

THE IRISH LABOUR PARTY AND FASCISM

By BRIAN O'NEILL

THE Irish Labour Party is European Social Democracy's *lusus naturee*; the jabberwock of the Second International's collection of strange beasts. The Austro-Marxists must "quote" Marx to justify their reformism and renunciation of Marxism; the German Social Democratic Party "recognises" the class struggle; and even the British Labour Party talks woolily of the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of socialist society. But the Irish Labour Party for a decade now has not troubled to give even verbal adherence to the tenets of working-class aims and policy. The Irish Labour reformists are shameless in their reformism; there is no pretence that reformism is a "constitutional means to socialism."; reformism is admitted to be the end itself.

The rôle of the Labour Party leaders as the journeymen of capitalist imperialism in Ireland has become ever more clear since the Treaty that terminated the Anglo-Irish war in 1922. From the opening shot of the Great War in 1914 they had played an unheroic part in Irish life; with the Treaty they sank to the basest levels. To-day they talk much of "patriotism" and the "nation's struggle," hoping apparently that the workers' memory is as short as their own effrontery is great. The Irish Labour Party had no part officially in the 1916 uprising, and the working-class forces who formed the vanguard of the rebel forces came from the most devoted and class conscious proletarians organised in James Connolly's Irish Citizen Army. "In the actual fighting," reported the Irish T.U.C. and Labour Party to the Second International, "it is certain that the majority of the insurgents were trade unionists, although no union, as such, had any part in the insurrection." In fact, at the Labour Party's Conference in August, 1916, the president, Thomas Johnson (he was one of those whom the Free State delighted to honour; he is now a senator), announced that the conference was not the place to discuss "the right or the wrong, the wisdom or the folly of the revolt."

True, in the closing years of the war, when the world revolutionary wave was showing the reformists of all countries the way the wind was blowing, the Labour Party leaders also had their moment of brave rebelly talk. They spoke of self-determination for Ireland, invoked Connolly's memory and the Workers' Republic, and sent greetings to the Kerensky Government in Russia and delegates to the Stockholm Conference. But when the Irish capitalist class betrayed the national cause

The Irish Labour Party and Fascism 49

by accepting the Treaty of 1922, which gave threequarters of Ireland the status of a Dominion, granted fiscal autonomy to the national bourgeoisie, but maintained British imperialism's hold of the country both in the economic and military fields, the Labour and Trade Union leaders strove to hold back the workers from any struggle against the Treaty. The reformists maintained "neutrality" on the whole question. They attempted to mediate between the Republican and Free State groups, and even called a one-day "anti-militarist" strike in April, 1922, in order to alienate trade unionists from the Irish Republican Army. They dared not show their hands in any other way; had they revealed themselves at that stage to be openly pro-Treaty, the thousands of anti-imperialists in the trade unions would have swept them aside. But by a posture of neutrality on the Treaty and calling the attention of the workers to unemployment and wage reductions, which they suddenly discovered to be most urgent questions, they hoped to smooth the path of the Treatyites and enter the Free State Dail, with the balance of power, as the accepted spokesmen of Labour.

And if the Labour Party, during the ten years in which it was aiding the Cosgrave régime to set the Free State on its feet, forgot the nationalist phrases which the struggle taught it after 1916, its present position as the social plumber's mate of the De Valera Government has forced it to shed whatever pitiful shreds of socialist phrases it might still possess. So low has it fallen that the annual conference, held in Dublin on October 20 and 21, 1933, could get through without mention of Socialism or the class struggle. The conference showed the Labour Party leaders to have no other policy for the working class than the begging of small unimportant concessions from the Fianna Fail Government as the price of parliamentary support in its anti-working-class measures. "Small minds have small desires."

Engels noted that "Ireland is still a sacred isle, whose sufferings must in no way be confused with the vulgar class struggle of the rest of the sinful world." But nor all the piety nor wit of the De Valera Government has succeeded in cancelling half a line of the monthly trade figures. And these reveal that the irreverent world crisis of capitalism has not halted at Ireland's shores. Ireland is no exception to the collapse of capitalism. The working masses of town and country are feeling acutely the lash of a ruling class striving desperately to maintain its rulership. Yet in this situation, when the question of a way out of the chaos and misery of capitalism becomes ever more urgent for the Irish working class, the Irish Labour Party steps forward with State Capitalism as the solution. True, Mr. William O'Brien, in his presidential address, was daring enough to mention "the world collapse of capitalism." But he followed up this with mild criticism of the Government's tariff policy as not going far

enough (how far it has gone the child and girl victims of the puny new sweatshops could testify !), and advised Fianna Fail that its " industrial construction " must take the form of " what we in the Labour Party call national corporations "—in other words, State Capitalism. It must be admitted that Mr. O'Brien declared that these national corporations (the Fascist flavour is to be remarked) should be " charged with the duty of production, not to make profits, but to serve the needs of the people." But Mr. O'Brien " forgot " to tell the conference that the sole purpose of industry under the present system is profit. Above all, like the English Mr. Herbert Morrison when writing recently of the " reformist " economics of the Soviet Union, Mr. O'Brien " forgot " the little matters of political power, the State, and the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, all of which trifles must be attended to before industry can " serve the needs of the people." Mr. O'Brien's " national corporations " were no mere children of his own brain, as was shown by the resolution proposed by the Administrative Council and accepted by the conference without demur :—

That in view of the *failure of private enterprise to develop* the industrial resources of the nation and the *slow industrial progress* recorded under tariffs, this conference demands that the Government shall adopt a vigorous policy of developing the industrial potentialities of the country by the establishment of State-controlled public corporations.

The Labour leaders showed themselves wholeheartedly against the resolution sponsored by the Dublin Central branch, which condemned the Fianna Fail Government for reviving the Cosgrave Coercion Act—ostensibly for use against O'Duffy's fascist Blue Shirts, the bloused levies of imperialists in Ireland.

The real answer to official arguments came in a motion by the Bray branch—a motion calling for mass struggle as the only way to defeat the Fascist menace :—

That this conference of the Irish Labour Party considers the National Guard movement as an anti-working-class force, with aims and intentions similar to Hitler's Nazis and Mussolini's Fascists, under whose rules in Germany and Italy the trade unions, all labour organisations and other working-class organs of struggle against capitalist tyranny have been brutally broken up and outlawed, their leaders imprisoned, tortured and murdered, their funds stolen, property confiscated, and Press suppressed ; that this conference warns the Irish workers and Labour Party supporters of the dangers of the introduction of similar forms of Fascism into Ireland ; that this conference calls for a resolute struggle against all attempts at establishing a Fascist dictatorship in any guise in Ireland, and instructs the Administrative Council to take every possible step in conjunction with all forces opposing that reactionary dictatorship to combat this great danger to the labour movement.

The motion was carried, and officialdom has gone back to its offices to utter no word either in exposure of the Fascist menace or about the

The Irish Labour Party and Fascism 51

unity of all Labour forces called for to meet the menace. Their lead to the Irish masses differs in words only from the lead of the German Social Democrats in a similar situation: "Leave it to the Government," "trust De Valera," "no disorder, the forces of the State are competent to deal with the Blue Shirts." And in fact it would be absurd to expect any struggle against Fascism from the Labour Party leaders. Did not Mr. W. Davin, a leading Labour deputy, plead in the Dail for General O'Duffy's pension to be given "with a good grace," and speak at the same time of the police chief's dismissal as "victimisation"? Senator Johnson aforementioned went further. In the Senate debate on the Free State Government's ban on the Blue Shirts, the Labour leader in the Senate deprecated mildly the "militarism" of the Blue Shirts, which, he said, "is undoubtedly going to lead to revolt not merely by the I.R.A., but by every other democratic organisation that feels its principles are being destroyed." He went on virtually to endorse the so-called "vocational representation" groups, borrowed by O'Duffy from Mussolini and the Fascist economics of national socialism. Johnson said:

On the other hand, there is so much good in the economic proposals of the National Guard that the Government should have encouraged a discussion of the ideas that were being broached by that organisation. I believe that because they were fathered by a sinister movement, what is good in them will be destroyed and the advantages will be ultimately lost.

If words mean anything, the Labour senator stands for the Fascist social policy, but regrets that such a blatantly imperialist pack of blackguards as the Blue Shirts should be the group to introduce it to Ireland and thereby discredit it. To expect such as Johnson to carry out the resolution of the Labour conference would be "baying the moon." But the workers in Labour Party branches undoubtedly have a fierce hatred of Fascism and a desire to fight it. Trade Unionists also want to struggle, although they have received no lead of any kind from the Irish T.U.C. The recent happenings in Kerry demonstrate not alone the readiness of the rank-and-file of the labour movement to struggle against Fascism, but the movement of the advanced sections to thrust aside the barriers against action created by the Fianna Fail Government and the Labour bureaucracy.

Kerry is the most devoted republican county in Ireland; it was unbreakable in 1922-23, when the British armed troops of the newly-established Free State were hunting down the remnants of the I.R.A. resistance to the Treaty. No county suffered so severely from the barbarities of the forces that were "establishing law and order in the country." At Ballyseedy and Killarney, in March, 1923, the Free State soldiers took seventeen Kerry men and murdered them by binding them

with electric wires to fallen trees and blowing them to pieces by the explosion of land-mines. Nearly fifty others were "executed" in jail or shot down in the fields and on the roadsides. Kerry has never forgotten, and the cry of "Remember Ballyseedy!" has driven out every attempt of the Treatyites to gain a footing there. When in October last, therefore, O'Duffy and his Blueshirts attempted to stage a demonstration in Tralee, the whole town rose in horror against these fascist agents of England who, in many cases, bore individual responsibility for the Civil War atrocities. Fianna Fail's police could not hold back the people, and the Blueshirts were driven indoors, to be rescued only by tin-hatted troops and armoured cars. In the sequel, fourteen Tralee republicans were charged before the Military Tribunal (functioning once more under the revived Coercion Act), and twelve were sentenced to terms of four to six months for "riot and unlawful assembly." A demand for the immediate release of the prisoners arose at once from the local republican and working-class bodies, and when the government upheld the Tribunal decision, a conference in Tralee decided to call a general strike in the town on December 15. The conference was entirely unofficial; no Trade Union executive endorsed it, and rank-and-file members of Fianna Fail clubs attended in defiance of the county executive of the Party. And only the manœuvres of the local leadership of Fianna Fail, the inspired whispers that the prisoners would be freed for Christmas and the sabotage of the reactionaries in some of the trade union branches prevented the strike from taking place. As it was, the call for the mass political strike, and the mobilisation achieved, mark a tremendous step forward for the mass anti-imperialist movement and bring right to the foreground the forces that alone can carry the national struggle to victory.

Kerry workers and republicans have given a lead to the whole country. They have shown that the united anti-imperialist movement can be forged in action. It is along these lines that the republican forces, the rank-and-file of the Labour Party and Trade Unions, and the Communist Party of Ireland can be brought together in spite of the attempt of the Fianna Fail government and Labour bureaucracy to handcuff the movement. It is along these lines that a nation-wide anti-fascist movement can be built to take up the mass organised struggle that alone can defeat O'Duffy and all other fascist-imperialist groupings in Ireland.