

# Trade Unions on the Offensive

( From Our London Correspondent )

THE British trade union movement, by virtue of its size and influence, possesses a far greater power to determine economic and political trends and policies than possibly any similar movement elsewhere in the Western world. Indeed, no British government can be so independent as to ignore the views of the Trades Union Congress and where it risks a policy formulated without regard to the views of the TUC there exists every chance that the policy will founder on the rocks of trade union opposition.

So long as the TUC is governed by a moderate leadership the Government can expect cooperation and industrial peace. In the past two years there have been some quiet changes in the composition of British trade union leadership. As long as there was an Ernest Bevin or an Arthur Deakin to lead the 1,800,000 strong Transport and General Workers' Union and hence the Trades Union Congress, no British government needed to have the anxieties that currently pervade the Tories. For now the silent revolution in the leadership of the British trade unions has decidedly forced the TUC to shed its moderate features and take decisions of a far-reaching political character which not only undermine the Government's economic policy but sharply conflict with the moderate objectives of the Labour Party on such crucial questions as Nationalisation and economic controls and planning.

## New Leadership

The trade union's meeting in Blackpool last week have by their decisions and by their relegation of the moderate elements into relatively back-seat positions, created a new situation for Britain. The TUC annual conference was dominated by Mr Frank Cousins, the new leader of the Transport and General Workers' Union. He combines a simplicity of approach to all trade union questions with a remarkable socialist fervour. It has been this combination which forced the Times to consider him to be the principal menace, the symbol of the "purely

destructive attitude into which the movement has been led." The remarkable power of Mr Cousins is reflected by the proceedings at the TUC conference. All the main decisions, including those on wages policy, on nationalisation, on social insurance and on disarmament, were taken unanimously. For the first time there was no resort to the card vote. It was certainly the smoothest TUC conference in a whole decade.

## Against Wage Restraint

The simplicity of Mr Cousins's approach is seen at its best in his exposition of TUC policy on wages pricey and inflation. The approach led to the rejection of the Government's plea for wage restraint. Mr Cousins declared that no trade union movement can be told how the "national cake" the national product is to be divided unless it was told also "how to control those who controlled the size of the cake."

When the Government dismantled controls of every form in the economy it was inaugurating a "free for-all" mentality and this had enabled the possessors of capital to invest in projects of limited social profitability like cinemas and garages when in fact the nation's needs dictated otherwise. A government which was bent on controlling the price of labour but nothing else was a government of an anti-working class character. And so the TUC took up one of the strongest stands against any post-war British Government.

## Nationalisation

The fact that the trade unions are now one step ahead of the Labour Party was sharply reflected by the resolution on nationalisation. The Labour Party policy statement Social Ownership reviewed in the columns of this journal recently conceived of the state as owning some shares in private companies as a more satisfactory alternative to outright nationalisation. The TUC, dictated by considerations of a general election in two years' time, did not wish to expose its difference with the Labour Party leadership. It did, however, give its

acceptance of the Labour policy a very conditional character. In its resolution, the TUC conference accepted the statement on Social Ownership as only "an adjunct to a nationalisation programme and not a substitute for such a programme." The powerful National Union of Railwaymen, in its statement to the conference, poured scorn on the Labour statement:

"...the politicians have decided that the workers could be emancipated through the board rooms, the managing directors and the benevolence of the shareholders."

And so there appears in the trade union movement a new attitude of meeting fundamental problems fundamentally and not, as the Labour Party Executive has been prone to in recent years, by "finding or inventing solutions which invariably carry a superficial and an opportunistic flavour."

## Free Trade Area

The trade union tendency towards clear thinking was, however, not always as all-embracing in the TUC conference discussion. This was particularly shown in the discussion on the Free Trade Area. Few appear to understand the distinctions between this project and the Common Market. "The merits and gains from a re-distribution of occupational activity between member countries of the projected Free Trade Area was completely lost in a general fear that the British workers were likely to suffer unemployment and a lowering of living standards."

This year's TUC conference presents for the Government the most difficult problems of economic policy. The question of inflation can now be tackled only, if industrial peace is to be assured, by a widespread abandonment of the Conservative philosophy of no economic controls. For failing that the only alternative is that of a conscious deflation leading, as it must, to mass unemployment and industrial war. Indeed, for the Government, this represents a dilemma of almost insoluble proportions.

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