

# **How Labour governed, 1945–1951**

Syndicalist Workers' Federation

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**"I look around my colleagues and I see landlords, capitalists and lawyers. We are a cross-section of the national life and this is something that has never happened before."**

**Arthur Greenwood**, Labour Lord Privy Seal, *Hansard*, August 17, 1945.

## ATOMIC INSANITY

The war in Europe ended on May 5, 1945. As a result of the General Election that followed, the Labour Government took office on July 26, 1945. Eleven days later, on August 6, the first atom bomb was dropped on Hiroshima. The second atom bomb devastated Nagasaki on August 9. The total casualties from these two insane acts will never be known, but the death toll was certainly upwards of half-a-million and, eighteen years later, victims are still dying from radiation sickness. The dropping of these bombs was not solely an act of American policy. President Truman has stated that he obtained the agreement of the British Government before the mass-murder was committed and the Labour Government had observed, including Group-Capt. Cheshire and nuclear scientist Sir William Penney, at the bomb dropping.

"The first task of the Labour Government was to complete the winning of the war against Japan and the general anticipation had been that this might prove to be a long and difficult one... but the use of the atom bomb at Hiroshima brought the war to a sudden end. It was, of course, an immense relief.

**Attlee**, *As It Happened*, p. 150.

Japan surrendered on August 15, but not all the Allied leaders agree with Attlee's cold-blooded justification of the use of the atom bomb. Read-Admiral Zacharias, Deputy Director of Naval Intelligence, USA, writing in the American publication *Look*, asserts: "Japan would have surrendered by August 15, 1945, without the use of extreme measures."

Admiral Zacharias broadcast on July 21, 1945, offering Japan the chance to surrender unconditionally. Tokio's answer was, he says, "**in effect an open invitation to begin surrender negotiations on the terms we had proposed.**"

Later, because of the work of spies in Britain, the USA withheld atom bomb information and the Labour Government began work on its own atom and hydrogen bombs. Before this was completed, the Tories had displaced the Labour Party and it was Churchill's task to announce the success of Britain's own bomb, though he graciously admitted that his Government had only plucked the fruit from the tree planted by another:

"All those concerned in the production of the first British atomic bomb are to be warmly congratulated on the successful outcome of an historic episode and I should no doubt pay my compliments to the Leader of the Opposition and the party opposite for initiating it."

**Churchill** in the House of Commons, *Hansard*, Oct. 24, 1952.

And Attlee, from the Labour benches, bowed and smiled his thanks for the compliment.

## MILITARY BLACKLEGS

**“No conscript should be required to take duty in aid of the civil power in connection with a trade dispute, or to perform, in consequence of a trade dispute, any civil or industrial duty customarily performed by a citizen.”**

Labour amendment to the Military Training Bill, *Hansard*, May 12, 1939.

Within six days of the Labour Government taking office in 1945, it sent conscript troops into the Surrey Docks, London, to break a ten-week-old strike against a wage-cut that J. Donovan, National Secretary of the Docks Group, Transport and General Workers' Union, admitted had placed them “in a worse position financially than the workers in industry generally... the dockers' basic wage of 16s. per day represents a rise of only 23 per cent during the war... the lowest of any industry.”

Three months later, at the beginning of October, an unofficial national dock dispute swiftly brought more than 43,000 militant portworkers out on the stones. The Labour Government's reply was to use 21,000 conscript troops to break the strike, which lasted until November 5. The portworkers demanded an increase of 9s. on their basic daily wage of 16s. The final settlement was for 19s. a day.

“The action of the strikers cannot be defended,” raged Minister of Labour George Isaacs. His reply came from a docker's wife:

“Eight kids and a husband are a lot to feed. In a full week at the present rates my husband earns just under £5. If there is no work, he gets £3 2s. 4d. for signing-on money.”

*News Chronicle*, Oct. 11, 1945.

In the House of Commons, Isaac's refusal to meet the strikers' leaders provoked an indignant outburst from Labour backbencher David Kirkwood (Dumbarton). “Why,” he asked, “should not Ministers come down off their pedestals when it is a question of dealing with the working class? This has been the lot of the workers right down the ages.”

The only port not to support this strike (on the ground that it would “bring into discredit the Government they helped to elect”) was Southampton. Nine months later, in July, 1946, the Labour Government expressed its gratitude by using troops to break a strike of Southampton dockers.

The portworkers, with their strong traditions of working-class solidarity, were to be the main—though not the only—target of the Labour military force.

“I take the opportunity of making it quite clear that this Government, like any government as an employer, would feel itself perfectly free to take any disciplinary action that any strike situation that might develop demanded.”

**Sir Hartley Shawcross***Hansard*, Feb. 2, 1946.

The next round came in June, 1948, when London portworkers claimed the usual special payment for handling zinc oxide. Eleven men were suspended for a week and their guaranteed week suspended for thirteen weeks—a possible loss of wages for fourteen weeks.

In reply to a spontaneous protest strike, the Labour Government drafted freshly-conscripted troops into the docks and brought out the old Tory Emergency Powers Act—the nearest to martial

law ever reached by the Tories. Merseyside joined the strike against the harsh tyranny of the National Dock Labour Board and more than 31,000 men took part in a sixteen-day fight.

There were many other disputes in dockland during those years, but we must pass on to May, 1949. The Canadian Seamen's Union was leading a strike against wage-cuts, when the *Montreal City* arrived in Avonmouth. Dockers refused to unload the black ship and a second attempt to discharge cargo brought out all Avonmouth dockers. When the employers declared a lock-out, tug and lock-gate men joined the struggle. The Labour Government sent in troops to break the strike, causing crane drivers to down tools. The crews of some British ships refused to sail because of the military strike-breaking.

The fight spread to Merseyside, when a Canadian cargo was smuggled to Liverpool. By early June, 11,000 dockers were on strike there. Two Canadian ships, the *Argomont* and *Beaverbrae*, were switched to London, where 14,000 portworkers struck. Once again the Labour Government invoked the Tory Emergency Powers Act and on July 11 the number of Thames-side strikers increased to 15,500. The strike ended when the CSU obtained certain concessions and asked the English dockers to end their action.

The Army having failed to break the dockers, judges, jailers and all the intimidations of the capitalist machine were brought into play and the battle shifted to the Old Bailey, site of the old Newgate Jail. In February, 1951, portworkers were offered a rise of 2s., bringing the minimum to 21s. a day. Discontent with this offer and the dubious manner of its acceptance by the T & GWU led to a strike on Merseyside and at Manchester. Few men in London came out. On February 9, seven London and Merseyside members of their respective Port Workers' Committees were arrested. Their homes were searched by the police without warrant, and they were charged with conspiracy to contravene Order 1305, a wartime measure forbidding strikes, framed by Churchill's Government.

The accused were committed to the Central Criminal Court, where the Attorney-General, Sir Hartley Shawcross, tried his brilliant best to get them heavy prison sentences. While a demonstration of dockers massed about the Old Bailey, the jury gave a verdict of Not Guilty on one major count and mortified Shawcross dropped the remaining charges.

## **AGAINST THE WORKERS**

In August, 1951, the beaten Government withdrew the hated Order 1305 and introduced a much milder Industrial Disputes and Compulsory Arbitration Order.

But portworkers were far from being the only victims. Smithfield Market lorry drivers, electric power station men and gasworkers were also subjected to strike-breaking by conscript military labour.

London gasworks maintenance engineers, after demanding a wage increase of 4½d. an hour, received a rise of 1½d. in September, 1950. Dissatisfied workers at Beckton struck and, within a few days, 1,500 men at fourteen gasworks were out. Ten members of the Strike Committee were arrested and charged under Order 1305 and the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act, 1875—a relic of the days of Mr. Gradgrind and the *Hard Times* of Dickens. On October 5, while naval blackleg labour was sent into Beckton and Bromley gasworks, the ten men were each sentenced to one month's imprisonment at Bow Street Magistrates' Court. On appeal, the sentences were varied to a fine of £50 each.

Similar action was taken on a number of occasions by the Labour Government's National Coast Board against striking miners. Following a big Yorkshire coalfield strike in August, 1947, which started at Grimethorpe Colliery in protest against an increased working stint, forty Grimethorpe miners appeared in Barnsley Magistrates' Court on December 19, 1947. The NCB claimed—and was awarded—damages of £304 against them under another 1875 relic, the Employers and Workers Act. The Court announced that this money would be deducted from their wage packets, at the rate of 10s. a week, from January 16, 1948. On that very day, Seaham Harbour (Durham) magistrates granted summonses against 191 miners at Vane Tempest Colliery for having taken part in a strike during the previous August. At Neath County Court, on March 18, 1948, two miners were each fined £39 for taking part in a stay-down strike. On May 26, in the same year, the *Daily Mail* reported: "Nearly 600 miners of Auchincruive Collieries, Ayrshire, described as 'habitually striking,' have been sacked from the Priory Pit, Blantyre." These are but a few of dozens of such cases.

The Labour Government was ever ready to take action against the working class. Not so against the employers. The clause of Order 1305 prohibiting lock-outs, as well as strikes, was not invoked. As one example, the London Society of Compositors was seeking a new basic wage during the summer of 1950. The employers using delaying tactics, the union imposed "work to rule," an old but effective Syndicalist method. The London Master Printers' Federation then issued dismissal notices to the workers engaged in producing local newspapers, trade journals and some magazines. The employers' lock-out began on August 26, but Order 1305 was not enforced against them. The workers, however, won the fight.

## THE WAGE FREEZE

Behind many of the bitter industrial disputes that took place during the period of office of the two post-war Labour Governments lay the Wage Freeze—or "Wage Restraint" as it was called by the politicians. Under this policy, which had the support of the Trades Union Congress, workers were forced to take "unofficial" action if their standard of living was to be defended, let alone improved, in a period of steadily-rising prices.

The end of the First World War in 1918 had been followed by a period of rising wages and the signs in 1945 pointed to an even more optimistic period for wage labour. From its first days, however, the Labour Government showed its anxiety to restrain and neutralise the economic trend.

"Social reform" was to be used to help regulate wages at a low level. Always the "hard cases," lowest-paid workers, men with large families and men subject to sickness and accidents from their work, had been used as arguments for **general** wage increases and, indeed, pressure often came from such sources. A sop to such hard cases would mean less pressure for all-round increases.

First of these measures was family allowances—5s. a week for each child after the first. This was not Labour's own idea and before the war it had been opposed by the Labour Party and TUC. Its chief sponsors in Britain had been the Family Endowment Society, whose chief spokesmen were Sir William Beveridge (Liberal), Miss Eleanor Rathbone and Mr. L. S. Amery (Tories). Family allowances had been introduced in Europe by Hitler and Mussolini.

“If a system of Family Allowances were introduced now, it would not only relieve the existing hard cases, but would afford a logical basis upon which a stand could be made against all further [wage] increases, except to the extent that they are directly justified by a rise in the cost of living.”

**L. S. Amery**, Conservative MP, *Times*, Jan. 14, 1940.

Family allowances had been recommended during the war by the Beveridge Report and accepted by the Churchill Government. On February 16, 1943, the Lord President of the Council, Sir John Anderson, announced the Government’s intention of introducing them when the war had ended. Some Labour men still expressed their doubts of this policy, but they toed the new party line.

Chief ally, after the employers, in the Labour Government’s wage freeze was the TUC. At successive post-war Congresses, union officials and delegates voted for a continued wage freeze. Few people now remember how low wages were during this period and much of the poverty and misery of certain sections has been forgotten, but it was revolt from below, expressed in unofficial strikes and Syndicalist methods of attack, which forced one union after another to break away from the TUC resolution and, finally, to end the wage truce.

Most notable were the struggles of the dockers, railmen and building workers. The railmen, in 1947, asked for an increase of £1 a week. The claim was refused. In 1948 they asked for a 12s. 6d. increase and later a minimum of £5. These claims, too, were rejected.

Work-to-rule strikes, first used in England by Syndicalist railmen on Tyneside, began to spread by 1949 and in that year the NUR voted by 71–8 in favour of work to rule, while in the North-East locomotive men began week-end strikes against worsened conditions such as extension of lodging away from home turns. In 1948 most of the building unions had broken from the wage freeze policy and demanded a wage increase. In engineering, discontent at the slowness and smallness of wage increases, combined with a rising cost of living, had so incensed the workers that the demand for a strike ballot was defeated by only 28–23 at the National Committee of the AEU in June, 1948, while unofficial strikes, factory to factory, were breaking out all over the country.

In the coal industry, which was excused from the TUC’s wage freeze, there were strikes, the most notable being that of the Lancashire miners against a reduction of their “free coal” in May, 1949. More than sixty pits closed and about 50,000 miners were out. Brick by brick, the Labour cold store was being broken down.

The wage freeze did not, of course, apply to the elected “representatives of the people.” On April 30, 1946, the Labour Government announced that it accepted the recommendations of the Select Committee of the House of Commons to raise members’ salaries from £600 to £1,000. Among rises for Ministers were £2,000 for the Postmaster-General, bringing his salary to £5,000, and £1,000 each for the Minister of Pensions and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, making their salaries £3,000.

The wage freeze was nibbled round the edges by individual workers, who left their jobs and bargained for more than trade union rates with other employers—not usually big firms, and never State-owned industries. The Labour Government’s reply to this practice was to introduce industrial conscription.

On August 6, 1947, Attlee announced that the Government had decided “to re-impose the control over the engagement of labour which was almost universal during the war, but had since been removed from all industries except coalmining, building and agriculture.”

The Order proved unworkable. Only twenty-nine compulsory directions were made. Shortly after its introduction, most Labour Exchanges found it impossible to operate and told men to find their own jobs, then return and ask for permits to go to them. Bugged down in bureaucratic red tape, the Labour Exchanges were overworked giving permits to work, while industry was being braked for lack of labour. Even the Labour Government had to recognise this at last and, on March 9, 1950, Labour Minister Isaacs announced that the Control of Engagements Order would be revoked.

## NATIONALISATION

The Labour Government’s nationalisation measures have been fully examined in another ‘Direct Action’ pamphlet, *Nationalisation and the New Boss Class* by Tom Brown, and we shall not, therefore, repeat here our criticism of the essentially anti-working-class nature of these acts, which—though more extensive—were not different in principle from those sometimes favoured by Tories and Liberals.

”There is a broadening field for State ownership and enterprise, especially in relation to monopolies of all kinds.”

**Winston Churchill**, BBC broadcast, April 14, 1943.

This attitude is more readily understood when it is seen that the interests of the holders of stocks and shares in the concerns to be nationalised were paramount.

Before nationalisation, stockholders in the Bank of England had for some years received a dividend of 12 per cent on their capital. The Labour Government safeguarded their interests by issuing 3 per cent Government bonds in exchange for Bank stock and guaranteeing stockholders the same income as before by exchanging £400 of Government bonds for £100 of Bank of England stock. Similarly with the railways:

”The Government is buying out the British railway and canal undertakings under its nationalisation proposals for a sum which can be roughly estimated at £850 million. Those who have bought railway stocks within the last few days will make considerable profits, as in nearly every case the compensation prices fixed are higher than the market prices ruling last night.”

*Daily Herald*, Nov. 11, 1946.

The trade unions, seemingly yielding to constant Syndicalist propaganda for Workers’ Control, had sought to change the character of State ownership by advocating a bastard form of it, through union representation on the boards of nationalised industry. Once in office, the Labour Party opposed this:

”In 1932, when London Transport was on the way to becoming a public corporation, our own Union pressed for some direct trade union representation on its management. We have since dropped the idea. Herbert Morrison talked us out of it.”

*Record*, Transport and General Workers’ Union, Feb., 1959.



Unemployment, according to Labour politicians, increases or decreases according to the good will or ill temper of the Government... “If the Tories are returned there will be mass unemployment.” ... “We can conquer unemployment.” In fact, the amount of unemployment is mainly the result of the economic workings of capitalism and not the result of an Act of Parliament. This is shown by the following figures, giving the annual average of registered unemployed in thousands, for the first ten post-war years (Labour Governments covered the years 1946–51):

1946 ...	374.3
1947 ...	480.2
1948 ...	310.0
1949 ...	308.9
1950 ...	314.2
1951 ...	252.9
1952 ...	414.3
1953 ...	342.0
1954 ...	282.8
1955 ...	241.0

During the fuel crisis, in February, 1947, the registered unemployed rose to 1,847,000. In addition, it was estimated that 503,200 who were suspended did not register.

## WAR IN INDONESIA

The Labour Government lost no time, after its election in 1945, in setting the keynote of the policies it was to follow for its six years of office. Just as its first domestic act was the use of troops for strike-breaking in the London docks, so its initial foreign action, after the end of the war, was to bolster Dutch imperialism in the East Indies.

During the war the islands had been occupied by Japanese troops. After Japan’s capitulation, the Dutch—who had drawn a yearly income of more than £40,000,000 from them before the war—found that the Indonesians had proclaimed an independent Republic of Indonesia.

The Dutch capitalists, however, had no intention of relinquishing control of 40 per cent of the world’s rubber, 17 per cent of its tin, 30 per cent of its palm oil, 30 per cent of its copra, large quantities of petroleum, tea, sugar, and coffee, as well as practically the entire world output of quinine. Eighty per cent of the capital invested in the Dutch Indies was from Holland.

The Dutch found ready allies in the British Labour Party. After Attlee had declared that Britain had obligations towards her great ally, Holland, his words were put into effect by the use of British troops (including the Seaforth Highlanders), Indian troops and—supreme irony—Japanese troops to crush the rising revolt of Indonesian nationalism, and to preserve the *status quo* until Dutch reinforcements could arrive.

American arms were used in these operations. In Washington on October 24, 1945, the then Democratic Foreign Secretary Byrnes told a Press conference: “Britain and the Netherlands Government have been asked to strip United States emblems from all lend-lease equipment in Indonesia.”

“This,” he added, “is a matter of general policy applying throughout the world, wherever lend-lease material is used, if there is a political connotation in its use.”

In India, Nehru commented: “It is a matter for shame that the British Empire should be using all its might to re-establish the Dutch Empire in Indonesia.”

At home, there was bitterness in the Labour Party itself. The late Harold Laski, then Chairman of the party, said that the intervention in Indonesia “makes the British claim to have been engaged in a war for democracy and freedom a hollow mockery all over South-East Asia.”

The use of collective punishment, rightly condemned when used by the Nazis in occupied Europe, was a feature of the war waged by British troops against the Indonesian nationalists. On December 13, 1945, following the murder of a British major and a Red Cross girl near the Sumatran town of Padang, Tabag village, where the bodies were found, was burnt to the ground. This in addition to the arrest of several Indonesians and the shooting of others who tried to escape.

One day later, it was announced that a battalion of Indian infantry, with strong tank and artillery support, had set out from Batavia for a punitive expedition to Bekasi, a small town where the crew and passengers of a crashed Dakota had been murdered three weeks before. Petrol was poured over the buildings and the town was razed to the ground.

But the strength of the Indonesian liberation movement was irresistible. Born in 1912 and bloodily suppressed in the insurrections of 1926 and 1927, it was at last successful in its aims. On March 25, 1947, the Dutch and Indonesians signed the Agreement of Linggar-Jati (Cheribon), ostensibly terminating hostilities.

Despite the agreement, however, the Dutch Navy blockaded Republican ports and a full-scale offensive was launched by the treacherous Dutch capitalists against the poorly-equipped Indonesians. There were, at this time, over 100,000 Dutch troops in the islands—more than double the pre-war strength.

By whom were they trained and equipped? Listen to the spokesmen of Britain’s Labour Government:

“Arms of the appropriate nature were provided for Dutch units in Indonesia on a normal basis for a force numbering 62,000. We are in the process of providing similar arms for a further 19,000 Dutch troops.”

**Fred Bellenger**, Minister of War, *Hansard*, Feb. 18, 1947.

“...20,500 Dutch troops were trained in the Malayan Union and Singapore.”

**Lord Corvedale**, Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Minister of War, *Hansard*, Jan. 16, 1947.

Workers throughout the world were alive to the issues involved in this dirty business. Australian dockers for months tied up Dutch ships in their ports, to prevent them taking arms to the imperialist forces in Indonesia. The crew of the British ship *Moreton Bay* refused to sail to Indonesia with 1,600 Dutch troops. The Labour Government, however, had no such scruples. Its weight was thrown solidly behind the Dutch exploiters.

Nor was its sphere of operations limited to Indonesia. In Indo-China, too, where a bitter struggle raged against the French re-establishing their sovereignty, it supported imperialism, though on a smaller scale. On the day Tabag village was destroyed in Sumatra, Spitfires were sent into action against a native Indo-Chinese emplacement. It was stated at the time that the British commander declared he “undertook the mission reluctantly... it was not considered cricket to use the RAF for offensive action against people who were unable to retaliate in kind.”

As in Indonesia, the British used captured Japanese troops in helping to suppress the Annamite rebellion in Indo-China for the French:

”A unit of 320 RAF men, aided by 100 ‘controlled’ Japanese soldiers, made a pre-dawn attack on Annamites near the airport control tower [at Saigon].”  
*News Chronicle*, Oct. 15, 1945.

Soon, however British troops were to be used for equally unsavoury work in the Mediterranean area. Decimated by Hitler’s war of extermination, the Jews of continental Europe saw Palestine as their only practical refuge from the vast concentration camp and charnel house that their native countries—Germany, Austria, Poland, Hungary, etc.—had become under the Brown terror. With the end of the war came a great movement by many of Europe’s surviving Jews to reach what they thought would be sanctuary in Palestine, where their fellows were urging the establishment of a Jewish National Home at the end of the British mandate in 1948.

Before British troops were finally reluctantly withdrawn, more blood was to flow and more Jewish families to be bereaved, as were those of the luckless National Servicemen sent to that strife-torn land. Foreign Secretary for the Labour Government was Ernest Bevin, whose dislike of the Jews was always thinly veiled. Under his direction, Jewish immigrants—many fresh from Nazi concentration camps—were refused admission to Palestine and taken under armed escort to Cyprus, where they found themselves once more behind barbed wire. A bitter guerrilla warfare developed between the British occupation forces in Palestine and Jewish settlers. Deportations became frequent. Reporting that fifty-two Palestinian Jews had been shipped to Eritrea, the *New York Times* said (Dec. 12, 1945):

”They are believed to have been held on suspicion of being members of an underground terrorist organisation, although no formal charges have been made against them or communicated to them. This desperation brings the number of Palestinian Jewish detainees in Eritrea to more than three hundred.”

At the same time, restrictions on sale of land to Jews, which had been severe since the 1939 White Paper, were tightened, and the British occupation forces conducted a war of nerves. Units of the Mediterranean Fleet were deployed off the coast of Palestine; British troops in full battle regalia paraded through the streets of all-Jewish Tel Aviv; searches for arms were conducted in the communal settlements; penalties for aiding illegal immigrants were increased. Such were the seeds of hatred sown in Palestine by Ernest Bevin in the autumn of 1945. The policy of the Labour Government in Palestine was to safeguard British oil interests in the Middle East and the trade route to the Indian Ocean through the Suez Canal. It makes later Labour protests about Anthony Eden’s Suez war of 1956 all too hypocritical.

## **GUNBOAT DIPLOMATS**

And the hypocrisy is heightened when we recall what happened when the Persian Majlis (Parliament) voted to nationalise the holdings of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company on March 15, 1951—six weeks before Dr. Mossadeq was elected Prime Minister of Persia.

On June 21, 1951, Herbert Morrison, who had succeeded Ernest Bevin as Foreign Secretary, told the House of Commons:

”We are not in a period when we can colonise countries which have reached a stage of self-government and we cannot in this 20<sup>th</sup> century do what was not uncommonly done in the 19<sup>th</sup> century... members opposite have to face the fact that the imperialism on which they were brought up is dead.”

Did this mean an end to Britain’s traditional gunboat diplomacy? Not at all. Four days later, on June 25, Morrison announced the dispatch of the cruiser *Mauritius* to Abadan for “the protection of British subjects in Persia.” When Labour MP Emrys Hughes asked whether this move was not likely to endanger British lives and if it could not be construed as “19<sup>th</sup> Century Imperialism,” Morrison replied: “I think in this case the imperialism is in some respect the other way round.”

*Mauritius* anchored in the Shatt-el-arab, in Iraqi waters.

Persian Foreign Minister M. Kazemi protested at this and the reinforcement in Iraq of British forces at the RAF airfields of Shaibah (near Basra) and Habbaniyah (near Bagdad) and in the area around Kirkuk and Arbil, near Persia’s western border.

The Labour Government’s reply was to send the destroyers *Armada*, *Gravelines*, *Vigo*, *Chequers*, *Chieftain*, and *Chivalrous* to join HMS *Mauritius*. On September 10, the Treasury announced economic sanctions, the effect of which were to deprive Persia of all her dollar income, prevent her earning any new sterling and stop her importing certain scarce goods from Britain. Simultaneously, the Board of Trade revoked licences for exporting to Persia such goods as sugar, iron and steel products, non-ferrous metals, alloys and certain processed oils. This was five days after Dr. Mossadeq had announced that Persia was prepared to sell Britain ten million tons of oil per year (an estimate of the quantity previously used here) and to offset 50 per cent of the price against compensation claims by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company.

Fortunately, Morrison’s essay into “Brinkmanship” did not lead to war, though for many months the big stick was waved in an attempt to terrorise Persia into capitulation on the issue of nationalising her oil resources—an ironical position for a government whose main plank of home economic policy had been the nationalisation of basic industries.

Egypt, however, was not so fortunate. Following the approval, on October 15–17, 1951, by both houses of the Egyptian Parliament of abrogation of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, under which British troops were stationed in the Suez Canal Zone, and of the Anglo-Egyptian condominium agreement of 1899, relating to the Sudan, rioting took place in Ismailia and Port Said and troops of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battn. Lancashire Fusiliers were sent into action, several Egyptians bring killed and a large number injured. Following the familiar pattern, troop reinforcements, including 3,500 men of the 16<sup>th</sup> Independent Parachute Brigade from Cyprus, were moved in, as were the destroyers *Armada*, *Vigo* and *Saintes*. On October 22, British tanks seized the workshops of the Egyptian State Railways outside Suez, took over twenty-five locomotives and occupied switchpoints.

Withdrawal of these troops was not to take place until after the Tories had taken power at Westminster.

In fact, the British Navy, Army and Air Force were kept in action almost continuously throughout the years of Labour rule, safeguarding the interests not only of British imperialism, but of despotic régimes abroad, too.

It was not until February 1, 1950, for example, that British troops were finally withdrawn from Greece. For five years they had played a leading part in the Greek Civil War, which started in December 2, 1945, with the shooting of demonstrators, mostly youths and girls, in Constitution

Square, Athens—outside the British HQ. The extraordinary arrogance with which Ernest Bevin regarded his mission as Foreign Secretary was aptly shown in a House of Commons debate on November 23, 1945. Replying to Churchill, who spoke against a suggested delay until March, 1948, in holding a plebiscite in Greece on the future of the monarchy, Bevin said that Greece must first be put in a state of tranquillity, adding the question: “In what reasonable period can *I* get this country [Greece] into a tranquil state?”

## ARMS AND THE SLAVE

The Government’s Defence Estimates reflected these military adventures of the Labour Government, product of a party which had once proudly boasted its anti-militarist principles. During the last four years of Labour rule, the Estimates were:

1948 ... £692.6 million  
1949 ... £759.86 million  
1950 ... £780.0 million  
1951 ... £1,032.26 million

The enormous increase during the 1950–51 period was accounted for by Britain’s becoming involved in the Korean War. But the White Paper of 1949, which provided for an increase in the Estimates of more than £617 million on 1948, attributed much of the cost of defence to Britain’s responsibility for administering occupied territories and to the necessity for sending abroad extra forces to reinforce local security measures.

Small wonder, then, that the Labour Party readily discarded its traditional opposition to peace-time military conscription, aptly named “the badge of the slave” by Keir Hardie, one of the party’s founders.

On November 5, 1946, Attlee disclosed the Government’s plan for **permanent** peace-time conscription to a private meeting of the Parliamentary Labour Party and to a special meeting of the TUC. This was to be on the basis of eighteen months with the colours, followed by a five-year period on Territorial Reserve.

On November 18, Labour MP Victor Yates tabled an amendment to this policy in the House of Commons, calling it “an outrage against elementary common sense.” Conscription, he added, was “an unpardonable waste of the precious energy of the nation,” “State slavery” and “the negation of freedom.”

On a division, the amendment was lost by 320 votes to 53, 211 Labour members voting **for** conscription and only 45 **against**. The Labour Government policy, of course, had the support of the Tory Opposition. When Isaacs moved the second reading of the Bill on March 31, 1947, Churchill said the Opposition would always support the Government when it stood for “national as opposed to party or sectarian interests.” He commented on the “irony of fate” which had resulted in Prime Minister Attlee and Minister of Defence Alexander, who four months before the war had led their followers into the lobby against compulsory service, being “the very men to bring forward a conscription Bill two years after the war, when all our enemies had surrendered unconditionally.”

On May 7, 1947, on the Committee Stage of the Bill, a Government amendment reduced the period of full-time service to twelve months, a move that Labour MP Capt. R. Blackburn called “a

sinister surrender on defence policy.” He need not have worried. At the end of 1948, the eighteen-month period was reinstated and, while exhausted MPs were enjoying the summer recess of 1950, the eighteen months was raised to two years.

## **TORY SUPPORT**

By a strange coincidence, a debate which touched the very bedrock of Labour foreign policy was held on the same day as that on which the party betrayed its opposition to conscription: November 18, 1946.

This was on an amendment tabled by forty-four Labour members and later supported by a further fourteen, urging the Government to “review and recast its conduct of international affairs” so as to “provide a democratic and constructive alternative to an otherwise inevitable conflict between American capitalism and Soviet Communism, in which all hope of World Government would be destroyed.” It was moved by Richard Crossman, who said the Government had drifted away from Labour’s election pledges and given the impression of an “exclusive Anglo-American tie-up and of a tie-up between the two front benches.”

The impression was confirmed when Tory MP Capt. Crookshank said: “The Opposition are utterly opposed to the... idea... that British foreign policy should not be based on clear British interests, but on ‘ideological’ aspirations. The Government’s foreign policy is, broadly speaking, supported by the Opposition.”

“Mr. Bevin,” he declared, “is having a difficult time in New York... we will be no party to stabs in the back from in the back from his so-called friends.”

However, when the ILP’s two surviving members, McGovern and Campbell Stephen (both later to climb on the Labour bandwagon), forced a division, not one of the amendment’s signatories had the guts to vote for it. The Government received a majority of 353 votes to nil.

## **NATO AND FASCISM**

And its foreign policy—with few exceptions—continued to receive the wholehearted support of the Tory Party. So it was when American bomber bases were established in Britain and later equipped with nuclear armament. So it was with the forming of the mammoth military alliance of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO). The Treaty was signed on April 4, 1949, and officially came into force on August 24, 1949. One of its main architects was Ernest Bevin. On signing the Treaty, he declared:

”At last democracy is no longer a series of isolated units. It has become a cohesive organism, determined to fulfil its great purpose... I put my signature to this Pact in the name of a people who join with other signatories for the preservation of the great freedoms and in giving an assurance to mankind to assist the peoples of the world to live in understanding and good neighbourliness.”

High-flown sentiments. How empty and meaningless they were was shown by the identity of a co-signatory and later speaker, Dr. José Caeiro da Mata, representing fascist Portugal. Making it clear that the Pact was simply and solely a military alliance against Russian expansionism, he

said Europe was “struggling against the greatest and most dangerous mental epidemic of all time, which threatens to destroy the flower of our culture.”

Spanish Fascism, like the Portuguese variety—and that of Dominican dictator Trukillo, who was supplied with arms from Britain—has good cause to remember with gratitude the two Labour Governments. One of the legacies Labour received from its Coalition and Tory-caretaker predecessors was a concentration camp at Hall o’ the Hill, Chorley, Lancashire, where 226 Spanish anti-fascists were interned. These men had been militant fighters against Fascism since 1936, when they took up arms against the Franco insurrection. At the end of the Spanish Civil War, they sought asylum in France, were interned, but after the fall of France in June, 1940, escaped and joined the underground resistance movement. Captured by the Germans, they were put on forced labour in the infamous Nazi Todt organisation. After the occupation of France by the victorious Allied armies, these men were rounded up and sent to England. In the Lancashire camp, Agustin Soler committed suicide, others—like Eustagio Bustos—went mad as a result of this final episode in their calvary of persecution.

A campaign on their behalf met with stubborn resistance from the Labour Government. In the House of Commons, Minister of War J. J. Lawson declared:

”These Spanish nationals were captured as serving members of an enemy para-military organisation and they are correctly held as prisoners-of-war.”

*Hansard*, Oct. 9, 1945.

Lawson must have been well aware that the “organisation” was that of forced labour. It was another full year before indignant anti-fascist public opinion forced the Labour Government to release the last of these men.

Even worse was to follow. At a time when executions of anti-fascists were taking place in Spain with sickening regularity, the Labour Government deported back to that country anti-fascists who sought refuge in Britain. *Direct Action* (March, 1948) reported:

”...the British Government has deported 136 Spanish anti-fascists back to Spain, where they face torture and probable death at the hands of the Franco authorities. These men recently arrived at British ports, having managed to escape from Spain illegally by boat. For this reason they carried no papers. In one port six men were immediately put on a ship to be returned to Spain. When the ship put off from the dockside they jumped into the water. They were then placed on a Spanish-bound plane and deported. The others were held, for a few days, in prisons in various ports, and were then sent back to Spain.”

At no time during their terms of office did the Labour Government take any effective action against Franco fascism. It came as no surprise, therefore, when, in March, 1951—ironically a month in which the oppressed Spanish workers staged strikes and mass demonstrations against Franco—the Labour Government established diplomatic relations with Spanish fascism and the Duke of Primo de Rivera, a typically corrupt product of a corrupt régime, arrived at the Court of St. James’s as Ambassador.

## IN THE COLONIES

The Labour Party has always posed as champion of the exploited colonial peoples, yet its coming to power changed their conditions hardly at all. This was not so much because Labour MPs lacked sympathy towards them (although, despite some staunch champions of their cause among Labour backbenchers, the same sort of patronising contempt which characterises the attitude of Labour Party leaders to the working class appears again and again in their dealings with the coloured peoples), but because, as in foreign affairs, the interests of Britain as a Great Power conflicted with socialist ideals and were considered more important. Also, the Labour Government did not wish to antagonise the white settlers or the great capitalist magnates with vested interests in the colonies.

Anyway, the activities of any party which attempted to introduce socialism, as opposed to mere State charity, by operating the machinery of the State would be thwarted by such hostile social forces and by the built-in inertia of the State bureaucracy itself. This was especially true in colonies with internal self-government, such as Kenya, with its notorious White Highlands, and Southern Rhodesia, with laws almost as repressive to the Africans as those of the Union of South Africa, with whose white population the Labour leaders were particularly concerned to keep on good terms.

The struggles and sacrifices of the colonial peoples themselves brought some constitutional advances, and, in the case of the former Indian Empire, independence, but the general picture of British imperialism remained the same under Labour control. In India, in September, 1946, there was the bombing of the villages of dissident tribesmen on the North-West Frontier; in Malaya there was collective punishment for individual crimes—a doctrine repugnant to natural justice; in the West Indies there was the banning of public meetings and processions following labour unrest caused by widespread unemployment and atrocious living conditions; and everywhere there were states of emergency, curfews, proscriptions, preventive detentions, banishments, Press censorship, the colour bar, and the same dear old Governors.

Typical of this breed was Sir Philip Mitchell, Governor of Kenya during the post-war period of Labour Party power, who, in reply to the suggestion that land occupied by British settlers should be returned to African tribes, said: "We are here as architects in a land we made our own." It is such men as this so-called "Civil Servant" and those who supported him, including the British Government, who bear ultimate responsibility for Mau Mau.

The effectiveness of the opposition to social, economic and political progress is shown by the fate of a petition sent by the Bermuda Workers' Association to Arthur Creech Jones, Labour's Colonial Secretary, in 1947. This asked for the appointment of a Royal Commission to investigate conditions in the colony, where "democracy is a mockery" and the masses are "voiceless, voteless and underprivileged."

In a dispatch to the Governor of Bermuda, Admiral Sir Ralph Leatham, Creech Jones said: "If the figures cited in the petition are correct, the proportion of the population of voting age which is in a position to exercise the vote in Bermuda is exceptionally small." He agreed that reliance on import duties to provide revenue "bears unfairly upon the less wealthy section of the community; and that the time has come for the introduction of direct taxation to reduce import duties and the cost of living and to provide funds for modern social development." And in a passage no less damning for the extreme caution of its phrasing, he recognised that the Bermuda Union and Trades Dispute Act, 1946, "goes some way towards legalising trade union activities, but that it



falls short of the trade union law in the United Kingdom,” and that he “must therefore continue to press for the bringing of the colonial union legislation into line with modern opinion.”

His recognition of the justice of the complaints was, however, wiped out by his opening statement that “as Bermuda has enjoyed representative government for more than three hundred years, it is clearly necessary that, in the first place at any rate, examination should be undertaken by or at the instance of the Colonial Legislature.”

Almost exactly a year later, on April 2, 1948, a Joint Committee of the Bermuda Legislative Council (a nominated body) and the House of Assembly reported that “the early adoption of adult franchise would be prejudicial to the best interests of Bermuda” on the ground that in larger countries universal suffrage was “disciplined and controlled by a party system,” which would be unsuitable for Bermuda because of its small size and because of the “important personal considerations play in political life”—the personal considerations, presumably, of the powerful and privileged.

The Committee also argued that with universal suffrage “the calibre of the representation would deteriorate,” another way of saying that opponents of such gross inequality would certainly be elected by the people. Forced to make some concession, they recommended “a limited increase in the electorate,” but defended the view that “ownership of real estate was the best system for the franchise.”

Most of the other grievances were skated over, although a compulsory scheme of sickness benefits and accident compensation, as a first step towards a more comprehensive scheme including old-age pensions, was recommended. While the extension of openings in the Civil Service to suitable coloured people was proposed, the colour bar was in general upheld, the Committee **unanimously supporting the system of separate schools for white and coloured children**. The ultimate raising of the school-leaving age to 14 was favoured, but the proposition that elementary education should be general be free was supported only by a 7 to 5 majority.

One must go back a hundred years to find comparable social, political and economic conditions in Britain. Yet the four and a half years during which the professedly socialist Labour Party enjoyed power from the time of the presentation of the petition, practically nothing was done to remedy the grievances of the people of Bermuda.

That Bermuda was not an isolated case is shown by the similar conditions in, for example, the Bahamas; by the fact that, for instance, universal adult suffrage was not introduced into British Guiana until 1953 and into British Honduras until 1954 (both, of course, under a Tory Government in Britain); and by the presence today all over the West Indies of nominated upper chambers able to block reforms introduced by the elected assemblies, if they so wish.

## **NKRUMAH JAILED**

However, during the period of Labour power, as now, the realities of imperialism were most starkly revealed in Britain’s African colonies.

A minor prelude, with the right note of contempt as it were, was provided by the shooting in Kenya in January, 1947, of African native soldiers who struck against delays in demobilisation. Other troops were brought in and ordered to fire on them. Six Africans were shot dead and ten wounded. Imagine the outcry if white mutineers, of whom there were many for the same reasons

at that time, had been dealt with so ruthlessly. The expendable “blacks” received no more than a curt paragraph in the British Press.

On March 19, 1959, the role of the Labour Government in the struggle for independence in the Gold Coast (which became the sovereign State of Ghana in 1957, under a Tory Government) was recalled in a Commons debate on the Cyprus agreement. Bevan was lecturing the Tories on their past and present folly in suppressing nationalist leaders in the colonies, with whom they later had to come to terms. When he came to the arrest of Dr. Nkrumah, his colleagues on the Opposition front bench had to remind him, amid laughter and jeers, that a Labour Government was responsible. “All right,” exclaimed Mr. Bevan, “we shoved him in jail! Yes, certainly. If honourable members will restrain their hilarity for a moment, I said this is part of the classic story of these struggles.” He can say that again!

But Bevan omitted to mention the death of twenty-nine people and the wounding of 237 others in riots which followed the firing by the police, on February 28, 1948, on a procession of unarmed ex-Servicemen taking a petition of grievances to the Governor. Two Africans were killed and five wounded. Six African leaders, including Nkrumah, described in the House of Commons by the Labour Government’s Under-Secretary of State for the Colonies as “Communists,” were arrested and, without trial, deported to the Northern Territories. For eight months the Gold Coast was ruled by the Governor under emergency legislation.

## **NIGERIAN MASSACRE**

On January 12, 1950, a state of emergency was again declared in reply to a civil disobedience campaign for independence. The *Accra Evening News*, organ of Nkrumah’s Convention People’s Party, was suspended, more than a hundred Africans were arrested for demonstrating and curfew-breaking, and several leaders of the CPP were again arrested for seditious activities. On February 22 eleven were found guilty, nine of them (including Nkrumah) bring sentenced to twelve months’ imprisonment. Following the overwhelming victory of the CPP in the elections under the new Constitution, introduced at the beginning of 1951, they were released “as an act of grace” on February 12, 1951, Nkrumah becoming first Prime Minister of the Gold Coast on March 5, 1951, and later of independent Ghana.

In Nigeria there is the same sort of story. On November 8, 1949, African miners at the Government-owned and operated Enugu Colliery adopted go-slow tactics in protest against the rejection of their demands for a basic daily wage of 5s. 10d. and welfare facilities. On November 15, following dismissal of 150 hewers for taking part in the movement, 1,500 men began a sit-down strike. On November 18 they were fired on by a force of police, twenty-one strikers being shot dead and fifty-one wounded. It was stated that they had been sent to the mine to remove explosives as a safety measure, but as the police report that they had been attacked by an armed mob was utterly rejected by the subsequent Inquiry Commission, the massacre was probably a deliberate attempt at strike-breaking by the authorities.

Certainly contemptuous indifference to the lives of “the blacks” was shown during the widespread disorders which followed. At Port Harcourt, where a general strike was declared, the police fired on a protest demonstration, killing two men. They also fired on “unruly crowds” at Aba on November 23, where two Africans were wounded, and at Omitsha on November 26, where three Africans were wounded.

On November 26 the Governor declared a state of emergency throughout Nigeria, giving the police powers to impose curfews and search houses without a warrant. Press censorship was imposed in the Eastern Provinces on the ground that "some sections of the Press have not been adopting a responsible attitude, and it appears that efforts are being made in some quarters to inflame the feelings of the public." One might have been excused for thinking that it was the "responsible attitude" of the authorities, especially of the police, that did most to inflame the public. Arrests were made in several towns in the Eastern Provinces, and at Aba, on November 27, five men were sentenced to terms of imprisonment ranging from six months to two years.

A few months later, on March 8, 1950, Mokwugo Okaye, Secretary-General of a Nigerian nationalist movement, was sentenced at Lagos to thirty-three months' imprisonment on charges of possessing seditious literature. This Zikist movement, formed in 1947 under the leadership of Dr. Nuamdi Azikwe (another potential Prime Minister of a sovereign State after Nigeria becomes a Dominion in 1960), was proclaimed an unlawful society on April 13, 1950, on the ground that it had sought "to stir up hatred and malice and to pursue seditious aims by lawlessness and violence."

British colonial administrators come professedly as apostles of a superior civilisation, with smiling countenances and bearing the priceless gifts of capitalism and parliamentary democracy. The politically naïve might assume that they would take under their wings the modern, westernised, sophisticated nationalists whose aim is to reproduce in their own countries these noble blooms of European civilisation. Yet their "divide and rule" policy, like that of the white settlers, has always been to keep the different tribes apart and to bolster the indigenous forces of authority and ossified tradition, the reactionary, anti-democratic hierarchies represented by most of the African tribal systems of paramount chiefs and sub-chiefs, because only so could the colonies be kept under British control. Indeed, where such anti-democratic forces have not existed, as among the ill-fated Kikuyu of Kenya, it has been thought necessary to invent them. Such tactics were long used to keep the nationalists at bay in West Africa.

But of all the colonies, Uganda probably gives the clearest example of this policy in action. On April 25, 1949, a mass demonstration outside the palace of the Kabaka (King) of Buganda (the largest of the four kingdoms of Uganda Protectorate) demanded that he dismiss his three chief ministers and all the chiefs and that the people should be allowed to choose their own chiefs. The demonstrators were dispersed by baton charges, but rioting, looting of Indian shops, and the burning of houses of chiefs and their supporters spread to outlying districts, and on the following day the Governor of Uganda, Sir John Hall, imposed a curfew and Press censorship. Troop reinforcements with armoured cars were brought in from Kenya and emergency measures empowered specified Government officials and the chiefs of the Buganda Government to disperse assemblies of five persons or more and to use force, including firearms, to prevent, or to deal with, breaches of the peace. Regulations were made to control strikes and maintain essential services. In the disturbances eight Africans were killed and over a thousand arrested. A collective fine was imposed and the Bataka Party and the Uganda African Farmers' Union, which were held to be responsible for the disorders and accused by the Governor of "acting under Communist inspiration," were outlawed. In the following year, on March 1, 1950, the former leader of the Bataka Party, James Kabazzi, was sentenced to a fine of 20,000 shillings or fourteen years' imprisonment, while seven other Africans charged with conspiring to rebel against the Kabaka received savage sentences ranging from ten years' imprisonment to sixteen years' hard labour.

The ironic sequel to this squalid story shows the other side of the coin: that where the actions of the stooge-chiefs themselves conflict with the interests of their white masters, they are unceremoniously booted out. So in 1953 the Tory Government deported the Kabaka of Buganda.

Another notorious case of an African chief assigned the role of stooge refusing to play the game according to the rules drawn up by the British authorities was that of Seretse Khama, elected chief of the Bamangwato tribe of Bechuanaland, who was indiscreet enough to marry a white woman, Ruth Williams. The British Government invited him to London to discuss the affair, using as a pretext the opposition of a small section of his tribe led by his uncle, Tshekedi Khama, to his retaining the chieftainship. On March 7, 1950, following Seretse Khama's rejection of a bribe of £1,100 a year offered to him on condition that he would "voluntarily" relinquish his claim to the chieftainship, it was announced that a five-year exile had been imposed on him.

"My people did not want me to come back to England," commented Seretse bitterly. "They foresaw the position that has arisen. I told Mr. Gordon-Walker I thought I had been tricked... I thought those things were supposed to happen only in Russia." He said he believed that the Governments of both the Union of South Africa (whose territory surrounds the Protectorate of Bechuanaland, and which, indeed, claims the right to annex it, along with the other two British Protectorates in South Africa) and of Southern Rhodesia had brought pressure to bear on the British Government to keep him out of his own country.

## THE COLOUR BAR

In the House of Commons on March 8, 1950, Fenner Brockway said: "Is the right honourable gentleman aware of the very grave concern in all sections of our community that a colour bar which influences certain quarters had determined the decision of the Government in this matter?" And from the Opposition benches Churchill, whose own Government was, in 1952, to declare Seretse's exile permanent, asked for an assurance that there was no mention in the report of the official inquiry of the opinion of white people in South Africa on mixed marriages. The Labour Government's Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Patrick Gordon-Walker, denied that the decision to banish Seretse had anything to do with a colour bar, but refused to disclose what was in the report.

Unfortunately for him, one of those Tory MPs who are incapable of keeping their big mouths shut, Sir Ian Fraser, revealed the ugly realities behind the suave evasiveness of the more diplomatic Minister. "Might I ask the right honourable gentleman," he said, "whether he is aware that 99 per cent or more of all the Europeans who live in South Africa, of all races, and"—he had the impertinence to add—"an overwhelming majority of all the Bantu who are capable of understanding this matter, would not be sympathetic to a mixed marriage? Mixed marriages are not only illegal but offensive to the whole of the population there in our sister country, and this is true also of the territories adjoining South Africa. In these circumstances this factor, so vitally affecting public opinion in our sister country, must be taken into account."

The Right Honourable Patrick Gordon-Walker denied that Seretse had been "tricked or in any way disadvantaged by coming here. "As it was," he blandly remarked, "he had the advantage of discussion with the Government and of being informed of their decision. I have done my utmost throughout," he declared, "to preserve honour between man and man in this matter." The Right

Honourable Winston Churchill, however, who should surely know a piece of dirty dealing when he sees on, called it “a very disreputable transaction.”

The Labour Government’s attitude to Cyprus further reveals the kinship of the colonial policies of the Labour Party bosses and the Tories, notwithstanding the constant stink the Labour Party raises in Parliament when it is in opposition. As a result of unrest against British rule before the war, the few rights of self-government its people had enjoyed had been taken away from them in 1931.

When they had the power to do so, the “socialist” champions of independence for the colonial peoples failed even to restore internal self-government to Cyprus. Like the Tories, whose policy was to be so violently attacked later, the Labour Government was more concerned with the strategic importance of Cyprus to the Empire than with human rights. It refused to allow Cyprus to unite with Greece, and it did its best to repress the opposition of Greek Cypriots. In January, 1946, for example, twelve trade union leaders were sentenced to a year’s imprisonment and six to eighteen months’ for belonging to an unlawful association, Akel, the Communist Party of Cyprus.

To what extent the British Government, as opposed to the colonial governments, was directly responsible for all these colonial crimes is not the main point at issue, although its ultimate responsibility is inescapable. The significant fact is that they could, and did, happen again and again while a Labour Government was in power, no less than they have done under the Tories.

## **THE ROPE TRICK**

An outstanding example of the sacrifice of political principles to expediency is provided by the fate of an amendment to the Criminal Justice Bill, 1948, introduced by Sidney Silverman on April 14, 1948. Abolition of the death penalty is a cause championed by socialists for over a hundred years. Its triumph might have seemed assured with the coming to power, with an overwhelming majority, of a party claiming to stand for socialism—even Fabian socialism! Mr. Silverman’s amendment was for the suspension of capital punishment for a trial period of five years.

Even in Parliament there is some traditional respect for the rights of free conscience, at least in such questions as death by the rope, if not in that of death by bullet and bomb. Accordingly the Government promised that although their advice was to reject the motion, they would allow Labour members a “free vote,” as this rare phenomenon is so ironically described. Later, however, they decided that such untrammelled freedom of conscience could not be tolerated in the case of Ministers. If they disagreed with the desire of the Home Secretary, Mr. Chuter Ede (who before he became responsible for executions had been a champion of abolition), to keep the death penalty, they would be allowed to abstain, but not to vote in opposition.

Despite this despicable manoeuvre, the clause was carried in the Commons by 245 votes to 222. Of the 289 Labour MPs present, 215—or nearly three to one—voted for suspension of the death penalty.

Of the seventy-two Ministers and other official members of the Government in the House of Commons, only twenty-eight voted against suspension, the remaining forty-four taking no part in the division, in most cases because they opposed their leaders’ decision.

On June 2 the House of Lords, with its permanent majority of reactionaries, threw out the clause. The Labour advocates of suspension then shamefully accepted a bogus compromise clause

introduced by the Government, retaining the death penalty for murder in connection with robbery and similar crimes, systematic poisoning, sexual crimes and in escaping from jailers and policemen. This was passed by the Commons by an even bigger majority—307 to 209.

But even this milk-and-water reform was too much for the noble peers, who threw it out in its turn. On July 22, on the advice of the Home Secretary, the elected “representatives” of the British people agreed, by 215 votes to 34, to forget the whole thing in view of the continued opposition of the Lords. Mr. Chuter Ede, who was congratulated by Churchill on his statesmanlike attitude, said that they would not be acting in the public interest, nor in accordance with public opinion, if they were to lose the whole measure merely to give further expression to their disagreement with the Lords.

Only thirty-three Labour MPS and one ILP member salvaged a few tattered remnants of their honour from the ruins. Nearly two-thirds of the Labour Party MPs, including seven Cabinet Ministers, showed their bold independence of conscience by failing to take part in the voting at all.

Rejection of the arrogant claims to special political powers and privileges by right of birth is surely the first essential of socialism. Yet here was a Labour Government meekly submitting to the will of its old foes, the hereditary peers, because it suited its leaders, who were against the suspension of the death penalty anyway.

Less than nine months before, in October, 1947, the same Government had introduced its Bill to curtail the powers of the House of Lords by reducing the period by which it could delay Bills passed by the Commons from two years to one. Why? Because it suited it, since otherwise its plans to nationalise steel would have been thwarted.

Listen to Citizen Clement Attlee, who a few years later was himself to be elevated to Olympus with an earl’s coronet perched on his noble brow, defending the Parliament Bill of 1947 in the House of Commons. October 21, 1947—“We cannot allow the will of the electorate to be thwarted by another place...” November 11, 1947—“The only purpose of the House of Lords is the alleged interpretation of the people’s will when there is either a Liberal or a Labour Government in power.”

The Parliament Bill was rejected three times by the House of Lords, and in consequence did not become law until December 16, 1949. Thus it had to receive altogether nine Readings in the House of Commons, and was, so to speak, hanging about the lobbies waiting for its turn to come up again at the very moment when Citizen Chuter Ede was mouthing “merely to give further expression to their disagreement with the Lords.”

During the Committee Stage of the Parliament Bill, Emrys Hughes proposed that the delaying power of the Lords should be reduced to only one month. This call for bloody revolution evoked a horrified cry from Citizen Herbert Morrison. For that old socialist warhorse it was “bolshevism gone mad.”

## **HOUSES AND HEALTH**

At the 1945 General Election, the Labour Party boasted of its ability to solve the housing problem, and pledged itself to create a Ministry of Housing to deal with what would obviously be one of the most pressing domestic issues in the post-war period. The pledge, like so many others, was not honoured and housing was handed to Aneurin Bevan, as a spare-time poser for him to solve

at the Ministry of Health. As a result, the statistics of permanent houses built during the Labour Party's period of power compare badly with those of previous and subsequent régimes. Here they are, in thousands:

1946 ... 55.5  
1947 ... 139.6  
1948 ... 227.6  
1949 ... 197.7  
1950 ... 198.2  
1951 ... 194.7

The record of the following three years of Tory Government was:

1952 ... 240.2  
1953 ... 318.9  
1954 ... 347.6

Pre-war, from 1924 to 1928, the average was 202,000 a year; from 1929 to 1933, 228,000; and from 1934 to 1939, 358,000 a year.

The Labour Party, particularly in the person of Bevan, as Minister of Health, was sworn to defend the National Health Service against the principle of making any change for any of its services. On April 3, 1951, Bevan declared: "I will never be a member of a Government which makes charges on the National Health Service for the patient." He had conveniently forgotten how, on October 24, 1949, in the House of Commons, Attlee announced the abandonment of the free principle. A charge of 1s. was to be made for each prescription. Though unmentioned in propaganda, the principle of payment had been anticipated in the Act. On April 10, 1951, Chancellor of the Exchequer Hugh Gaitskell, introducing his Budget, announced that charges would be made for glasses and dentures supplied by the National Health Service. Bevan had no alternative this time but to resign.

On June 21, 1949, Labour's Chancellor of the Exchequer, Hugh Dalton, replying to Sir Ian Fraser (Conservative), said that the total post-war credits created had amounted to £800 million, of which £133 million had been repaid to men over 68 and women over 60.

On July 18, 1950, the Exchequer said that about £155 million had been repaid. During Labour's terms of office, only about one-quarter of the debt was repaid and that only to persons of an advanced age.

But... **out** of office: "The state of post-war credits really was a bit of a scandal—almost a public default." **Patrick Gordon-Walker**, Labour MP, *Hansard*, April 15, 1959.

The post-war increase in working-class living standards was almost entirely due to the world trade boom and the readiness of British capitalists to take advantage of it. World boom, not Acts of Parliament, brought "full employment," which, itself, made increased wage demands possible. To judge the efficacy of the "Welfare State" we must consider the condition of those unable to get a direct share of the capitalist market boom. Of these, the old-age pensioners form the biggest and best example.

In 1936 Seebohm Rowntree conducted his famous study of poverty, using York as his example subject. There, in 1936, old-age pensioners formed 14.7 per cent of those living **below** the poverty

line. Repeating the experiment in 1950, after four years of Labour Government, he found that in York the old-age pensioners now formed 68.1 per cent of those living **below** the poverty level.

**”The Labour Party has got to understand that it is no longer a street-corner mob. It is the governing class of this country. It has got to have the poise and self-assurance of the ruling class.”**

**The late Maurice Webb**, then Labour Minister of Food, at Bradford, May 6, 1951.

## **THE GREAT ILLUSION**

Some readers, new to Syndicalist ideas, may question our motive in exposing the anti-working-class record of the two post-war Labour Governments. We have done so for two reasons.

First, we believe many sincere but starry-eyed Labour supporters have already half-forgotten the events during those six years in which every Socialist principle was betrayed by the politicians. Before they were lost completely, we felt it essential to place these facts on record. It is no service to the working class for the truth to be hidden, however embarrassing and unpalatable it may be for some people.

Second, these events were not accidental. Social democracy, based on the gradual reform of capitalist institutions and operating within the framework of the capitalist State machine, is inevitably conditioned and corrupted by these forces. This development was clearly foreseen by the revolutionary industrial wing of the First International, the forerunner of our present International Working Men’s Association. The clash of ideas, State and authoritarian versus anti-State and libertarian, has since continued to divide the working-class movement. Syndicalists have always claimed that there is no hope of ever achieving working-class emancipation through political action, either at the ballot box or by the imposition of one-party dictatorships. The result of the former can be seen in the record of the Labour Party in power; that of the latter in the rigid class division and oppression of the so-called “Communist” States.

Syndicalism claims that the workers’ strength and ability to achieve a free Socialist society lie in their own self-organisation at the point of production and the use of direct economic action, both in the day-to-day struggle against capitalism and in its final replacement by a society based on Workers’ Control.

It is to help dispel the pipe-dream that any hope for the future rests in the election of yet another Labour Government, foredoomed to travel the same road as its predecessors, that this pamphlet is dedicated. In the words of the “International”: “The slave’s own hand his chains must shiver.”



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Syndicalist Workers' Federation  
How Labour governed, 1945–1951  
1960

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A pamphlet by the Syndicalist Workers' Federation on how the Labour Party governed between the years 1945 and 1951 examining their relationship with the working class and how “socialist” it really was.

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