

# The Evolution Of The British Labor Movement

It will not be surprising if October, 1917, is noted in future calendars of the British labor movement as marking the first move in that bloodless revolution which Mr. J. H. Thomas, the railwaymen's secretary, recently predicted. In that month two steps were taken—the adoption by the executive of the Labor party of a new party constitution, and the decision of a representative congress of co-operative societies to throw the whole of their great movement into the political field—that promise to change fundamentally the balance of political parties in Great Britain.

To appreciate the significance of those decisions it is necessary to compare the position of British labor three months ago with its position to-day. Down to August of this year all who believed in the need for a well established Labor party in Great Britain were uniformly pessimistic. The effect of the war on democracy was that Labor had almost ceased to count as a political force. On its industrial side it was always formidable, for the risk of a strike of engineers or miners was a danger no government could lightly incur. But as an organized political party resting its power on its command of the electorate the Labor movement by the end of the third year of the war had fallen on evil days. One school of Labor members in the House of Commons was under ban as pacifist, another as being mortgaged to the government. Whatever industrial unrest there was found new mouthpieces among the rank and file in the workshops, ignoring alike the titular trade union leaders and the political representatives of Labor in Parliament. The influence of the old Labor organizations was waning, and new associations, suspiciously fertilized by plutocratic patronage, were springing up in rivalry.

That was the position in August, when the discussions on British representation at the Stockholm Conference supervened to intensify existing controversies. Labor was known to be divided on the question, and every hostile critic—among them five-sixths of the London press—predicted a radical and lasting cleavage. There seemed ample foundation for the forecast. By all the omens Stockholm should have meant a split. In the event it has proved the starting point of an irresistible movement towards consolidation. The explanation of that dramatic change is not obscure. The danger of disintegration had become so grave that the choice lay naked and open between solidarity and impotence. With that knowledge weighing daily more heavily on the mind of Labor, a sudden political sensation resolved all doubts and hesitations. Mr. Arthur Henderson, the secretary and recognized leader of the Labor party, having found himself at cross purposes with his colleagues of the War Cabinet, severed his association with them under circumstances succinctly characterized in the terse declaration of Mr. Robert Smillie, the miner's leader, that "Henderson didn't resign; Henderson was chucked." There was sufficient truth in that interpretation of the facts to sting Labor into action. It saw or imagined a challenge and took it up forthwith. Unwittingly enough, Mr. Lloyd George had galvanized the Labor movement into new life.

The Stockholm question forthwith assumed a different color. It was affected not so much by the personal issue involved in the Prime Minister's

treatment of Mr. Henderson as by the instinctive reaction against the provocation conceived to have been offered to Labor as a whole. The government's refusal of passports, for example, was denounced as emphatically by Labor leaders opposed to the Stockholm Conference as by its most convinced supporters, and at a national Labor congress the proposal to send delegates to Stockholm was carried by a sweeping majority. It is true that at a subsequent congress ten days later that decision was only reaffirmed by the narrowest of margins, but the turnover of votes, due to an apparent change of front by the 600,000 miners, was the result of the miners' disapproval not of the Stockholm project itself but of the composition of the proposed British delegation. None the less the contrast between the two votes was striking. If the critics were to be believed it marked the total discomfiture of Labor, for though the earlier Stockholm decision was in fact endorsed it was by so narrow a margin that there was no prospect whatever of the issue of the necessary passports.

To all appearances those criticisms were fully justified. The crisis in the affairs of Labor had reached a head. The annual Trade Union Congress, representing the industrial side of the movement, was to be held just three weeks later. At that congress, it was confidently predicted, the Stockholm proposals would be finally damned. And since Stockholm had by this time come to bulk more largely as a symbol in the domestic controversies of Labor than as an objective actuality an adverse vote by the Trade Union Congress would have had devastating effects on the doubtful solidarity of the Labor movement. But no such adverse vote was recorded. A skillfully framed compromise motion, declaring for the holding of an international Socialist conference after due preparation in the different countries, was carried by an overwhelming majority, and Mr. Henderson, attending as a fraternal delegate from the Labor party, met with an ovation that set his own position out of reach of envy, detraction or malice. That was the first of three notable events which have changed the whole face of the Labor movement. The others, the framing of the Labor party's new constitution and the entry of the co-operative movement into politics, have already been mentioned and may now be more fully discussed.

The realized achievements and the still greater potentialities of the co-operative movement are imperfectly appreciated even in Great Britain. Over large areas in the industrial districts the movement is an integral part of the life of the working classes. The retail co-operative societies have a membership of between three and four millions, and thus claim to supply (since each member represents a family) something like a third of the whole population. Their trade over the counter in 115 reached a total of £106,000,000, the Co-operative Wholesale Society doing business to the amount of £57,000,000 in the same year. The whole of the profits of the societies, after the payment of a moderate capital, goes back to the consumer in quarterly dividends varying from five per cent. to twelve and one-half per cent. on the amount of his purchases. The movement is not entirely a commercial enterprise, since every retail society sets apart a percentage of its profits for educational and other constructive work. But hitherto it has steadfastly eschewed

political activity. Its members could hold what views they would and advocate them as they would. That remains theoretically true to-day, for the vote of the recent conference was merely in favor of running co-operative candidates for the House of Commons. No stipulation is laid down as to party color, but no one doubts that nine co-operative candidates out of every ten will stand virtually on a Labor platform. The two bodies will work separately, but in harmony. Where there is a co-operative candidate, he will get the Labor vote. Where a Labor man is standing, the local co-operators will back him. That, of course, is no radically new development. It is probably true already that most co-operators are associated with the Labor party or the Trade Union Congress or both. But many hundreds of thousands are not. It is the political influence of these hundreds of thousands that will be mobilized by the recent decision, while the rest will now be bound to the Labor movement by a triple tie instead of a single or a double.

Significant as the co-operators' new departure is, it yields place in importance to the simultaneous self-reformation of the Labor party. In the past that party has been a close corporation. In the future its doors will be open to all, whether brain workers or manual workers, who avow sympathy with its declared objects. Hitherto it has been a federation of trade unions and three small Socialist societies. Any would-be member of the party had to gain entrance to it through a union of one of the three societies. (There was indeed one class of exceptions to that rule, but it was so small as to be negligible.) Henceforward there will be organized branches of the party in every Parliamentary constituency, and every branch will accept individual members, whether they are connected with trade union or Socialist society or not. The appeal of the party is to be specifically to "workers with hand or brain," and the writer, the thinker, the lawyer, the doctor, the schoolmaster, the engineer, to whom the stated objects of the party commend themselves, will be welcomed into full co-operation and alliance, with rights of direct representation on the central executive. At the same time, women, who under the Representation of the People bill, now before Parliament, will form more than a third of the electorate, are to have the same place and power as men in the counsels of the party.

That is not the only change the new constitution has inaugurated, but it is by far the most important at a time when a new grouping of political parties in Great Britain is in visible progress. To-day all the old parties are in the melting-pot. The Conservatives are being weakened by the secession of a number of their second and third rank members, who are enrolling themselves under the colors of a new "National Party" aiming, with a great deal of sound and heat, at nothing in particular. The Irish are certain under any conceivable Home Rule settlement to find their numbers in the House of Commons greatly reduced. Liberalism is in complete disintegration. The right wing of the party has thrown itself into full co-operation with the Coalition government. The Center gives the government uneasy and unenthusiastic support on patriotic grounds. The Left, which is much more influential outside the House of Commons than in it, is openly ready to break with the party tradition and strike an alliance, if an alliance on reasonable terms is offered, with the independent and iconoclastic forces of Labor.

Such an alliance opens up great political possibilities, and there is little doubt that the new "individual membership" provisions in the Labor

party constitution will be a bridge over which a substantial block of the Liberal left will pass into the Labor camp. That process has palpable dangers. Labor will tolerate no dominance by intellectuals, and the intellectuals will not submit to bondage to a stereotyped and perhaps doctrinaire program. But those dangers can and must be avoided. Labor has great need of the brain workers, and the infusion of a progressive Liberal-Radical element will give the party a new strength and abalance. As things stand to-day the prospects of Labor are demonstrably more hopeful than those of either the Liberal or Conservative parties. That of course is spoken relatively. A Labor majority in the House of Commons is still far beyond the horizon. But as a political group Labor in the House seems certain to be greatly strengthened. At the 1906 election Labor fought fifty seats and won twenty-nine. In January, 1910, it fought seventy-eight and won forty. In December, 1910, the last general election, it fought fifty-six and won forty-two. The intention now is to put no fewer than three hundred candidates in the field, and, given the harmonious alliance that is promised between all sections of the new Labor movement, it is not putting it too high to estimate that at least half that number should be returned.

Much in any case has been achieved already. The past three months have seen the democratic forces in Great Britain both co-ordinated and consolidated. The one process has implied the other. The Trade Union Congress, the Labor party and the Co-operative Union are recognized as the undisputed representatives of democracy in its different aspects as they have never been before. Their spheres are defined and their relations are straightforward and friendly. The Trade Union Congress represents the worker as producer, the Labor party the worker as voter and legislator, the Co-operative movement the worker as consumer. The broad policy of each association—housing, educational and social reform, effective Parliamentary control of foreign policy, state ownership of the main instruments of production and transport, increased control by the workers of the processes of industry—is substantially the same, and the three bodies will become increasingly identified through their individual members. At the last Trade Union Congress the watchword "Every trade unionist a co-operator and every co-operator a trade unionist" found wide support. The formula, to fit the present need, must be widened to include the political expression of Labor activity. That would mean that every manual worker, and most of the so-called brain workers, would individually be a member at once of a trade union, a co-operative society and a local Labor party branch. The point has not yet been reached, but the ideal is coming rapidly within reach of realization. The mere process of realizing it may have a transforming effect on British politics.—H. Wilson Harris, London, in the New Republic.

## FELLOW-SUFFERER.

A humane society had secured a show window and filled it with attractive pictures of wild animals in their native haunts. A placard in the middle of the exhibit read:

"We were skinned to provide women with fashionable furs."

A man paused before the window, and his harassed expression for a moment gave place to one of sympathy.

"I know just how you feel, old tops," he muttered. "So was I."

## TO MATCH.

Life is short and so are most of us all through life.