

The Story of the British Labor Party

By Morris Hillquit

Until the end of the last century, the workers of Great Britain had no political organization of their own. They believed that their trade unions were sufficient in their fight for better working conditions. They did not perceive that their every-day lives, at home and in the shops, were powerfully influenced by politics. They failed to realize that liberal labor laws could mean better wages, shorter hours, greater protection of life and health in connection with their daily labor, healthier home surroundings, provision against destitution in old age, or in periods of unemployment, and better facilities for the education of their children. It did not occur to them that laws hostile to labor could put heavy obstacles in the struggles of the workers for human existence; that a hostile government with the aid of the military and police force and, above all, the courts, could destroy the usefulness and efficiency of the very trade unions upon which they relied in their struggles.

They ignored the fact that the vital social policies of the government are fashioned by the men in the legislative, judiciary and executive bodies and are determined by the views, sympathies, interests and class ties of these men; that they could elect these men themselves; and that an independent party of labor could break into the political game, exert a direct influence on the government and eventually run it.

HANDICAPPED BY OLD BELIEFS

They were handicapped by the superstitious belief in the "two-party" system of politics. For generations Tories and Whigs, Conservatives and Liberals, had alternated in the control of the British government. The British workers had always voted for the one or the other, just as the workers of America always voted the Republican or the Democratic tickets. When labor issues became more acute, the workers rallied to candidates professing friendship for them, and these were mostly found in the ranks of the Liberal Party, just as the workers here were in the habit of locating their "friends" in the Democratic Party. Towards the end of the last century, the Liberal Party made it a regular practise to name on its ticket a few men from the ranks of organized labor as candidates for the House of Commons. These were known as Liberal-Labor Representatives. They had no consistent political labor program; they were not accountable to definite labor constituencies; they were controlled by the policies of the Liberal Party, and were on the whole quite ineffective for the cause of labor, just as our own "Union-card" members in Congress and in the various state legislatures of necessity have proved to be.

For many years men like Keir Hardie, the clear-headed and forward-looking Scotch miner, J. Ramsay MacDonald and other Socialists urged upon the British workers to form a new and independent political party of Labor. They were derided as visionaries by the conservative leaders of organized labor, who were honestly convinced that the thing "could not be done."

But finally the ice was broken. A series of intense industrial struggles in which the powers of government were openly and consistently arrayed on the side of the employers and against labor resulted in a heightened political interest in the ranks of the workers. In 1899 the British Trade Union Congress passed a resolution calling for a conference of trade-unions, Socialist parties, co-operative societies and other progressive organizations to devise ways and means for securing a better representation of the interests of labor in the House of Commons.

In the following year the conference was held in London and a permanent "Labor Representative Committee" was formed. It was not until five years later that the organization adopted the name of Labor Party.

PARTY SHOWS STEADY GROWTH

The beginnings of the new party were very modest. The organizations which joined in its founding in 1900 represented a total membership of less than 400,000. In that year the new party polled a total of about 63,000 votes in 15 constituencies and returned two members to the House of Commons. But these meager results did not discourage the pioneers of the movement. They continued the work of political organization and education among the workers with unabated faith and increased zeal year after year, and year by year the new party grew in width, depth and strength.

The membership of the organizations affiliated with the Labor Party was doubled in the first two years of its existence, it passed the million mark in 1907, jumped to 1,500,000 in 1911, grew to 2,000,000 in 1915, and has since increased to more than 3,000,000.

The electoral successes of the party during that time kept pace with the growth of membership as the following table will show:—

General Election of	Labor Vote	Labor Candidates	Members returned
1900	62,698	15	2
1906	323,195	50	29
Jan. 1910	505,690	78	40
Dec. 1910	370,802	56	42
1918	2,244,945	361	57

In 1922 the British Labor Party polled in round number 4,250,000 votes (a full third of the total vote cast) and returned 142 members to the House of Commons. The party had a larger representation in Parlia-

ment than the two wings of the Liberal Party combined and became the official opposition in the House of Commons. In the last general parliamentary elections of Great Britain, held in 1923, both old parties suffered heavy losses while the Labor Party increased its delegation in the House of Commons to 191 members.

FAITH IN LABOR PARTY GROWS

The election was ordered by the Conservative Party in the hope that the people would express their confidence in its policies by an increased vote. The people by their vote showed their distrust of the Conservatives and Liberals alike and their growing faith in the Labor Party. Under the rules and precedents of British Parliamentary procedure, the Conservative Party was forced to surrender the government into the hands of the Labor Party. Labor has assumed the task of ruling England. With very few and minor exceptions, every member of the Cabinet is a trade-union leader or a Socialist. The British Labor Party does not yet represent a clear majority of the voters or representatives in parliament. Its present rule may be terminated by the combined action of the old parties. But at the rate of growth it has shown in the past, the party is bound to have an absolute majority of the votes within a very short time, and then its political rule will be permanent.

The great British Empire governed by labor! Think what that means for labor, and for the forward-looking people of the whole world.

For strange as it may sound, the Labor Party is not a class party. The vast bulk of its members and voters come from the working class, and its activities are frankly directed in support of the producing classes and in determined opposition to the classes thriving on profit and privilege, but its supreme and ever-present aim is to do away with all class privileges and class distinctions, and to run the government for the true and equal benefit of the whole people.

The last electoral platform of the party announced in unmistakable terms that the party is resolved "to change as speedily as possible by constructive measures the social and economic system which confers unfair privileges on the few and undeserved hardships on the many and to bring about a more equitable distribution of the wealth produced by the common efforts of the workers by hand and brain."

The Labor Party of Great Britain is the party of social progress and political idealism. That is why the best elements of the country are rallying to its support. Not only the leaders of labor unions and organizations of farmers, but men and women prominent in all walks of intellectual and artistic pursuit sit in the councils of the party and on its benches in the House of Commons.

PARTY A GREAT EDUCATIONAL FORCE

The Labor Party of Great Britain is vastly more than a mere political party. It is a great educational and progressive force, the greatest in the

country. By its constant contact with the millions of organized workers in the affiliated trade unions; through the educational activities of the affiliated Socialist parties; through 2,500 divisional and local groups and numerous women's organizations it carries on an unceasing campaign of political and social enlightenment. It has enlisted the best minds of the country to study all important social problems affecting the nation and the world, and the results of such studies are communicated to the people through the labor press, numerous leaflets and pamphlets and in public meetings regularly held throughout the country.

British labor is politically emancipated. It has ceased to follow the parties of its masters; it has ceased to knock at the backdoors of legislative bodies, to lobby and to beg. It has risen to political dignity. It has asserted its political strength. Even before it assumed the government it had forced such radical labor legislation as old-age pensions and unemployment insurance and the full legal recognition of the rights of trade unions and the immunity of their treasuries.

This is the story of the political achievements of the British workers. Its lesson is inspiring, its moral is simple. It loudly cries to American labor: "Go thou and do likewise!" The American workers are not inferior to their British brothers in natural intellect, in courage or perseverance—what our comrades on the other side of the ocean have accomplished is not beyond our reach. There is no reason why the American workers should continue to be the football of the disgusting game of old-party politicians, ever cajoled and despised, deceived and betrayed, impotent and humiliated; there is no reason why they should continue the futile policy of supporting the parties of the master classes and reaping the reward of their political weakness in hostile governments, hostile laws and hostile courts.

With the crying need for political relief in this country and with the example and ready methods of England back of us we can form a powerful Labor Party in this country to-day; we can challenge the supremacy of the old parties in a few years.

Let us go and do it.

1929 LABOR RULES

A G A I N !

8,400,000 VOTES

288 MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT

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