the capitalists without smashing up the Empire. It therefore follows that the colonial peoples are the potential allies of the workers against a common enemy — the British imperialist class.

It is no accident that the two fundamental questions which stand before the working class in the present epoch are its attitude towards imperialist wars and the right to self-determination of the colonial peoples. These two questions are inseparable and form the touchstone of revolutionary socialism. "The socialists cannot reach their great aim (socialism) without fighting against every form of national oppression. . . . The socialist of a great nation or a nation possessing colonies who does not defend this right (self-determination) is a chauvinist" (Lenin). These, then are two principles of Marxist Leninism which admit of no compromise.

Let us examine the attitude of the three working-class parties in Britain on these questions.

The Labor Party is basically a reformist organization and must of necessity be opportunist in practise. Its leaders suffer from all the illusions and deficiencies which have characterized the whole history of social-democracy. But, unlike many of their continental colleagues, they have remained typical Bourbons. They have learned nothing and forgotten nothing, despite all the tragic events of the post-war period.

Whatever illusions the rank-and-file may have about its leaders, the bourgeoisie knows that, in every great crisis of British imperialsm, the overwhelming majority of the Labor leaders will line up behind them. Their support of the National government's armament program is the best indication of coming events. The only scruple of the British Labor Party is that its imperialists should select the "right" enemy. In other words, they will not have the slightest embarrassment in supporting the National government in war, if only the enemy is Italy, Germany or Japan.

On the question of self-determination, the record of the Labor governments is too well known. People who can bomb Indians struggling for independence and apply the most repressive measures to safeguard the interests of British capitalists in the African and West Indian colonies, are the last people in the world to support the cause of self-determination. About this the colonial peoples have no illusions.

Stalinism Betrays

The present attitude of the Communist Party towards imperialist war and colonial oppression is a tragedy. On no major issue does the party's policy so clearly demonstrate the contradiction between theory and practise as on these. While its Moscow leaders still continue to admit that war is inevitable under imperialism (see Stalin's famous interview with Roy Howard) and imperialism and Socialism are incompatible, the British Communist Party, in order to accommodate itself to the foreign diplomacy of the Soviet Union, pursues a policy identical with that of the Labor Party. Instead of taking advantage of the international situation to mobilize the workers for independent action, its leaders are re-echoing all the shibboleths of Transport House about "democracy" and "collective security thru the League of Nations."

And, in order to make their apostasy seem consistent with Leninism, they have found it necessary to divide world imperialism into two categories: the "good, peace-loving" powers (Britain, France and America) and the "bad, warlike" nations (Germany, Italy and Japan). And, as a corollary to this, the workers of Britain are to support the former group against the latter.

Similarly, the colonial peoples living under the yoke of British, French and American imperialism must forego their struggle for self-

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determination and line up in defense of "democracy," something which they have never known.

Position Of The I.L.P.

The Independent Labor Party, in my opinion, is the only working-class party in Britain that has a correct approach to the questions of imperialist war and colonies. It must be stated that the I.L.P. has only recently arrived at this clear Marxist position, for, even up to the Italo-Abyssinian War, the party displayed a lamentable confusion. And this was no accident. It was due to the fact that several leading members of the party were themselves not clear on these basic questions.

Every revolutionary socialist in Britain and anti-imperialist in the colonies must welcome this new development of the I.L.P. It is my sincere hope that the I.L.P. will continue to hold high the banner of revolutionary Marxism and will maintain an uncompromising and unswerving position, come what may. Under no condition must the British workers support "their" bourgeosie in imperialist war or help the capitalists to drown in blood the struggles of the colonial peoples. Their battle cry must be: Not a man, not a gun, not a penny for imperialist war! Hands off the colonies!!