

LEFTWARD HO!

I

JUDGING from what I saw and heard at the recent Trade Union Congress in Glasgow the British labor movement, like ancient Gaul, is divided into three parts:

- (1) Parliamentarians.
- (2) Direct Actionists.
- (3) Industrialists.

In the first two groups are all the leaders, in the last two are all the rank and file.

The Parliamentarians consist mainly of labor MPs, and those who expect very soon to be labor MPs. Not unnaturally, they believe in Parliament regnant, supreme, one and indivisible, world without end. To them the road to heaven is paved with ballot boxes, and they cannot speak of a polling booth without making the sign of a cross. Their universal theme just now is that the days of Lloyd George's Coalition are numbered and that a labor government will soon come into power. All that the workers have to do is to vote right, and then, behold a new heaven and a new earth, and Arthur Henderson Prime Minister of Britain!

The second group looks to Parliament for the governance of the country, but not to Parliament alone. The Direct Actionists conceive a new form of the two chamber system – not, as now, a House of Commons and a House of Lords, but a House of Commons and a Trade Union Congress or some body analogous to it. British labour, as the Direct Actionists see it, is now organized in two powerful sections – the political wing in the Labor Party, and the industrial wing in the Trade Union Congress. The Direct Actionists call for continuous joint action between these two sections – a unity of demand organized and directed by a unity of command. Parliament, as its custom is, will always procrastinate, evade, and deceive. The demands of Labor's political representatives will be flouted. It is then that labor's industrial representatives must come to the aid of their comrades. The Trade Union Congress must meet and debate the issue and, if they see fit, order a national ballot to be taken to decide whether there shall be a general strike to endorse its claims. So say the Direct Actionists and their leader Robert Smillie, the miner.

The last group – the Industrialists – are frankly revolutionary. They have an unqualified contempt for Parliament and all its works. The prospect of a labour government at an early date leaves them cold. They are syndicalists, and sovietists. They are strongly entrenched in the shop-steward movement. They glory in the absence of prominent leaders, but they not without active and able propagandists, both speakers and writers. It is a growing movement and is working like leaven in the rank and file.

This three-fold division in the ranks of British labor was manifest in Glasgow from September 8th to 14th. Direct Action was the touchstone at all times. It made its first appearance in the President's opening speech (in which he condemned it); and on the last day in the debate on the Irish resolution an immediate general

strike was advocated in order to compel the government to withdraw the British garrison from Ireland.

Between those two dates Direct Action gained four distinct victories, thus:

Second day.— A motion in effect censuring the Parliamentary Committee (i.e., the Executive) for its refusal to call a special session last Spring at the request of the Triple Alliance (miners, transport workers and railwaymen) to decide what action, if any, should be taken to compel the Government to withdraw from Russia, abolish conscription, raise the blockade, and release conscientious objectors; *carried by 2,586,000 votes to 1,876,000; majority 710,000.*

Third day.— A resolution demanding nationalization of the mines and, in the event of the Government's refusal, the calling of a special session to decide what action shall be taken; *Carried by 4,478,000 votes to 77,000. Majority 4,401,000.*

Fourth day.— A resolution condemning Direct Action in "purely political matters"; *Shelved as being "too abstract" by 2,555,000 votes to 2,086,000, majority 169,000.*

Fifth day.— A resolution demanding the repeal of the Conscription Acts and the immediate withdrawal of British troops from Russia, and, in the event of the Government's refusal, the calling of a special session to decide what action should be taken; *Carried unanimously.*

All of which looks very much like business.

II

Straws showed from the outset which way the wind was blowing. On the first day, while the delegates were assembling, an orchestra of the Amalgamated Musicians' Union cheered things up with some pleasant musical selections, of which the last was an overture called "Robespierre", described in the program as "a tone poem of the French Revolution" and having as its climax a noisy triumph for Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. After this, the Congress was welcomed to Glasgow in the name of the local Trades and Labor Council. A roar of applause went up as Emanuel Shinwell, the Council's chairman, stepped forward. A few days before he had been released from prison, where he had suffered six months for his part – a leading part – in the great 40 Hours Strike in Glasgow last winter. The cheers of the Congress had an unmistakable quality of appreciation and challenge. Then came the President's address – a careful and cautious document, which deserved the general praise it received next day in the capitalist press. "Statesmanlike," the editorials called it. But the delegates listened to it in silence, save only once, when Russia was mentioned: "Unhappily we are involved in a war with Russia which is thoroughly unpopular with the working classes in this country." This was endorsed with hearty cheers.

On the second day Robert Smillie entered the field and the leftward wind began to blow a gale. This was the scene and the setting of the storm:

A big bare concert hall – the largest in the city, the floor crowded with long straight rows of narrow tables and benches, not chairs, arranged in two big sections facing each other, with a wide aisle running down the middle. Here for six hours a day, crowded and uncomfortable, sat the eight hundred delegates. The public were admitted to the gallery and kept it well filled every day. No flag rejoiced the patriotic eye, no, nor uniform either, not even a policeman's or a parson's. No decorations or color, save the turbanned heads of four Indian visitors on the platform and the score or more of bright red and black posters announcing each day's issue of George Lansbury's labor daily, *The Herald*, (which I hear has attained a national circulation of over a quarter of a million). On the platform at a long table running from side to side sat the dozen or members of the Parliamentary Committee, with Stuart-Bunning, the President, comfortably armchaired in the midst.

"What union does he belong to? What's his job?" I asked a press man at my table.

"He's a man of letters," he answered, smiling.

"What!"

"Yes, an ex-London postman."

Enter Bob Smillie

Robert Smillie spoke from his place among the miners' delegation in the body of the hall. A great burst of cheers greeted his rising. He stood the while, as his manner is on such occasions, with his bent down and his hands lightly touching a nearby table, or moving to and fro the papers on his desk. Never have I seen him stand, as others do, upright, self-pleased, boldly facing the so many and so friendly eyes and taking to himself all the praise and tribute. He is a tall lean man, but the stoop of his broad shoulders robs him of several inches. His blue eyes are small and deep set, but from the farthest gallery you can catch the keen bright gleam in them. His mouth is hidden by a ragged moustache, but its frequent smile easily breaks through the heavy barrage of sandy hair. Smillie never wastes words in pompous openings or perorations. He isn't that kind of man. He is of the quality of another man who once spoke a few words at Gettysburg. Smillie's purpose now was to move the rejection of that paragraph in the Parliamentary Committee's report which sought to justify its refusal to call a national conference at the request of the Triple Alliance. The salient points of his argument were these:

The present Government holds power under false pretences. It misled the country at the general election. "It is the duty of the nation," said Smillie with emphasis, "to take any and every action to turn out any government, a labor government as much as any other; which is put into power on the strength of certain pledges and then repudiates those pledges or refuses to carry them out." (Loud cheers) . "The word of this Congress, representing nearly six million organized workers, ought to be strong enough to make any government do anything which in justice it ought to be called upon to do for the Workers." "Resolutions and

deputations have little effect. . . . A special trade union conference would be justified on any of a score of questions. Take for instance our Blockade of Germany," he continued. "Under it hundreds of thousands of old men, women and children were starved to death. Whoever was to blame for the terrible war, the young and the aged could not be blamed. I have always in my mind that the time will come again when we shall have to meet in the International Movement the fathers and brothers of these innocents. If the voice of British labor is silent on this question we shall hardly be able to raise our eyes and shake them by the hand." . . . "Take the question of Russia. They say that this is political question," said Smillie, "but I say that there is no greater labor question in the world than that of intervention in Russia. The capitalist Governments – our own amongst them – are trying to crush out the Socialist movement in Russia led by Lenin, – which God forbid." (This was the first mention of Lenin's name and was the signal for such an outburst of cheers as to oblige President Stuart-Bunning to call for order.) "Russia," Smillie went on, "is fighting the battle of Socialism for the whole world. . . . Then there is conscription – which is still in force, whatever the Government may say. . . . The land still belongs to the few. But we in this Congress say that the land must belong to those men who saved it. . . . Who will dare to say that these questions do not warrant a special conference of labor? . . . There is a new spirit in the rank and file of our movement. The Parliamentary Committee does not conceive it. We must let the rank and file speak, and the Committee must know that it is the servant not the master of Congress."

Smillie's motion amounted to a vote of censure on the Committee, and was thus understood by every delegate in the hall. The Parliament men, led by one of their ablest – a keen, little Lancashire man – J.R. Clynes, MP, rallied to the defence of the Committee, but in vain.

So it was again, on the following day – Wednesday – when Smillie, in a speech of unusual power and determination, carried all before him in the debate on the nationalization of the mines.

An American Delegate

On Thursday the leftward wing gathered strength from a new quarter: The afternoon session opened calmly enough with greetings from the fraternal delegates. First spoke the American Federation of Labor in the person of J. Hynes. I had noticed this gentleman drifting on and off the platform since the first day's meeting, seemingly slightly bored by the proceedings, and looking as though he would like to be safely back at Headquarters in Washington, DC, where no winds blow, – none at least to vex the souls of those who live around the Gomerian throne. He read a long and dreary speech which told us little more than that the world had passed through what he, not inaccurately, called "a trying war." So far as American labor was concerned his views seemed to be that generally speaking

–
"Sam's in his heaven,
All's right with the world."

And yet that same evening the delegates read in their Glasgow papers that Boston was under martial law, that the United Mine Workers of America were going to strike for nationalization, and that serious trouble was imminent in Pittsburg.

After Hynes came the representative of the Canadian Trades and Labor Congress, J. C. Watters; a big gentle rebel whose near-revolutionary speech was warmly received. The President of the Congress then called on B. P. Wadia, the President of the Madras Labor Union, a tall lithe young Indian of striking appearance, dark-skinned, gracious in speech and manner. In a clear ringing voice, and in perfect English, he appealed on behalf of Indian labor – unorganized, exploited, forced by poverty, helplessness and ignorance to be the scab-labor of the world.

A message from India

“But I bring you a new message, my comrades,” he cried. “The workers of India are awakening. In Madras we have organized five trade unions with a combined membership of over twenty thousand. I come to this great Congress as the first fraternal delegate from organized Indian labor.”

And then with the emphasis of under-statement he told us something of present-day labor conditions in India – facts that sent murmurs of indignation running like air-currents up and down the hall. He told of the Indian Government’s Factory Act of 1911 under which men in Indian textile factories work twelve hours a day for six days a week, women eleven hours, and little children six hours. “Shame, shame!” rang out angrily all over the hall. I saw that now every man was turning sideways on his bench so as to face the platform and see with both eyes this strange new phenomenon, industrial Asia, standing forth boldly in their midst, articulate – demanding.

“In the cotton mills of Bombay, the Indian Factory Labor Commission’s Report for 1918 states, the highest paid worker get £3/2/7 (\$15.50) a month.” Only a sound of hissing here and there broke the silence of the audience. “The highest paid workers in the jute mills of India get just £2 (\$10) a month” . . . and so the damning indictment continued. Then briefly Wadia went on to speak of the monstrous housing conditions in the big Indian cities, of the lack of education, of neglected health and sanitation.

“Do you think, friends,” he asked, “that you will be able to stop exploitation over here in Britain while the same capitalists are exploiting us in India?”

“No, no,” came at once from a hundred delegates. “Then you must join hands with the workers of India,” he cried. “You must join hands with the workers of the world everywhere.” The answering shout seemed to show that no insular Britishers remained in that Congress.

“When we in India,” Wadia went on, “ask our masters for better wages and shorter hours they tell us they can do nothing for us because of the competition of English workers. When you in England ask for better conditions you are told of the menace of Indian

competition.”

“So we are!” “That’s true!” they shouted back.

“Friends,” said Wadia, leaning far forward, with his long arms stretched out before him, “They are the same men who tell us these things.” In a towering height of passion he ended, “We shall never succeed in our fight, neither you here nor we in India, until the capitalists everywhere are overthrown.”

Then a strange thing happened – unique I am told in Congress history. Every man and woman in the hall – delegates, the public in the gallery, the people on the platform – Parliamentary Committee, President and all – even the press men at the press table, rose to their feet spontaneously and cheered – cheered as I imagine a multitude of blind men would cheer if by some miracle sight came to their eyes.

That all this was not a useless outburst of emotion was shown the next day when two resolutions were brought forward, one calling upon the Congress to appoint a special Commission to investigate labor conditions in India, – this was referred for action to the Parliamentary Committee; and a second resolution welcoming the formation of trade unions in India and instructing the executive to appeal to all British trade unions to support the Indian movement financially – this was agreed to unanimously.

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During the week I freely canvassed opinion as to the leftward drift of the Glasgow Congress. Delegates, press men and labor politicians all agreed that a new kind of Trade Union Congress had come to Glasgow. A new spirit animated the discussions. A new sense of strength and power and speedy achievement kept the delegates in their places alert and confident. Speaker after speaker protested scornfully against passing any more pious resolutions.

A typical parliamentarian explained this new spirit to me as being the product of the vigorous educational work of the I. L. P.

A Direct Actionist leader assured me “the conception of industrial solidarity coupled with Direct Action has caught the imagination of the Trade Unions. At last they see a way by which they can make their resolutions effective. Since 1882 this Congress has passed forty-two resolutions in favor of nationalization and nobody has paid the slightest attention. But now at last we are going to get what we have been asking for.”

My Industrialist friend agreed that the Glasgow Congress was far to the right. “That,” he said, “is an expression of the growing discontent and impatience with political action on the part of the rank and file. This is only a beginning. We’re going to capture the trade unions for the revolution.”

The Liberator, December 1919, pages 11–14