

The Workers' Council

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Editorials

THE NEW FIRST OF MAY

Holidays, in common with many other institutions and customs, change their significance as times go on. When the First Paris Congress of the Second International established the First of May as an international workingmen's holiday thirty-two years ago, the chief purpose of that day was a general agitation for the eight-hour day. From year to year new slogans appeared upon the posters and banners of the parades and demonstrations of the workers; there was no dearth of phrases about disarmament and general appeals to international brotherhood and kindred demands in which great masses of workers, the class-conscious along with those who lacked class-consciousness, could join. And as even the more advanced units of the world labor movement became imbued with the tame spirit of reformism and bourgeois pacifism and liberalism, it seemed significant that this working-class holiday was established on the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution of 1789, in which the working people, led on by the catchwords of liberty, equality, fraternity, fought the bourgeois battle, gave their lives so that new masters might have the freedom to oppress them.

There has been going on in recent years within the working masses a tremendous ferment. Disillusioned by a gigantic mass-murder, in which the workers of the world have sacrificed for a bourgeois cause on the most enormous scale in their

history, made to suffer the most intense misery as a result of the aftermath of the war, inspired on the other hand by the spectacle of at least one section of the world's toilers that has succeeded in throwing off its chains and is already at work forging the new society of free workers, ever larger groups of workers in every land are learning to grasp the idea and purpose of working-class emancipation. And during these years the May-Day slogans have become genuine workers' slogans with the solid ring of earnest revolutionary purpose in them. To wrest from the hands of the exploiters and profiteers the factories and the fields and place them in the hands of those to whom they rightfully belong by the sweat they have bestowed on them; to free themselves from the oppression and violence of the paid defenders of private greed and the mass-murderers and hangmen of the working class and establish a workers' state which shall create the new communistic society in which there shall be neither oppressors nor oppressed—this is the revolutionary purpose that is inspiring great masses of the workers of all nations today, and that has given the First of May a new significance. The rulers of bank and parliament no longer look down indulgently upon parading workers seeking petty reforms and uttering mild pacifistic hopes; they are anxiously bringing up defences and setting guards, for fear that the rallying-day of the revolutionary workers may bring the fate which they know must sooner or later overtake them.

THE TREASON OF THE TRIPLE-ALLIANCE

For a moment the leaders of the Triple-Alliance seemed ready to oppose the capitalist onslaught with the power and solidarity of labor. But only for a moment. Thomas and Henderson, for a few days, were forced to play a most difficult role, the role of spokesmen of militant labor. For once it appeared that the compromising and vacillating and hesitant leadership of the Triple-Alliance would give way to action. The brazen attempt of the mine owners to bring down the wages of the British workers to the 1914 scale constituted a challenge which organized labor immediately accepted. With the cost of living still more than 100 per cent above the 1914 scale, the capitalist class made no efforts to conceal its intention to deprive labor of all its war-time gains.

The staggering wage reductions which the mine owners were bent upon enforcing would have reduced the mine industry to a sweated trade. In addition, passage of the Decontrol bill, which the government was pressing, provided that government control and the subsidy of the mines would cease on March 31st instead of August 31st. This meant

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the abolition of all national agreements. In view of this situation, the miners demanded that a National Wages Board should be set up for the regulation of wages and profits; that the industry should be treated as a whole, the pooling of profits to continue, and that a national minimum wage should be fixed. The owners, however, favored district settlements; abolition of the pool; fixing the standard wage at the 1914 level, and a minimum profit of 2s per ton.

Negotiations between the owners and the miners failed to accomplish any results. By a vote of 723,000 to 231,000 the miners, on March 25th, declared in favor of a strike, and the strike actually began on March 31st, even the pumpmen being called out in spite of the consequent flooding of the mines. The government declared a national emergency existed and issued a call for the mobilization of the troops. The Triple-Alliance was equally quick to act and it immediately agreed to support the miners in their struggle.

That the Triple-Alliance would actually carry out its threat of a general strike seemed unbelievable. Its recent history was a combination of brave words and inaction. Again and again in the past few years the possibility of a direct challenge of the ruling class by British Labor seemed imminent. The only result in every case was another congress or conference and lengthy resolutions ending with the dispatch of a deputation to the Prime Minister. The creation of the Council of Action (or, as others named it, of Inaction) last August, aroused the enthusiasm and hopes of labor everywhere. British labor demanded the cessation of all aid to Poland in its war against Russia and threatened a general strike to enforce its demands. But pretty soon this enthusiasm waned as in the past. It was a glorious gesture but it did not greatly interfere with Curzon's and Churchill's and Lloyd George's plans.

This time, however, it appeared that the Triple-Alliance was ready for action. After the failure of the government to mediate successfully between the miners and the owners and the refusal of the miners to man the pumps unless they were first guaranteed a national pool and a wage board, the Triple-Alliance determined upon April 12th as the date for the beginning of a general strike, a strike which would involve several million workers. It is true that poor old Thomas announced the strike decision with tears in his eyes and that the Triple-Alliance declared that they were not embarking on a revolution; that it was to be a strictly industrial struggle.

Tuesday the 12th came but the Triple-Alliance, true to form, postponed the strike pending a conference between the miners and the government. The miners, however, again refused the terms of the government and the owners, although willing to take a reduction in wages, the reduction to be established by a sliding scale based on the cost of living. The Triple-Alliance then set Friday, April 15th, as the new strike date. The General Workers' Federation, with a membership of one and a half million, decided to throw in its lot with the

miners, railway and transport workers. The electrical workers and railway clerks and other unions were quick to determine their solidarity with the Triple-Alliance. Labor at last was organizing to meet the ruling class in open warfare. The possibilities of the struggle resulting in a decisive class struggle between capital and labor were clearly recognized. Hence the many and frantic efforts on the part of Lloyd George to secure some sort of temporary settlement without granting any of the miners' demands; some postponement, or at least the submitting of the question to a "solemn referendum." But labor was standing by its guns. Its ranks were united.

As if in answer to the statement of the Prime Minister that the Executive of the Federation were not in favor of the strike but that their hands were forced by the "thoughtless blind clamoring of those below" a joint manifesto signed by executives of the Parliamentary Labor Party, Triple-Alliance leaders and executives of the Trade Union Congress was issued to the nation which read:

"This conference is convinced of the justice of the claims put forward by the miners and pledges support of the miners, railway men and transport workers. It appeals to all sections of the labor movement and to every citizen who cares for the well-being of the community to stand solidly against this attack on the position of the workers. The conference condemns the action of the government throughout, more particularly the military preparations made during the last week, as being calculated to provoke public feeling and create disorder."

Could it be possible that Thomas had failed the government and the employers? Thomas who had succeeded in delaying, compromising strikes so often in the past? Or was Lloyd George right in feeling that the leaders were anxious to suppress this movement of the masses?

Shortly before midnight, in the closing hours of Thursday, April 14th, Frank Hodges, the young secretary of the Miners' Federation, laid the basis for the treason to the Triple-Alliance. At a conference with a number of members of Parliament he declared that the miners would discuss wages with the owners and the government at once if the question of a national wages board and a national profits pool were separated from wages and considered later. This was a complete reversal of the position taken by the miners in conference after conference with the Prime Minister and the mine owners. This offer was made without authority (it appeared later) and was repudiated by the executives of the Miners' Federation.

The Railway and Transport Workers' executives grasped at this straw. The opportunity they looked for was at hand. They urged the miners to go into conference on the basis of the terms which Hodges had advanced. The miners, however, rejected their advice. They refused to retreat, and betray the one million workers they represented. Thomas and Gosling now hastened to write to Lloyd George that the strike had been cancelled—that they had decided to desert the Miners' Federation. The treason of the Triple-Alliance was complete, and in