

A Repast of Wild Beasts

A French Communist Viewpoint on the London Naval Conference

By Paul Sizoff

PARIS

On January 21, the imperialisms that divide the surface of the globe will meet in London to discuss ways and means of making war cheap. Naturally, the servile press is intoning the pacifist chorus: to believe it, the governments would ask no better than to make pickling cases with armor-plate, but there is "security" which requires or wants it, etc., there is the neighbor who has not had in its past the same traditions of "generosity" and humanity, etc.; the neighbors are responsible for everything: without them there would be no more war and the peace of the Lord would reign over the fleets. "Peace" in capitalist language means hegemony, absence of competitors, since the time when the word of the Lord was expressed in good English.

The Importance of Naval Transport

From the seventeenth century to the world war, English "peace" has actually prevailed uncontested over the expanse of the seas. First capitalist country in history, the United Kingdom has been, because of that, the first naval power of the world. Freedom of the seas plays a predominant role in commerce. Even today, when land communications are multiplied, when railroad lines are more and more contracted, maritime transportation remains the only means of access to the distant countries pounced upon by the capitalist vultures.

"Security" is needed for capital used to exploit raw materials; "security" is needed for the merchandise that the metropolitan factories throw on the market among the backward populations of the colonized lands. This "security" is demanded from the war fleets, the sharks of capital. The existence of a great imperialist country cannot then be conceived without a war-fleet in proportion to the extent of its world expansion: to that extent naval hegemony is synonymous with world hegemony.

England has had the first to the extent that she has been able to retain the second. The extraordinarily rapid growth of German imperialism having threatened her pretensions, she stopped at nothing, even war, in order to save decadent England from great peril and now, the formidable German fleet, the pride of the Kaiser, rests on a thick bed of shellfish at the bottom of a little bay of Scotland.

Despite that, the war did not save British hegemony. Before her has arisen the American colossus which little by little has forced her exhausted forces to retreat; and thus America has become the greatest imperialist power in the world. Her capital, her merchandise, her navies go everywhere. Even Europe and the Dominions, those ancient sacred shrines of British finance, are penetrated. A new star has arisen on the Far Eastern horizon, Japan, which in Asia vigorously competes with England and America. By means of her fleets she keeps watch over the Chinese ports on the Pacific. This causes grave concern to Wall Street and the White House; China, the outlet of enormous Asia, is under the Japanese menace and that makes it necessary for them to maintain a powerful fleet in the Pacific.

In Europe, France and Italy enviously spy upon each other; Italy suffocated within her national frontiers and on a poor soil requires land for colonization whereas France is firmly entrenched in the best parts of Northern Africa. Their colonial antagonism results in their naval antagonism and the victory will belong to the one that controls the Mediterranean.

Such are the naval powers which, periodically, in 1930 as in 1921 feel the need of limiting their armaments. Of course, peace serves, once again, as tinsel which functions to hide from the masses the intrigues of imperialism. On the day the naval conference at Washington decided to equalize the tonnage of British and American armament, the American Secretary of State Hughes declared that "A new era is opened for humanity." He should have been more exact and be satisfied with the statement that in actuality a new era is opened for American imperialism.

"Humanizing Warfare"

When Sir Arthur Balfour, British delegate to the conference, asked for the prohibition of submarines "in order to humanize warfare" France and Japan,

which require a submarine fleet, replied that what was more necessary to "humanize warfare" was the suppression of capital ships. The proletariat will make these scoundrels agree by suppressing them together with capitalism which they represent!

The bourgeoisie whose domination is founded on the subjection of the working class, could not, without danger, lay before the masses the contradictions that torment it. It needs a whole front of abstract phrases, such as peace, humanity, civilization, right, disarmament, behind which to conceal its appetites and the resultant antagonisms.

Just as in its colonial enterprises, it makes use of pastors and other agents of God to persuade the natives that for their own good they ought to become Christians that is, wage slaves, so, in defense of its hegemony, it utilizes pacifists, socialists, and other agents of capital to persuade people that it is capable of bringing them a ray of hope in their misery.

We saw above that a war fleet was an indispensable instrument to any self-respecting imperialism. Unfortunately for it, it is a costly instrument. An armored ship having a crew of a thousand men is worth about 800 million francs; a well placed torpedo sends it to the bottom in a few minutes. At this price, and with less risks, one can equip an army. Besides with the lightning progress of industrial technique, the completed ship whose plans date back several years is almost out of style. The rival imperialisms have already conceived of more powerful, less vulnerable ones. After twenty years, it is useless and sold as a pile of junk. This involves considerable budgets: the United States spends 10 billion francs a year for its navy; England 7 billion, France 3 billion. There are hundreds of billions in capital tied up in all the fleets of the world, producing nothing, wasting themselves in smoke.

The Washington Conference

An economic power, however weak, must therefore have a relatively satisfactory economic perspective, to keep its rank in the great naval competition. This is no longer possible for England. In other days its Admiralty set itself the task of having a fleet at least the equal of the next two smaller fleets combined. Now, it must be satisfied with equality with the United States. It was at the Washington Conference (1921) that this first stage of British decadence was, so to speak, solemnly recorded. A vast economic crisis raged throughout the world; all the industrial powers were in a weakened condition. In order to lighten the excessively burdensome budgets, rising America and declining Great Britain agreed to fix the tonnage of capital ships at the same value, while preserving their privileges as regards the smaller ships, the cruisers and the submarines. At the same time Japan, the principal opponent of the United States in the Far East, abandoned by her former ally England, had to accept, under pressure, a smaller tonnage for its effective forces. France and Italy, which cut a figure with their fireworks at the repasts of wild beasts that these "disarmament" conferences are, had to be content with very little. Finally, the ship tonnages were fixed in the proportions 5-5-3-1.75-1.75 for the five powers. Since the position of England has not been re-established, it has constantly sought to obtain new naval agreements, but has failed because of American hostility. Yankee capitalism, being in good health could permit itself the construction of a dozen cruisers, while signing Kellogg Pacts at the same time.

Today the perspective of a new economic crisis, which seems bound to hit the United States; the technical revolution performed by the Germans in the construction and use of cruisers which, from auxiliary units become battleships—all these preliminary factors are required for the two Anglo-Saxon imperialisms to seek an understanding on a formula for cruiser limitation.

That is the real cause of the new conference which will be held in London. Such is the world hegemony of these two states that the others are so to speak constrained to come and talk. The large fleets swallow the small ones as small enterprises devour weak ones. So, each country will go to

London but each will defend its own appetite; Japan wants more cruisers than the others will let it have; France develops the weapon, the submarine, and desires very much to keep that advantage; Italy, its immediate rival, seeks to come closer to America and will defend her theses: prohibition of submarines and freedom of commerce in times of war. We shall witness a great battle around the militaristic porringer, but there is no doubt about the victory of the strongest. America could, if it wished, construct a fleet capable of crushing all the others; England knows this and that is the reason which forces it to accept a formula of limitation which maintains in appearance a sort of equality between it and its rival. In appearance only; for what is decisive in a conflict is not the military power at the outset—it is the ability of a country at war to repair and construct new material. This is the "potential of war", and it requires capital, raw materials, and a highly developed capacity for production. It is for this reason that America obligingly lends itself to this disarmament comedy. With a little pacifist air, it makes sure of a superiority gotten at a bargain.

Thus, the "disarmament" conferences make ready for the war just as surely as do irrational programs of ruinous armament construction. They permit the release of non-productive capital to economic branches of construction, and force the militarists to perfect the technique of combat and to design weapons infinitely more murderous than those of the past.

That is the real, the productive side of conferences, but they also play a moral role which must not be neglected, in that they give a semblance of reality to the talk-fest at Geneva. The Socialist International avails itself of these conferences in order to spread its opium among the workers. It has formed a commission for disarmament (of the working class, we might add, through which it expresses the opinion that the London Conference will have lasting value, only "if it accomplishes its task in the general organization of peace sought at Geneva", in other words, only if the famous preparatory conference at Geneva, supposed to discuss above nations, confirms purely and simply the orders of American imperialism, which dictates them according to its momentary needs. Peace, according to our social democrats, still speaks English as it did formerly, but with a strong Yankee accent. All socialists are not Americanized. There are French ones like the social-chauvinist Paul Boncour, who worries over the limitation from "above" (at a "height" which French capitalism evidently cannot reach); he adjures the government to have "our rights" respected, to the applause of a hundred deputies of the French section of the Workers' International.

The genuine struggle against war is that of Lenin, of Rosa Luxemburg, that of the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat against capitalism. Any solution that will not exterminate capitalism, the sole cause of war, is like cauterizing a wooden leg. In order to save ailing humanity the proletariat must cast off the social democratic witch-doctors and bone-setters, together with their poisonous methods and join the school of revolutionary Communism in order to march along the sure road of the liberating revolution.

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NEW KIND OF TRADE UNION WORK

Minneapolis, Minn.

Dear Comrades:

Yesterday I attended a conference and mass meeting called ostensibly to hear Otto Wangerin of Chicago explain why new unions on the U. S. railroads were necessary.

The call was circulated among as many railroad workers as they thought safe and those who would not bother them with Trotskyism. Out of the tremendous force that the C. P. boasts, only three bona fide railroad workers were present. But this did not stop the hoodlums from expelling those who are not converted to the third period. When I arrived in the hall the giant minds were set into motion to find out who can best interpret this period. A tremendous struggle was waged amongst themselves, which took up a good portion of an hour. Finally unity was achieved and I was ordered out of the hall. Poor Otto Wangerin, his soul is not in the best of condition. But what can a poor fellow do who always bows before the almighty apparatus? After I left the hall the formulae was developed in detail and now the unity-purity squad will go on as ever before.

CARL SKOGLUND

United Front in Boston in the New Style

Boston is known as a historical city, particularly so to the working class. But unfortunately Boston can boast of a great deal more destructive work than constructive. So while this city is mentioned historically let us not forget to put in a page for January 19, 1930.

On that day a conference was called by the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union, inviting all organizations in Boston and vicinity to build a united front of all workers for the defense of the union in the coming struggles. Two of the members of the Communist League (Opposition) branch came to 22 Harrison Avenue to participate in the conference. We came as ever before to help build the union and not to thrash out political differences.

What did we find? We found assembled in a hall a number of people most of whom were Communist Party members, each one giving his name as representative of a certain organization. Incidentally, the names of the various organizations were not disclosed to the gathering.

Everything is "Properly" Arranged

The meeting was opened by a member of the union who at once gave the chair to a man elected from the floor—not a member of the trade but a member of the party—before he had been seated as a delegate.

The same maneuver was exercised in electing a credentials committee. Here too, one of the five was not in the trade but a delegate who had not yet been seated. When the credentials committee appeared, it brought in a majority report against seating us at the conference because we were "Trotskyists". When we asked for the floor to explain our attitude towards the union, we were refused that also!

We were "cleverly" refused the floor on the ground that it is unconstitutional to grant the floor to any guest before the delegation is constituted as a body. If this is the case, I would like to ask those of the conference who are so constitutionally correct: How did it happen that the chair man was elected out of the delegation before its constitution as a body? And was there not a slight breach of good ruling when a guest from the floor was placed on the credentials committee to vote us out? What does this mean? Is this not a repetition of the expulsion policy employed by the reactionary International Ladies Garment Workers Union? How much more justified are these people in barring us than the bureaucrats of the International were in barring us? As Left wingers, we always fought and always will fight most bitterly against this policy of disruption.

I want to remind the members of the Needle Trade Workers Industrial Union—and particularly those who were so ready to expel us from the conference—to look back only a short time when the bureaucrats of the International expelled them for their political views. How bitterly we all fought against it! And when, in the summer of 1928, the call came to mobilize and build a new union of the workers and for the workers, a union that would embrace all workers regardless of their political views, we felt that this was a sacred task.

Joyous was the response of all our comrades, whether actually engaged in the needle trades or not, whether they were "Trotskyists" or Stalinists. We all took up arms to fight the bosses and their agents, the bureaucrats of the International. We took up arms to help build the Needle Trades Workers Industrial Union.

Opposition on Side of Union

From the time of its coming into existence, throughout every strike conducted by the Left wing union, our comrades stood by its side on the picket line and everywhere else. Now the few party members who came up to give the keynote to the conference, suddenly declared us to be—not workers, but bosses, shopkeepers! Is this their conception of a united front? Is this their conception of how to build?

It is painful to see such work carried on by those who themselves were born in the struggle against just this type of work, which can prove nothing but detrimental.

No, it is not by expulsion, not by trying to push away those who come in earnest with the interest of the union at heart, that the union can be built, but by a real united front of all workers regardless of their political views. Only through such a united front can we build a strong union.

—CHARLOTTE SHECHET