EDUCATING BRITISH LABOUR

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IT is not uncommon in modern propagandist organs to personify Capital as a relentless and all-destroying octopus, and Labour as a hirsute Neanderthal, armed with a ponderous and knotty club with which he thoughtlessly and aimlessly strikes around him, shattering the economic structure of generations. The figure is sensational—it is easy—that is why it makes such an appeal to creator and consumer alike. It is also, in general, untrue, but that appears to be no reason why it should cease to find favour and to continue in employment.

Leaving Capital out of the question as being able to care for itself—at least for the time being—more efficiently than its coadjutor and rival, to make an analysis of the English Labour group is not the easiest thing in the world. It is tempting to describe it as the great army of the underpaid led by the overpaid. Moreover, there is in such a judgment just about that modicum of truth commonly found in the general statement. In every State and at every time the agitator-class has invariably been composed of that body of the populace which has attained a certain degree of emancipation, but which sees a new and a better Paradise just beyond its reach. At the same time, the comparatively modest degree of enlightenment and understanding possessed by such a class makes it the easy prey of the noisy demagogue. And this, in general terms, is the stage to which English Labour has progressed up to the present. There is undoubtedly a small group of able men at the head of the British Labour Party in Parliament; but two considerations are to be noted about them. The first is that these men are by no means the acknowledged leaders of the whole of the *economic* Labour group in the country. They do not even command anything approaching the entire Trades Union political vote. In the second place, even if they could possibly be considered as the acknowledged chiefs to whom the Trades Unions look for guidance—and often they profess to speak with authority on behalf of those bodies—yet, between them and their subalterns, that is to say, the minor Trades Union officials, there is a great gulf fixed. This is possibly due to the elevating influence of the atmosphere of

Westminster. At all events it appears to be the inevitable thing that when a weaver or a miner wins the coveted honour of writing the magic initials "M. P." after his name, he tends to adopt with them Conservative views, a dress suit and other distinctive badges of the leisured class. He also learns from experience, and from contact with campaigners more seasoned than himself, that Rome cannot even be pulled down in a day, and he loses in consequence some of that crusading zeal which fired him when he preached the doctrine of the necessity of an immediate regeneration from the steps of some statue to England's forgotten past in his early electioneering period. And all this separates him from his one-time friends. No longer can he go down among them in days of economic strife, slap them on the back, and tell them what he will do to a callous and venal government. He knows that it cannot be done, anyway. Neither dares he tell his friends and constituents the truth about his metamorphosis. And so another Commission is erected, and he sits upon a Committee thereof, and spins cobwebs of argument about nothing in particular, and agrees eventually to the inevitable compromise—which is just as inevitably rejected by the men in the Unions— and our M. P. probably loses a little more repute as a stalwart Labour man on every such occasion.

The task, then, of manufacturing and swaying public opinion among the members of the British Labour group falls upon the lesser light, be he shop steward, tavern orator, or—worst of all—street corner politician. And now the question may be raised: "What is this British Labour group which is waiting patiently thus to be swayed, guided and delivered?" The true answer to the question is that there really is no such group at all. There are, however, at least three groups in England which claim the title "Labour" as their differentia. They overlap annoyingly; they often differ widely among themselves in matters of aim and method, and the cross-division serves merely to check progress and to confuse the onlooker.

First, and best known of all, is the parliamentary Labour Party, once looked upon with apprehension and some contempt by all good patriots, but now rapidly becoming strong, and therefore respectable. There was a day when its policy was plainly dubbed "socialistic," but not for the first time it has been found that to climb the ladder of civilized progress man must lose his tail, and now this Party pursues such ends as are merely "social" in their nature. In the main it cherishes the old delusion that social and economic heavens may be produced by legislation, and in its highest flights of fancy it proposes to purchase the resources of the nation

for the common weal with money it does not possess. Such ideas are not found native in the "working-man," and this political party, as might be hazarded, is by no means wholly composed of such. Possibly half of its numbers are made up of dilettanti who have individual axes to grind, and find no room for their small blades upon the grindstones of the older political parties. Many schoolmasters and quasi-intellectuals stand in the ranks, some for honest though often sentimental reasons, others simply because the prospect —sometime and somehow—of bringing "direct action" to bear upon an adamantine local educational authority is an alluring one with which to play. At a modest estimate, a little over fifty per cent of the actual workers of England vote either with the Conservative or with the Liberal Party. When such men support the Labour candidate, this is rarely from a desire to alter the constitution or to further new political ideals; it is from a bread-and-butter motive, and in the hope that the capitalist employer may be forced by oft-promised legislation to disgorge a greater proportion of that "unearned surplus" so frequently raved about on Labour electioneering platforms.

In the second place, the term "Labour" has, especially of late years, come to be applied to the whole group of wage-earners in the country. But any such application gives a totally false idea of solidarity. The social line which divides the "black-coated brigade" from the digger of the soil and the artificer in metals is still strongly marked, and though in the formation of "Middle Class Unions" the bank clerk and the broker have imitated to some degree the methods of their brethren who work with their hands, the very title of such organizations betrays a class distinction. Moreover, these Middle Class Unions have no affiliation with the Trades Unions whose form they copy; they differ from them in the purposes of their existence, and, most important consideration of all, they represent no common political interest and control no material monopoly. In consequence, they exert no influence.

Thirdly, there are the Trades Unions. There is nothing nebulous about an English Trades Union. It is as large as life, organized to act as no other body of workers in the world is organized —and, on occasion, its actions have been uncommonly disconcerting and paralyzing to its own members as well as to the community at large. But it must always be borne in mind that the body of English Trades Unionists is by no means coincident with the parliamentary Labour Party, that Trades Unionists do not vote solidly for Labour candidates, and that the Labour leaders in parliament can rarely command a loyal following among the Union members

sufficiently strong to ensure obedience even to calculated agreements on trade disputes when made in the name of the Unions. The reason for this has already been suggested. The parliamentary Labour man, even when he is a nominee of a Trades Union, rapidly loses touch with his one-time fellows, and public opinion among the Trades Unionists is left to be formed by the minor Trades Union official. He forms it in strange places and upon strangely-gathered tags of information, and mis-information. He argues in the ale-house; he lays down the law upon the kerb-stone; occasionally he attains the eminence of a soap-box in Hyde Park or Woodhouse Moor; most often, perhaps, of all, he holds forth in the political club. He will quote you Plato; he will throw in a snippet from Hobbes. If you are lucky, you may catch a phrase from Rousseau, Kant or Adam Smith. But all these are merely tags, culled painfully from between the asterisks in the literary column in some pseudo-intellectual weekly; they represent no real reading, and their facile quotation implies no studied thought. But we must not blame our Trades Unionist for that. What can he do otherwise but speak at random? He was probably taken from his elementary school at the age of twelve-and-a-half or thirteen, and hurled into the bustle of the mine or the mill. He has been sweating blood ever since to keep himself and his family going, and it is to his eternal credit that he tries to think at all. Nevertheless, good, big-hearted fellow that he is, he can be a positive danger to the community when, labouring under a sense of a century of injustice, he preaches the doctrine of "direct action." His teaching has had the effect in England of bringing the Trades Unions into fierce antagonism with the great part of the community who often have seen in the weapon of the strike the spectre of a Communism which does not exist in fact, with the result that at the present moment both Unions and community are exhausted in point of funds and inclined to wonder what the next move is to be.

Something has to be done about it. That has been obvious to many men for a long time past. Exactly what, it has been difficult to decide. Something in the line of education has seemed the natural thing. In consequence, all sorts of schemes for granting educational facilities to the proletariat have been evolved. The parliamentary Labour Party has definitely adopted as one of the main planks in its platform the policy of free education for all, from the elementary school to the university. Most of the objections to such a policy are easy to see; they are principally matters of finance, and of the suitability of the available material. But to a teacher who knows the English educational system, the chief

drawback to such a scheme is that under it a huge number of youngsters would receive the type of education which prepares for a professional sphere which not two-per-cent of them will ever dream of entering. It may be aesthetic to have a generation of coal-heavers who can quote Homer, but it is not particularly useful; it is not economical; it is disturbing to the coal-heaver himself, and somebody *must* heave coal.

Very well, then. Let us educate the grown-up worker. The Workers' Educational Association and various "Settlements," as well as the Y. M. C. A. and similar organizations, have done great things with that purpose in view. But they know only too well that in such work, as well as in the art of cookery, you must "first catch your hare." In other words, the British workman is a shy bird, and must be piped to never so sweetly. And the problem is not merely to get him to attend a class in elementary French or English Literature. We have to try to instruct him in the principles which underlie his trade and his own economic position in the community, and we are frankly trying to do this, not in the hope of influencing his politics, but certainly in the hope that we can make him justify his own point of view or else revise it. It is just that fact which makes the problem so delicate. Attempt to get a works personnel together for a lecture or a class, introduce a speaker into a mill to talk on vital industrial or commercial topics, and you arouse a bristling wall of suspicion immediately. "Who is the man?" "What's his game?" "What are the employers at now?" Questions such as these—often ornamented with more or less lurid adjectives--fly around, and in the long run your prospective audience fades away, preferring to spend its time upon the bowling green or in the club. Some superficial observers, in consequence, will tell you that the said British workman lives in an atmosphere of beer and 'bacca and bowls, and tends to confine his vocabulary to other words beginning with the second letter of the alphabet. As a matter of hard fact, nothing could be further from the truth. You cannot indulge in many excesses on a wage of something less than twenty dollars a week!

The truth is that the worker wants to learn, but primarily he wants to learn something that will increase his wages, and he finds it difficult to believe that his employer is ready to assist him to this end. It must be admitted that Trades Union experience of the last fifty years justifies the worker's attitude in this matter. In response, however, to the impulse to climb, some few men will attend technical classes at night and get out of the rut; but the vast majority of Trades Union members is already wedded to some one

accomplishment and is anxious only to improve the productivity of its particular job. For years the only possible way understood by the workman of forcing his views and necessities upon public notice appeared to be the strike. He has struck, not because he was unwilling to arbitrate, but because he has invariably been beaten in argument when he has appeared to plead his case before a Board of Directors. He has lost in argument because he has rarely known enough facts as to how business is run. And now the strike, in itself a perfectly legitimate withdrawal of goods from sale for the time being, has proved a two-edged weapon, as destructive to its user as to its victims, since the workers of England live perpetually within a fortnight of the starvation line.

And so the Trades Unions are turning to find some remedy for their deficiencies in knowledge. They are developing a new and intense interest in Economics and in Economic History, and it is not impossible that thereby a new phase of adult education and industrial arbitration is being begun in England. The scheme under which such studies are being prosecuted is new. No longer does some more or less patronizing body attempt to press a biassed theory through the medium of free lectures or cheap night classes. Under the aegis of one or two of the modern universities the National Alliance of Employers and Employed has begun to erect, in the manufacturing North, joint committees of employers and Trades Union officials. By such committees lecture courses in Economics and Economic History have been arranged and given. Four circumstances, at least, differentiate this scheme from any that has preceded it. In the first place the employers and the employed sit on one committee to draw up the arrangements for the proposed course; secondly, the financial responsibility for the venture is divided between the employers and the Unions; thirdly, the classes are composed of a mixture of masters and workmen, though the workmen, naturally, predominate; and fourthly, the lecturer chosen is allowed absolute freedom in all he says, though he is requested to be as unbiassed as he can. Moreover, as each class is strictly local and composed entirely of workers in one particular trade, the lecture room tends to become the forum in which grievances—which in ordinary circumstances might remain unalleviated until they became the causes of real disturbance—can be examined and discussed in public under healthy conditions.

Under such a scheme, of course, there are possibilities of much embarrassment. The initial shyness of the worker and the problem of mixing successfully the two ends of industry can easily be imagined. It is interesting, on occasion, to hear fifty thousand dollars a

year arguing in suave accents with the northern brogue of fifteen dollars a week. But it is extremely healthy. I have heard questions freely and openly discussed in such a class-room which would have been as a match to powder had they been broached in past days in a Board Room by the old type of Trades Union delegation. The presence of an outsider, and, presumably, of an expert witness, in the person of the lecturer, acts as some sort of restraint, and much is expected of him. He is, at first, regarded by the men as a new type of conjurer who is going, within a very limited period—a couple of weeks, for preference—to produce an appreciable increase of wages from the aether. The employer, on the other hand, (at least in the first instance,) attends the class to discover whether in some subtle manner he has been duped into contributing funds towards the payment of some sort of super-agitator, veiled this time beneath the academic mantle. To occupy the platform, in fact, before such an eager and critical audience, and one so well-informed on the hard practical side of industry, is an unique and exhilarating experience for one accustomed merely to the placid direction of academic classes. But when the lecturer has contrived to combine the silvery tongue of Nestor with the diplomacy of Machiavelli and the discipline of the London bobby—once, in fact, he has proved to both elements in his class that he expects no commission from either side and that he is ready, in accordance with the facts of a case, to crush or applaud with sublime impartiality—then he sinks to his proper plane: that is to say, he tends to become the fountain of information and the referee in discussion. He is then plied with questions of a most fearsome type. There is always one man in a class who worships statistics. He is the terror of the man upon the platform. He brings in a couple of Blue Books every time, and some half-dozen queries based upon strings of figures, and probably winds up by asking you why, (if it is true, as maybe you have unfortunately alleged, that the price of a Ford car in Manchester may depend upon the selling price of English cotton goods in South America) wages in the Widnes chemical trade have remained stationary in spite of tremendous variations, appropriately quoted in thousands of tons or to the nearest cent, in English and Argentine exports and in the price of the American dollar. Then, every class contains a professional pessimist. His regular question, raised at intervals, is: "How can you expect a man to bring up a family of ten on fifty shillings a week, and what is Economics going to do about that?" Such questions require a good deal of care in the answering, especially on the spur of the moment. They are worse than the hardy annual as to how much the German is going

to pay and when he will begin to do it. But they are important as they betray trends of thought more vital, indeed, than that of the man who, in idle curiosity and in some doubt of the lecturer's encyclopaedic knowledge will enquire, *apropos* of the topic of the Division of Labour, how the Egyptians managed to erect the Pyramids. And if a lecturer will exercise tact and sympathy in his replies, he will gradually gain the confidence of his men. He will find that the Trades Unionist is a most serious person, and that he will spend hours in trying to perfect himself. I have known him tackle Adam Smith and Ricardo, to say nothing of Marshall and Gide. He ceases to cry out for a Lenin to smooth out his difficulties. Moreover, in such a class, master and man begin to realize something of each other's individuality, and—above all—the lesson of the need of co-operation between all the personal agents of production and distribution begins to sink in.

The movement is a great step forwards. It is also, in a measure a step backwards to the days of the guilds of the Middle Ages, when all the freemen of a craft, whether masters or journeymen, decided together the conditions under which they should live and work. It is a fitting complement to the Whitley Councils which have been set up by various industries in England, for it gives that instruction in the principles of the conduct of industry and commerce without which wise decisions cannot be made. Nine-tenths of the industrial disputes of the last twenty years have been the result either of ignorance or of pig-headedness. Ignorance, under the scheme of the National Alliance, can be pleasantly remedied in the right environment. For pig-headedness there is no cure; but public opinion, publicly aired in such a mixed assembly as these classes provide, is the nearest approach to a specific that I can think of. We pretend that secret diplomacy in politics has had its day. In commerce and industry many employers are beginning to feel that the same perhaps is true. The National Alliance scheme is the first-fruits of that belief. It deserves support and a fair trial in England, and the gravest consideration in other countries where Labour problems have still to develope to a head.