

her for six weeks on the grounds that 'she left her employment without just cause', and also for six weeks on the grounds that she refused to apply for a suitable situation.

(From *The Unemployment Bill and Women in Industry*, The National United Front Committee, 1934)

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## CHANCES LOST AND WON

Bill Baker

**T**HE defeat of fascism in 1945 by the powers of the anti-Hitler coalition marked a turning point in the history of the world that was second in importance only to 1917. If 1917 heralded the beginning of the world-wide transformation from the epoch of capitalism to that of socialism, 1945 marked a new stage in that revolutionary process. Although it had suffered terrible losses the Soviet Union, due to its decisive role in the defeat of Nazism, emerged from the war with its international position greatly strengthened. Its prestige and authority had risen to such an extent that, from now on, no important matter in world affairs could be solved without its participation.

All over the world popular, democratic movements and working class movements emerged from the fight against fascism much strengthened and determined to carry through fundamental changes so that fascism would never again be able to threaten the world. In many countries the communist parties, who everywhere had taken a leading part in the anti-Nazi fight, had posts in the first post-war governments.

### Britain 1945

Britain was no exception to the general tendency. The election of the Labour government in July 1945, with a huge parliamentary majority, was the direct political expression of it. The British people rejected Winston Churchill and the Tories in 1945 because they rejected the old world of the pre-war days with its mass unemployment, its inequalities and its ruling class politicians who, in their anti-Soviet and anti-communist blindness, had played such a large part in bringing the war about. They voted Labour because Labour seemed to provide an alternative and the Labour Party had, as the Labour programme put it, 'a common bond with the working people of all countries who have achieved new influence through the struggle against the Nazi tyranny.' The people believed that a Labour government would preserve the alliance with the Soviet Union, which was

so necessary for world peace, and ensure that there would be great changes in favour of the working people in British society. Many believed that in voting Labour they were voting for socialism.

A glance at the press in 1945 bears witness to the radicalisation of opinion. When the Soviet football team, 'Dynamo', toured Britain in November 1945, the *Daily Mirror*'s columns were full of reports of grounds packed out and scenes of great enthusiasm. When they played Chelsea, 'a hundred thousand people fought for a view of the game,' and 'those who failed to get in broke down the doors of nearby houses and ran upstairs in the hope of seeing the game from the roof' (result 3:3). And even when the match with Arsenal was rendered impossible by a thick London pea-souper, 54,000 turned up to a match they could not see. The *Daily Mirror* had caught the mood in May 1945 with an expressive headline: 'Anti-Soviet Whispers in US Must Stop—Big Business Far Too Hostile.' The appreciation of the necessity for co-operation with the Soviet Union in the post-war world found expression far beyond working class circles. The respectable *Times*, for instance, in 1945 was also calling for 'reaffirming the solid foundations of future security in Europe in the lasting unity of the principal three powers.' As for the readiness for change among the people at large, the experience related by a Labour Party member still serving in the army education corps at the time, and who thus had wide opportunity for contact with the men, is typical. When he asked servicemen if they were going to support Labour and Attlee, the reply, more often than not, was that Labour wasn't left enough for them—they'd rather give their vote to old Joe Stalin and communism.

Such was the wave of radicalism on which the Labour government of Clement Attlee rode to power. This Labour government had a very real and historic chance to begin the transformation of British society in the direction of socialism. Within three years, i.e. by 1948, that same government had gone back on its own programme and the wishes of its electorate so thoroughly that to be suspected of pro-communism provided enough ground for expulsion from the Labour Party. Behind the people's backs even the most elementary interests of the British people for security were sold out in the interests of anti-Sovietism, as the Labour government eagerly offered Britain as an aircraft carrier for the US atom-bombers, thus making Britain number one target in the event of any conflict. In three years a Labour government, elected on a platform of change, with 'a common bond with the working people of all countries', had tied itself economically and politically to the cold war warriors of the US

trusts and monopolies so effectively that Britain's foreign policy from that day on has always been an echo of that of Washington. True the government of 1945-51 introduced some spectacular reforms that have had a decisive influence on the social life of the people: the introduction of the health service, the education reform and a series of nationalisation measures. But, whatever the impression at the time, from the vantage point of 30 years on, it can be seen that in no way did any of these measures threaten the fabric of British capitalism. And, of course, because you cannot have a reactionary foreign policy and, at the same time, a progressive home policy, the reforming zeal of the government after three years was much diminished and, in the face of American financial control and the demands of a soaring defence budget in the latter years of the Labour administration, even that which had been achieved became threatened through lack of funds.

The results of betrayal by the right-wing Labour government can be summarised as follows: (1) The cold war (a too comforting expression which means, of course, almost hot real war). Without British help the US would have been hard put to it to launch, alone, its world-wide campaign to contain and roll back communism. (2) A continual deepening of the crisis of Britain's economy due to the deployment of resources for military uses, with naturally corresponding social effects on the standard of living, social services, etc. (3) In the political field the failure of Labour at the polls in 1951, and 13 years of Tory government. (4) No progress towards socialism: instead a continual worsening of Britain's economic position so that the world power of 1945 has become the 'sick man of Europe' of 1975, more famous for its high rate of inflation than for anything else.

Such were the truly momentous consequences of betrayal by the right-wing leadership of Clement Attlee. The rejection of the historic chance of 1945 for a decisive break with the past and a move towards socialism was in some ways even more damaging to the labour movement, and to the world at large, than the betrayal by the right wing in 1931. But it was part of the same pattern. The same pattern as is today being displayed by the present right-wing leadership under Wilson in regard to the Common Market.

### **Germany 1945**

Hitler's thousand year Reich had been smashed by the powers of the anti-Hitler coalition—Britain, the US and the USSR. The red flag of the Soviet Union waved over the Reichstag building amidst the

rudder of the German capital. Nazism was militarily defeated but its consequences were not so easily overcome: the towns lay in ruins and, worst of all, the people were also in ruins ideologically, deeply affected by the poison of twelve years of Nazism.

But there were healthy forces in Germany, forces who had never accepted Hitler, which had struggled against Nazism. Chief amongst these was the Communist Party of Germany (the KPD) which had never ceased to exist despite all the Gestapo's efforts. In Germany itself communists formed the nucleus of resistance organisations in which social-democrats, Christians and other anti-fascists were involved. Of course, many opponents of Hitler had spent the Nazi years in prison or in concentration camps. How many good and able communists, social-democrats and plain anti-fascists never survived the Nazi terror! But those that did provided the hope for the future of Germany.

The Soviet military administration in Germany recognised this and, only a month after the capitulation, allowed anti-fascist parties to begin activity in the Soviet zone. Immediately the KPD issued its manifesto, which called for an anti-fascist democracy in which fascism would not only be politically banned but would be destroyed from the roots up, through the destruction of the power of the monopolists and Prussian militarist landowners who bore the historic responsibility for easing Hitler and his gangster band into power. Above all, the KPD called for the establishment of the political unity of the working class movement, the division of which in 1933 had been the decisive factor in the failure to prevent the fascists coming to power. Only a firmly united working class movement could guarantee that fascism would never again achieve influence.

The Social-Democratic Party (the SPD) had more or less organisationally ceased to exist inside Germany during the Nazi period. Now the Party was reborn in the form of a central committee that constituted itself in Berlin, composed of leading social-democrats. They issued their own manifesto, some days after the KPD, which contained many similar and parallel proposals. Not a week later the two party leaderships came together and agreed on a common 'action programme' in which they bound themselves to work together to get rid of the remnants of fascism and to achieve an anti-fascist democracy. At the same time they agreed to discuss all ideological questions together. This will to unity was a natural outcome of the experiences of fascism under which social-democrats and communists had suffered and died together. As a Thuringian social-

democrat said to a visiting British journalist later in 1947: 'The Nazis took me to Berlin handcuffed to Theodore Neubauer, one of our communist comrades, who was afterwards murdered. I said to myself then: "Why did it need the Nazis to bring us together?"'

The majority of social-democrats in Germany recognised this policy as the only possible one. In the western zones of Germany, too, socialists and communists began to come together. However, there were still right wingers in German social-democracy who had learnt nothing from the past. These elements were led by Kurt Schumacher who spread his influence in the western zones under the benevolent eye of the British occupation authorities. To sabotage the policy of unity he tried to appear the more genuine revolutionary, talking of German capitalism being dead and the immediate task being the construction of socialism.

The Berlin leadership of the SPD, under Otto Grotewohl and the KPD, united on their action programme, got on with the concrete tasks of 1945, discovering and turning out all the active Nazis from their positions, organising local administrations that could start bringing order in the chaos, help ensure food supplies and begin organising the population to clear the rubble away and, at least to some extent, get things going again. Then they carried through a land reform that gave the land to the peasants and to the refugees from the east, so ensuring food production and, at the same time, dispossessing the reactionary (and in the main Nazi) big landowners. The industries owned by war criminals and active Nazis were expropriated. In their enormous task the 'activists of the first hour', as they have gone down in history, with communists and socialists at their head, were helped, aided and advised by the Soviet military administration. In every way possible the Soviet officers helped the reborn working class movement and at the same time prevented reactionary forces from organising in their zone.

In the western zones the occupation powers, despite their signature of the Potsdam agreement in which the de-Nazification, demilitarisation and democratisation of Germany were foreseen, pursued exactly the opposite policy. A TUC delegation to the British zone of Germany in December 1945 reported 'alarm and indignation' caused by the continued employment of known Nazis in the zone. A progressive British officer (an increasing rarity) reported: 'Men who suffered in Dachau or Buchenwald, heroes of the underground movement, are treated as children or just as a bloody nuisance. There are hundreds of Nazi Party members in the administration of

every large town in the British zone.’\* In these conditions it is rather horrifying but not surprising that the right wingers around Schumacher managed to smash the attempts at working class unity in the western zones and carried out a virulent campaign of anti-communism and anti-Sovietism which deepened and confirmed the split in the West German labour movement. They handed over power to the reactionary forces who held it until their monopoly was broken (or should it be ‘dented’?) by the Brandt government of 1967.

In the Soviet zone the daily co-operation of socialists and communists in the tasks of reconstruction, the formation of a strong, unified trade union movement through which the working class could make its voice heard: all this, plus the danger of the revival of reaction due to the policy of the Western powers, led to an increasing demand for the political unity of the working class. The process of overcoming past traditions, of gaining confidence in one another, in admitting mistakes in the past, was not easy from either side. However, the SPD and KPD managed it because the practical experiences of reconstruction pushed them into it and because they remembered the oaths they had sworn in Hitler’s prisons and camps: ‘Never again a divided working class movement!’

In April 1946 the KPD and the SPD of the Soviet zone (the SPD in the west zones, under right-wing influence, refused to recognise the Berlin leadership) held a Unity Congress where the two parties united to form the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). The Party combined 680,000 former SPD members and 620,000 former KPD members, and was thus numerically the strongest party in Germany as a whole. Incidentally, the unification was greeted by a telegram from a group of Labour MPs and trade union leaders who, remaining true to the principles on which Labour was elected in 1945, stated: ‘We believe that the socialist reconstruction of Europe can only be carried out in close co-operation and unity between communists and socialists. . . .’†

The most important consequences of the policy of working class political unity, pursued in the Soviet zone, may be expressed as follows: (1) The complete eradication of fascism and its root causes in the imperialist system (arms monopolies, etc) on the territory of the then Soviet occupation zone, now the GDR. (2) The establishment of the GDR, the simple existence of which helped to secure

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\* *Reynolds News*, December 30, 1945.

† Among the signatories were: K. Zilliacus MP, H. L. Hutchinson MP, D. N. Pritt KC MP, J. Platts-Mills KC MP, J. Silverman MP and H. Davies MP.

peace in Europe by obstructing the revenge-seeking plans of West German governments. (3) The building up in the GDR, from the ruins of war, of a socialist society in which the working class has power and in which it is immune from the problems of capitalism in crisis which stop short of the Western state borders.

Such were the momentous consequences of the vision and determination of the socialist and communist leaderships when they chose the path of working class political unity in 1945-46. The lesson deserves to be learnt.

## PROGRESSIVE ASSEMBLY

*(An assembly of representatives of progressive movements met at Liège in Belgium on April 26-29, 1975, to make constructive proposals to the heads of state who will be meeting in Helsinki to consider recommendations made by East-West representatives at Geneva for European security and co-operation. We print here the report, slightly abridged, of the Commission over which Fenner Brockway, with Soviet and French co-chairmen, presided at Liège. There were 120 delegates who attended the sessions of the Commission, and 57 participated in the discussion—Ed. LM)*

**T**HE Third Commission was allotted the comprehensive duty of considering the following subjects:

1. Economic co-operation
2. The energy problem
3. Social progress across frontiers
4. The strengthening of democracy
5. Cultural co-operation
6. A better understanding between nations
7. The improvement of contacts between peoples.

### **Economic Co-operation and the Problem of Energy**

The participants welcome the decisions on economic co-operation by the Commission (Basket Three\*) set up at Geneva by the first Helsinki Conference. They include co-operation between West and East Europe on projects relating to raw materials, energy (including atomic energy), electrical power, transport by road and river,

\* On French initiative the groups appointed to consider different subjects were named 'baskets' to overcome a constitutional technical objection to the term 'commissions'.