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# "Approaching a Decisive Turning Point in Gt. Britain"

**Statement  
of the United Secretariat  
of the Fourth International**

**Sixpence**

# Approaching a decisive turning point in Great Britain

## Declaration of the United Secretariat of the Fourth International.

The situation in Great Britain is now approaching a decisive turning point. It is not the crisis of British capitalism, frankly admitted by all political forces in the country, that is new but the role played by the leadership of the Labour Party. This new role differs from the previous role of social democracy in which it defended capitalism by granting small reforms to the working class. Today the Labour Party leadership, while continuing to pose as the representative of the British working class, systematically endeavours to apply a plan of modernization and consolidation of British capitalism at the cost of the working class itself. This is the basis of the growing conflict between the mass of workers—above all those in the trade unions—and Harold Wilson's Labour government. The reflections of that conflict inside the British Labour Party and the working class could decide the possibilities of a breakthrough towards socialism in Great Britain for a long period to come.

The roots of the chronic crisis of Britain's capitalist economy are well known and need only brief mention. Britain's capitalist class is paying the price today of having been the pioneer beneficiaries of the first industrial revolution. Its present distress stems from this historic distinction. Even before the first world war it was clear that it had lost its great advantage as world leader in industrial productivity. That it could still retain for a period of thirty years the features of a major imperialist power was due to its enormous foreign capital investments, accumulated in the course of a century and more. This enabled and ensured substantial profits permitting it to live with a chronically negative trade balance without a real threat to the stability of the pound.

The second world war seriously depleted these foreign holdings in an absolute sense but even more so in a relative sense. Britain's "invisible"

exports proved less and less able in themselves to maintain a positive balance of payments. The relative backwardness of British industry and industrial productivity developed with increasing speed particularly during the decades of the fifties and sixties in comparison with its principal competitors in Europe (West Germany) and Asia (Japan). The latter's rate of growth and modernization outstripped Britain's particularly since they carried no great military and naval burden. This in turn brought the chronic balance of payments crisis and the periodic attempt to stop this crisis through government engineered recessions which could only accentuate the gap between the rate of growth of both productivity and production between Britain and its main competitors.

### EMPLOYERS' STRATEGY

For many years now the leading spokesmen and ideologues of British capitalism have advocated a clear programme for rationalizing and streamlining the capitalist economy. Implicit in this programme is a callous stop to nominal wage increases in order to raise the rate of profit and capital accumulation. Also, a vast displacement of labour from the so-called backward and stagnating industrial branches toward the expanding ones, particularly those tied to exports. By ending the condition of full employment which the British working class has known for nearly 25 years (except during the Tory engineered recession of 1963-64) they could indeed go a long way toward "rationalizing" capitalist industries. The aim was the crushing of working class resistance to capitalist super-exploitation by the creation of an industrial reserve army, that would bear down upon wage increases and even present wage standards, and thus overcome the main obstacle which arises from the workers' stubborn defence of their living standards and social services, which they have won through long and successful struggle. This employers' strategy is also designed to prepare Britain's entry into the Common Market on the most advantageous basis.

A direct attack by the capitalist class through a Tory government would have provoked a generalized resistance of the working class which could have very well led towards a victorious general strike and a consequent social and political crisis for British capitalism. In the face of this the Tory party was restrained by various sectors of British capital from undertaking such an offensive. With refined political instinct they favoured a Labour government's undertaking of this dirty job, particularly since it would at first enjoy the good will and loyalty of the overwhelming majority of the working class. They calculated correctly that a Labour government could apply the employers' programme more directly than any Tory government since 1951 and that this would

create divisions, confusion, and demoralization inside the working class sufficiently to reduce to a minimum the "social overhead costs" of the streamlining operation. The past year's experience shows that they did not miscalculate.

### WILSON'S ROLE

Through a skilful use of the traditional machine of Transport House and a no less skilful appeal to the basic loyalty of the British working class to the Labour Party, Wilson has been able to carry through step by step support to U.S. imperialism's dirty war in Vietnam, with a *de facto* recognition of the white settlers' *apartheid* regime in Rhodesia; a tacit abandonment of any extension of the social services including the promised return to a completely free health service; all this combined with the hypocrisy of an "incomes policy"—a thinly disguised form of wage freeze. When all these measures proved insufficient to rehabilitate Britain's sick capitalist economy he has—with the enthusiastic approval of the British bourgeoisie and the international bankers—gone to the point of stopping free wage bargaining between unions and employers; suspending already signed contracts that called for wage increases, imposing a total wage freeze and threatening punitive measures for trade unionists who resist these measures with industrial action. As the cost of living continues to rise partially also as a result of some of the measures taken by the Wilson government and as the latter specifically permits the increased indirect taxes to be passed on to the consumers, this policy means in fact a *downward slide of real wages*. The stringent credit restrictions linked with this decline of real wages can only lead to a real recession, i.e. mass unemployment which is already visible in the present wide layoffs.

Not much time need be spent on the cynicism of these gentlemen who were returned to power by promising the working class to eliminate the threat of periodic unemployment inherent in the Tories' "stop-go" policy and who now revive this very same policy on a still greater scale. Nor should anyone who has studied the lessons of history be astonished that these "labour lieutenants of capital" who draw their strength by claiming to represent the interests of the working class cynically betray these interests for the sole benefit of "rationalizing" Britain's capitalist economy. This is the same role played by the Social Democratic leadership of Western Europe, who, having integrated themselves totally into the bourgeois state, find themselves obliged to save that state and bourgeois society whenever the social contradictions impose decisions which the working class would never accept if they came from the direct representatives of the capitalist class.

## DANGER OF MILITANT ISOLATED OPPOSITION

This treacherous behaviour of the Labour leaders has aroused widespread opposition and indignation among militant workers. But it has already created widespread confusion and disillusionment among the great mass of Labour supporters. For them it still remains unthinkable that their political party, which they built through generations of struggle and innumerable sacrifices, so as to defend their interests against capitalism, should now turn, at least in its top layers, into an instrument for the defence of capital against labour. There is a very real danger that while opposition to Wilson will slowly and constantly grow inside the Labour Party and inside the TUC, and while these large bodies will slowly swing to the left, actual militant reactions to Wilson's anti-working class policies will remain episodic, fragmented and largely isolated from the great mass of the workers. While able to achieve some partial results as the Seamen's strike did, they would be unable to prevent the main goals of the employers' policy—a cut in real wages for the mass of workers and the reappearance of a permanent body of unemployed—from being achieved.

The most advanced militants of the British working class must be very conscious of this danger. It is true that the British workers today have a tremendous confidence in their organized strength. It is also true that they have never experienced an important defeat in open battle for an entire generation. They have experienced 25 years of uninterrupted full employment. All this explains the anger and violence of the workers' reactions to Wilson's betrayal. It explains why a new mass left wing will certainly arise in the Labour Party. This time, in contrast to the experience of Bevanism in the 1950s, it is based mainly on the unionized industrial workers. All these considerations are fundamental in assessing the increasing difficulties with which Wilson's government will be faced, and in expressing confidence that the British working class will not permit its standard of living to be cut down without putting up a vigorous struggle against the employers' offensive.

## ONLY A GENERALIZED STRUGGLE CAN WIN

But for all of this it nevertheless remains true that the offensive has overall goals, in every sector of the economy, which cannot be prevented by fragmented reactions of isolated sectors of the working class. Only a generalized struggle by all the main sections of that class, for general objectives and with an alternative solution and alternative leadership clearly appearing before the mass of the working class, could really and decisively defeat the employers' plan and Wilson's measures. In the absence of such a generalised struggle the most probable variant is that these plans and measures will succeed

with only partial concessions won from the government by the most militant sections of the working class.

Obviously the need of the hour is the preparation of a general counter-offensive of the working class, to defend its past conquests and present standard of living, and to impose an alternative, truly socialist, solution to the crisis of the British economy and society. To be able to prepare and actually realize such a general action it is necessary to formulate a clear programme of action and to achieve the widest possible unity of action inside the trade unions and the Labour Party for the mobilization of the workers around this programme.

## ABSENCE OF ALTERNATIVE LEADERSHIP

A major void that impedes a wide working class mobilization is the absence of an alternative leadership *recognized by the mass of workers themselves*. As revolutionary Marxists we are fully conscious of the need to build in Britain a revolutionary socialist organization which, embodying all the lessons of past and present experiences of the British and international working class, could become an effective instrument for leading the British workers toward overthrowing capitalism. But we also are fully aware of the fact that the overwhelming majority of the British working class is not yet ready to follow such an organization and that it will not readily abandon its historical allegiance towards the Labour Party.

For that reason to restrict oneself to declamatory calls for the building of a revolutionary party instead of proposing concrete steps for common action to all those unionists and workers, particularly within the Labour Party and in the large factories who are aroused over Wilson's betrayal, means in reality to abandon the perspectives of a real struggle in the immediate future for the pipe dreams of sectarian self-indulgence. In reality, a revolutionary organization with a real mass following will be built precisely through constant and patient efforts by the vanguard to participate in a constructive way in common activity with the broad mass of the class conscious workers.

## REGROUP WORKING-CLASS AND SOCIALIST MILITANTS

Up to now, no real alternative leadership to the Wilson-Brown team has appeared on the scene inside the Labour Party, and no initiative from the outside can substitute for such a leadership. But all advanced working class militants and conscious socialists could and should undertake an immediate effort to regroup all those sections of the working class willing to fight the employers' policy and Wilson's measures around a common programme. Such a unity in *action*

expressed in great mass meetings and demonstrations and widespread industrial action could become in itself a powerful lever for organizing and strengthening the left forces inside the Labour Party and put strong pressure behind those union leaders who are prepared to challenge the employers and Wilson. This alone will pose the immediacy of an alternative socialist programme.

### A PROGRAMME TO MEET THE CRISIS

The United Secretariat of the Fourth International is of the opinion that such a programme constituting an answer not only to the employers' offensive and to the measures of Wilson but also to the overall crisis of British economy and society should be built around the following central lines :

1. Immediate cessation of the wage freeze and restoration of full freedom of negotiation for the trade unions.
2. Immediate repeal of all anti-union legislation and withdrawal of all threats of legal penalties against unionists defending the material interests of union members.
3. Introduction of a universal sliding scale of wages (as, for example, attained in many American industries and in Belgium) automatically insuring commensurate wage increases after each rise in the cost of living and thereby at least safeguarding the purchasing power of wages against the worst erosion resulting from permanent inflation. Immediate introduction of the 40 hour week without reduction of weekly wages, in order to establish full employment.
4. Radical reduction of military expenditures, an end to the "east of Suez" expense and an end to the expense of the nuclear deterrents.
5. Nationalization without compensation of "the big five banks," the big insurance companies, the automobile, aircraft and chemical industries as well as steel, all under workers' control. State control over imports and exports and overseas investments as a transitional stage to the establishment of a state monopoly of foreign trade. Systematic expansion of trade relations with the workers' states and the countries newly established in the wake of the colonial revolution.

6. Immediate elaboration by the trade unions of a general plan of development of the British economy under common ownership and workers' control, geared to a steep rise of social expenses in favour of the most disinherited parts of the British people, to increasing collaboration with the countries having a socialized economy and with the countries going through colonial revolutions. Such a plan should be designed to free the British economy and the hard won social gains from the dictates of the City and of the international bankers, and to modernize the British economy without imposing the burden on the working class.
7. Opening of the books of all employers and suppression of the commercial and banking secrets in order to expose before the whole country the real truth about the relations between the total amount of wages, the total amount of capitalist profit and the rise in productivity. Introduction of control by elected shop stewards over all productive operations in all factories, private as well as public. Control of prices in retail trade by housewives' committees.
8. Immediate return to a completely free health service. Iron-clad clauses to implement laws against racial discrimination, particularly in employment and wage scales. Immediate introduction of a £15 national minimum weekly wage for workers, applicable especially to women. Immediate acceleration of a low cost housing programme with a national target of 750,000 houses a year. Drastic measures to implement comprehensive education.
9. Immediate break with Wilson's shameful support to U.S. imperialism's aggression in Vietnam. Support to the revolutionary freedom fighters of the South Viet Nam National Liberation Front. Withdraw recognition of the rotten Saigon puppet regime; stop material assistance to aggression in Malaysia and Laos. Recognise the Democratic Republic of Vietnam.
10. A call to all trade unions and organizations speaking in the name of the working class in Western Europe, to convene a European Congress of Labour which would work out concrete plans for a Socialist United States of Europe in place of the capitalist Common Market.

Around these and similar proposals, all left groups and tendencies should as quickly as possible achieve a large degree

of consensus enabling them to prepare common action. They should act in common to have systematically elected trade union delegates who pledge themselves to a relentless struggle for the implementation of that programme. They should mobilize themselves to support and extend all industrial actions of the working class in defence of their standard of living and of their elementary rights. They should undertake the utmost efforts to co-ordinate their actions on a regional and national basis in order to prepare the great general wave of the working class counter-offensive which will defeat the employers' policies and crisis.

Down with the capitalist plan of "rationalising" the British economy at the expense of the working class!

Down with Wilson's treacherous anti-working class measures which favour the industrialists!

Forward, to a united front of all left tendencies and groups, for the building up of an alternative leadership in the Labour Party against the Wilson-Brown gang—for a successful working class counter-offensive which will open up the road toward a socialist Great Britain.

December 4, 1966

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