



The League of Nations and Labour

BY THE

RT. HON. ARTHUR HENDERSON

P.C., M.P.

SECRETARY OF THE BRITISH LABOUR PARTY

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THE LEAGUE OF NATIONS AND LABOUR

FOUR years of warfare on an unprecedented scale cannot have failed to produce a passionate desire for peace. For the multitudes of people in every country whose lives have been darkened by the present tragedy the struggle can have only one issue worthy of the sacrifices and sufferings they have endured: no settlement can be accepted as final which does not offer to them the promise that henceforth upon earth there shall be no more war.

The experiences of the last four years have, by a strange paradox, converted one of the strongest influences making for war into a powerful argument for permanent peace. Fear of military aggression on the part of other nations has led every people to believe that the only way to keep peace is to be ready for war. Under the influence of fear the people have been persuaded to spend their energies in building up costly armaments. Fear is the chief sanction of the system of conscription which has enslaved the manhood of Europe for generations. Increase of armaments led to war-scares; war-scares led to further increase of armaments. In this vicious circle the nations have

moved, and will continue to move, hating one another because they fear one another's designs, until they learn that the ultimate guarantee against war lies in the common will for peace.

In the stress of this mighty conflict the common will for peace has been evoked in support of the idea of a League of Nations; and the very fear which formerly made for war has become the most potent argument that can be used on behalf of this constructive proposal. All thinking people, whatever their political views may be, now realize that if some means of preventing future war cannot be devised civilization itself will be destroyed. Enlightened self-interest has combined with the highest form of political and social idealism in support of the idea of world-peace. War consumes not only the material wealth of civilization and the finest manhood of the race; it paralyses the impulse towards social progress and spreads black despair in the hearts of men and women devoted to great causes. It destroys the hope of social betterment and blocks every project of reform.

In the atmosphere of international ill-will, under the perpetual menace of war, estranged from one another by suspicion, jealousy, and fear, the nations will not be able to carry out the great schemes of social reconstruction upon which the best minds of our time are now engaged. Nor will any country be able to afford the cost of social reconstruction on the grand scale if the threat of another and greater war

compels expenditure upon armaments, and the energies of its peoples are absorbed in preparation for the struggle.

This is the first and most compelling reason why the organized working-class movement supports the proposal of a League of Nations. Labour recognizes that in this proposal lies the hope of deliverance for all the peoples from the severest economic pressure and the most terrible risks of suffering and loss, from heavy burdens of taxation to maintain large armies and navies. Our hope for the future is bound up with this question of security. The specific programme of reconstruction in which Labour is interested presupposes two essential conditions which must be fulfilled before it can be carried into practical effect: the first condition is the defeat and destruction of Prussian militarism; the second is the establishment of a League of Nations which will make the world safe for democracy.

The project of a League of Nations is the keystone of the new social order that Labour desires to build. It stands also in the forefront of the Labour policy of international conciliation. Neither national reconstruction nor international conciliation is possible as long as the people are preoccupied with the menace of foreign aggression, and Governments are forced to spend huge sums yearly upon the means of national self-defence. In the past many necessary reforms have had to be postponed or altogether abandoned for

this reason. Future Chancellors of the Exchequer will have a far more difficult task to raise the revenue necessary to meet the enormous charges arising out of the War; and if they have to impose heavy taxation for military purposes the nation will be unable to bear the additional burden of expenditure involved in the great and far-reaching schemes of social reconstruction which the War has made imperative. If nations are to be forced to continue to pay the blood-tax, even on the pre-war scale, it is useless to talk of reform.

But we can be quite certain that warlike expenditure on the pre-war scale, unless measures can be devised to safeguard the security of nations, will not be adequate: if the nations have to organize their resources for future war they will do so in a far more thorough fashion. Conscription will become a permanent system in this country, with all that conscription implies as a drain upon the life-blood of the people; standing armaments will grow ever larger and more costly; industry will be impoverished, and the natural growth of trade will be checked; and indeed civilization itself will collapse under the strain of another war. From these evils there is no escape except by way of a League of Nations, which will guarantee peace and security for all peoples, and leave them free to develop their material and moral resources without the menace of recurrent wars.

But British Labour supports on other grounds the

proposal to establish a League of Nations. No other practicable suggestion has been made which will have the effect of promoting the unity of peoples. The aim which organized labour keeps steadily in view in the field of international affairs is the solidarity of nations, because we realize that the final safeguard of peace does not lie in the machinery of judicial arbitration and conciliation, however skilfully devised, but in the spirit of international goodwill and the understanding between nations based upon the essential identity of their interests. Two—or twenty—nations at war are like one great nation committing suicide. The establishment of a League of Nations will be a dramatic declaration of the fact that the peoples of the world form one family, and will show that they have learned that war is a family quarrel which humiliates every member of it, and destroys the happiness and prosperity of the whole. When the League is established, it will keep before the eyes of all nations the truth that peace is the greatest of human blessings, and that a dynasty or a government bent on war is the enemy of the human race.

In the forefront of the policy of international conciliation to which the organized workers stand pledged this project is prominently placed. The organized proletariat conceive this war to be a struggle between two kinds of civilization and two irreconcilable systems of government—between the system which treats a country as if it were the private property of

its king, and gives one crowned person an almost unqualified right to dispose of the lives and property of his subjects, and the system which recognizes the right of democratic self-determination, and steadily and consistently develops this principle in politics and industry and social life. Seeing the War as a struggle to make the world safe for democracy, the organized workers declare that no conceivable issue of the War, however much it might contribute to national self-glorification, or an extension of territory for any nation, or increase of its political influence in the world, would compensate for the failure to secure such international machinery as will help to develop democratic institutions in every country, and curb the sinister forces that make for war.

The clearest and strongest affirmation of the organized proletariat in the allied countries, at the conference held in London last February, was that, whoever wins, the peoples will have lost unless an international system is established which will prevent war. 'It would mean nothing to declare the right of peoples to self-determination', the inter-allied conference said in its memorandum on war aims, 'if this right were left at the mercy of new violations and was not protected by a super-national authority. That authority can be no other than the League of Nations, which not only all the present belligerents, but every other independent State, should be pressed to join.'

Organized Labour, however, regards this League as something much more than an organization to prevent war. The prevention of war is indeed one of its cardinal objects: it involves the immediate establishment, by a solemn agreement of States, of International High Courts for the settlement of all disputes that are of a justiciable character, and for effective mediation between States upon other issues that vitally affect their honour or interest but are not susceptible to judicial treatment. But in Labour's view, the ultimate purpose of such a League is to create a common mind in the world, to make the nations conscious of the solidarity of their interests, and to enable them to perceive that the world is one, and not a number of separate countries divided by artificial frontiers.

Side by side with the international courts set up for purposes of conciliation and judicial arbitration the workers have, therefore, proclaimed their desire to further the project of an International Legislature. Representatives of every civilized State, if this project is realized, will co-operate with one another in shaping the body of international law by which we hope the intercourse of States will hereafter be regulated, and which will be accepted as binding upon the several nations that have joined the League. It is an essential condition of the scheme, as Labour understands it, that the consenting States shall pledge themselves to submit every issue between two or more of them to arbitration on the lines indicated; and refusal to

accept such arbitration, or to submit to the settlement proposed by the court, could only be regarded as a deliberate aggression which would justify the League in making common cause against the aggressor, and in using any and every means at its disposal, economic or military, in order to compel the offending nation to keep the world's covenant of peace. That is a democratic doctrine. It was the greatest of modern Socialists, Jaurés himself, who pointed out that the question which of two belligerents was engaged in a war of national self-defence could be determined by showing which of them had refused to submit the issue to arbitration.

It is obvious that the proposed League of Nations can derive its authority only from the fact that it speaks for the public opinion of the world as a whole. In setting up the League, organized Labour insists that it shall be based on something more than an agreement between Governments: it must be the first step in creating a real League of Peoples. More than a hundred years ago, at the end of another great war, an attempt was made to realize a similar ideal. The League which then came into existence developed into a mere league of kings pledged to maintain the *status quo*, to protect the monarchical principle, to suppress every liberal and humanizing idea, to check every democratic movement in the direction of liberty and equality. The Holy Alliance which was established at the close of the Napoleonic Wars fell

to pieces because it was rooted in the idea of privilege: it was a league formed by rulers against their peoples.

Organized democracy to-day has resolved to establish a League of Nations on an entirely different foundation. It is pledged to a policy of pacific internationalism. It insists that the League must be based upon the idea of public law and the right of peoples, not merely upon the agreements of governments and kings. It believes that the League can only be established after the destruction of militarism on a foundation of true democratic freedom, beginning with freedom of trade and commercial intercourse, and including the abolition, by agreement, of compulsory military service and standing armaments, which limit the development of democracy and menace the existence of free institutions everywhere in the world.

In the view of organized Labour the decision to establish such a League, and willingness to accept its findings, imply the complete democratization of every country concerned. Peace cannot be maintained merely by getting together an international assembly of lawyers and diplomatists any more than it could be secured by standing armies and navies. The ultimate assurance of permanent peace lies in the resolute repudiation by every people of the tawdry and vulgar imperialism which rests upon the armed domination of one race over another. It is the League itself that will supersede the arbitrary powers that have hitherto

arrogated the right of choosing between peace and war. It will bring foreign policy under the control of popularly elected assemblies resolved to maintain the sovereign rights of peoples. It implies the suppression of secret diplomacy and the development of Parliamentary control over Cabinets. It will mean that a vigilant watch will be kept over the activities of Foreign Ministers, diplomatists, and the agents of international finance. It involves full publicity for all agreements between States. It will render powerless for further mischief the evil influence of the armament trusts which are so largely responsible for the awful tragedy in which the world is at present involved.

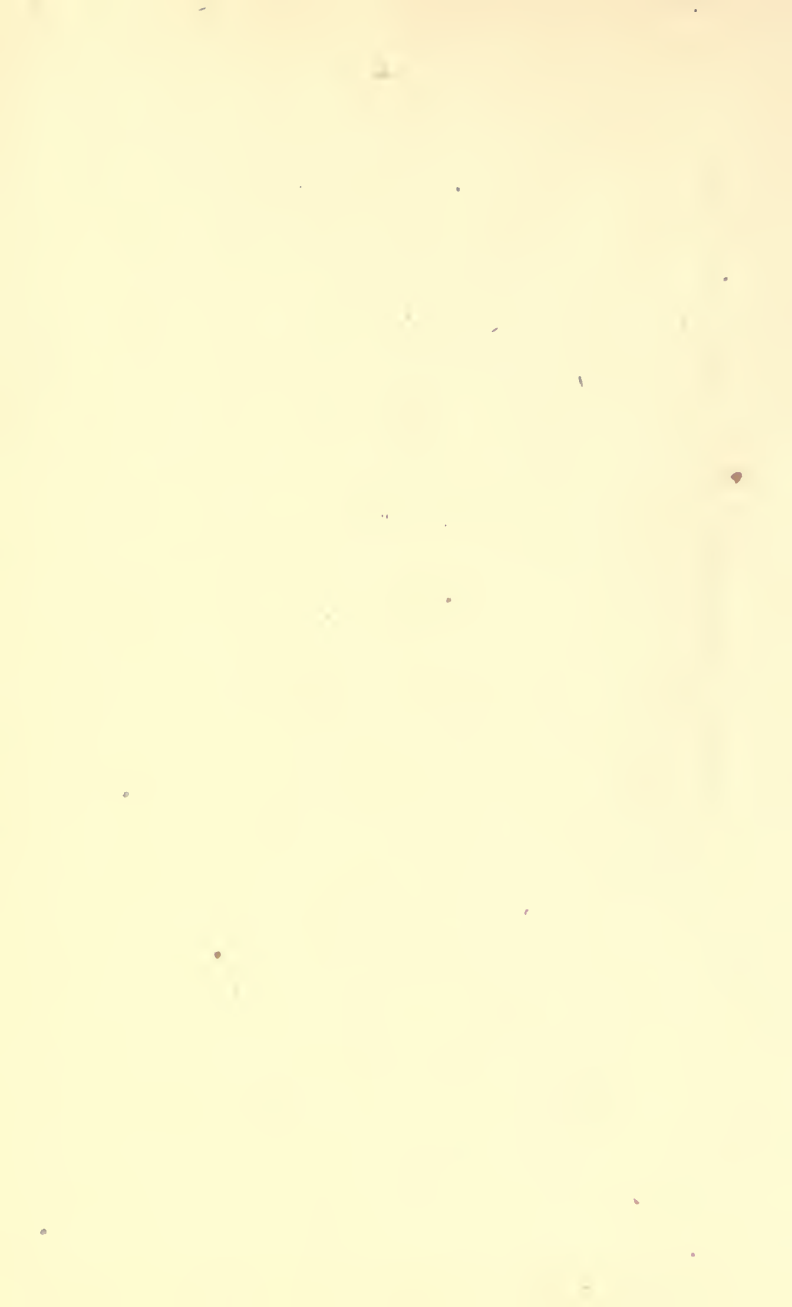
Of this struggle there can be only one issue: there is no place in the world for militarism and autocracy, which have darkened the lives of millions of human beings in these last years, have poisoned the political life of Europe for generations, and have thrown back the progress of the race perhaps for centuries. Merely to repair the ravages of the War will exhaust the energies of the nations for decades; and if the War ends without adequate machinery being instituted to make future war impossible, no nation will be able to summon up the courage and strength to begin the task of reconstruction. Given a sense of security and a promise that their labour will not be in vain, the peoples will turn hopefully and resolutely to the tasks and duties of reconstruction. They will not

spare labour and sacrifice to replace the wealth that has been consumed.

But if the coming peace sows the seed of future war, if this project of a League of Nations to prevent war fails to materialize, and if the peoples are required to spend their strength in building up new armaments in preparation for new conflicts—then indeed we shall find that we have entered upon what Nietzsche called Europe's tragic era, the watchword of which will be not Reconstruction but Revolution, and in which the remaining treasures of our civilization may be totally consumed.

Democracy stands at the cross-roads. Whether the path taken is the one that leads to a new social order giving freedom and security to all, or the path that leads to revolutionary struggles and a violent and stormy close to the story of Western civilization, depends very largely upon the fate of this project of a League of Nations. If we fail here we fail irretrievably. Wars more frightful than the present will waste the substance of our race, and we shall lose even the belief in the possibility of progress.





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