

3. British Labor After the Elections

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THE NEW AND OUTSTANDING FEATURE of current British politics, which largely explains Labor's recent defeat at the general election, is the volatility of the electorate. There was not only the enormous swing against Labor up to three months ago, there was also the rapidity of the swing back in its favor. Within the final week of the election I believe there were rapid changes of view.

Why was this? Because of the apparent narrowness of distinction between the two major parties. There was little difference between the manifestoes, from which clear commitments had mostly been removed. The potential Labor voter lacked a great cause to strive for; he could not feel he was supporting the cause of those who work for their living by hand or brain; he saw little reason for loyalty; there was no ideological conflict. Therefore one month's deviation from the recently successful balance of trade figures or a relatively minor cost of living change could affect his voting.

However, the situation for the Conservatives is going to be immensely difficult. For they are deeply divided. There are extreme reactionaries in the local parties who are longing to "bash" the colored, Irish and other immigrants, the trade unionists, the council house tenants and those dependent on social security. Some of the newly elected Members of Parliament are of this brand of Conservatism. Of one new M.P. it has been said: "If he were any further to the Right he would be in the North Sea."

On the other hand there are other Conservative M.P.s who see that, if they are to hold their grip on the center of the electorate, they must act more moderately. The conflict between Enoch Powell and the new Prime Minister, Edward Heath, is not just a conflict of personalities; it symbolizes the underlying struggle for power.

ON ONE ISSUE THE CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT is in particularly serious difficulty and that is the Common Market. For it is on this issue above all that the Conservative M.P.s are divided. There is a three to one opposition to it among the British people. Rather than be defeated on this issue I think the Government may be prepared to relinquish entry.

In the Labor Party there are many who are against Britain entering the European Community under any conditions. While it may be difficult for the Labor leaders to reverse their attitude overnight, they can, with principle, stand firm on the conditions laid down in the resolution carried overwhelmingly at last year's delegate conference. These conditions are almost certain *not* to be granted by the Six.

The opposition of most Labor men to entry is based on a number of facts: (1) it would raise the cost of food in Britain by nearly 25 per cent; (2) it would add a colossal sum to the deficit on our balance of payments (and we have gone through too much trouble in the last few years putting that right without enduring it all again); (3) it would mean breaking agreements with Commonwealth countries; and (4) we fear that far from uniting Europe it would further divide it by hardening the division between East and West, by providing an economic base for a military pact (NATO) and by permitting the spread of nuclear weapons to West Germany and/or France.

So this is clearly going to be the burning question in the months ahead.

There will be no shortage of issues—for the Conservative Government will create them. Already we have had some indication of what they will do. Talks with Vorster's government about the supply of British arms to South Africa. The recognition of the Rhodesian Whites led by Ian Smith. The retention of British military bases in the Persian Gulf and Malaysia.

As regards Vietnam, the British Labor Party is officially committed to asking the British Government to disassociate from the American war policy there. The Labor Government did not carry out Conference policy, but the Conservatives are positively enthusiastic about the American war. Some M.P.s would even like to send British lads to fight and die there. However, opposition of the public would be so great I do not believe they would dare attempt it.

The new Foreign Secretary is Sir Alec Douglas-Home. His anti-communism is so deep that I cannot see him supporting any serious proposals for an East-West security conference.

As for Labor, I foresee that there will be, as there was after the electoral defeat of 1951, a swing to the Left. The Left Labor M.P.s will probably make the most effective and uninhibited attacks on Conservative policy. After all, they cannot be silenced by any argument that it is only after a Conservative Government has been elected that they are voicing such views.

My own Constituency Labor Party in East Salford (adjoining Manchester) has just decided to table the following resolution for the annual delegate conference of the British Labour Party this autumn:—

That this Conference believes that if the Labor Government had carried out Party conference decisions the electorate would have seen more clearly the difference between the Parties; and asks that, in future, the Parliamentary Labor leaders should respect Party conference decisions.

My Party has also decided to put down an amendment to a relevant resolution, which reads:—

That Conference demands the ending of our military bases East of Suez, a reduction in the size of the British Army of the Rhine and a drastic

cut in arms spending, with the transfer of expenditure to housing, health, education, pensions and overseas aid.

I mention these two resolutions since they indicate, I believe, the mood of the rank and file Labor Party members.

LABOR HAS SUFFERED A DEFEAT—but not a rout. Despite this setback, I am optimistic about the future of the Labor Party. Mainly for one reason—in Britain the Labor Party is based on the trade unions, which provide it with the overwhelming bulk of its members, money and policy.

Because the trade unions are bound to keep roughly in harmony with the bread and butter demands of their members (otherwise the leaders are voted out and replaced by new officials) this, in turn, tends to keep the feet of the Labor Party roughly on the right path, i.e., on the side of the workers. It cannot depart too far or for too long from this path.

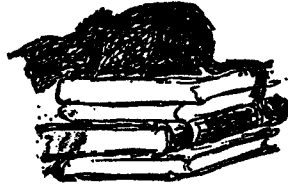
By great good fortunes—perhaps better than we deserve—there have arisen in the last two years at the head of the biggest trade unions in the country men who are not only militant leaders on the industrial front but also good socialists and determined defenders of peace.

I refer in particular to Jack Jones, General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union (the biggest union), Hugh Scanlon, President of the Engineers (the second biggest union) and Lawrence Daly, leader of the Miners.

Their influence, coupled with the hard lessons inflicted by the new reactionary Government, will, I am confident, take Labor in a progressive direction. It will make clear to everyone the distinction between one Party, representing those who work for their living and the other Party, representing those who live on their backs.

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Book



Reviews

WE SHALL BE ALL: A HISTORY OF THE I.W.W., by Melvin Dubofsky. Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1969, 557 pp., \$12.50.

THE FOUNDING CONVENTION OF THE I.W.W. (Proceedings). Merit Publishers, New York, 1969, 616 pp., \$15.00. (Orig. publ. by the New York Labor News Co. New York, 1905; new edition photo-offset.)

Reviewed by Burton Hall

IN FEBRUARY 1917, James Slovick, the Secretary of the IWW's Marine Transport Workers Industrial Union, wrote to W. D. Haywood, the parent body's Secretary-Treasurer, asking for a special convention to consider a nationwide general strike in the event that Congress should declare war. His letter conceded that the odds were against the success of an anti-war general strike. The IWW, after all, was still too weak; the American working class was too patriotic; the capitalist class was too strong. But as a practical matter, he argued, the IWW had no choice. If war were declared and military conscription were introduced—as it would be if the war were to continue for any length of time—then the IWW would have to resist. And in consequence, Slovick said, “our organization will stand in danger of being completely destroyed.” Better to take the initiative and confront militarism head-on than sit quietly and be destroyed by it; by openly resisting, the IWW could make its principles clear and at least demonstrate to posterity that it was the only labor organization in the world willing to take a stand against bloodshed.

Slovick's arguments were undeniably realistic; indeed, his prophecies came true within a few months. What is more, his arguments accorded with everything that the IWW had been saying for the past twelve years, and especially with the IWW's 1916 Convention resolution promising anti-militarism in time of peace and, in time of war, general strike in all industries. Yet the IWW did not respond affirmatively to Slovick's appeal. Haywood simply rejected Slovick's request for a convention and filed his letter away, where the U.S. Justice Department found it a few months later. The IWW faced the war crisis passively—and, although the organization was not “entirely destroyed” in consequence (as Slovick had suggested it might be), it was permanently eliminated as a serious revolutionary force.

An ideal history would provide some clear explanation of why the IWW failed to meet its crisis of 1917 as militantly (and successfully) as it had met its earlier crises. Did the leadership, newly “centralized” by the 1916 Convention, suffer a failure of nerve? Had the wobblies become soft on the bosses' government (on the “slugging committee of the capitalist class”)? Was it a failure of individual leaders or of the organization as a whole?

Prof. Dubofsky's new history is less than ideal: it offers no simple or