

“THE EMPIRE”

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FIFTY years ago, when the Boer War had finally been brought to an end, the Rt. Hon. Joseph Chamberlain, then Colonial Secretary, went on a visit to South Africa. On his return he spoke at a great Tory gathering in St. Andrew's Hall, Glasgow. In the course of his speech he said he had gone out one evening and gazed up at the starry heavens, millions of worlds whirling through space. He went on: 'Then I looked away across the illimitable veldt and I had a vision—a vision of Empire'. What a tale he thus gave them, of untold wealth, of trade to revive Britain's decaying industries, of work and wages, of prosperity for all, rich and poor alike. Yes, sir, he had a vision all right.

A year or so later I was standing on a platform at a street corner in Paisley, looking down at an array of pamphlets spread out for display in front of the platform. Prominent amongst them was one with the title *Empire is Murder*. Pride of Empire was inculcated everywhere, it was then much more the subject of laudation than the monarchy. 'The greatest Empire the world has ever seen.' 'An Empire on which the sun never sets.' It was all over the world to the farthest corner of the earth. In school the children had their young minds directed to the bright red areas when geography was the lesson for the day. There are red areas now, that at all costs their young minds must be kept away from or poisoned about their character. But in these earlier days there was no question about the fact of Empire nor of the wealth it brought in an ever-increasing flow into this country—but, however it was disbursed, the poor still remained poor. Nor was there any question as to the attitude of Socialists towards it. They recognised the slavery, the wholesale debauchery of tribes and peoples, that accompanied the boast and the ruthless exploitation, of Empire. Today a change has taken place. Not in the fact of Empire, nor in the ruthless desire of the imperialists for the plunder it represents, but in their public utterances regarding its existence. Now, when the pamphlet to which I have referred should have its title changed to 'Empire is massacre,' the imperialists and their right-wing labour apologists never cease in their efforts to persuade the working class that 'Empire is a thing of the past'. 'There is no British imperialism any more.' So far as colonial peoples are concerned we are just kind-hearted big brothers doing all we can to help backward peoples to a better life—if not in this world in the next.

With all this going on in the press and on the platform, it is scarcely to be wondered at that there is confusion, widespread confusion on the subject and that so many workers should fail to realise the vital importance for themselves of an alliance between the exploited workers of this country and the oppressed and exploited workers and peasants of the colonial and semi-colonial countries. Tearing aside this veil of confusion that seeks to hide the Empire and its evil consequences, not only for the colonial people, but now more and more for the people of this country, has come a truly great study of imperialism, a searching factual study from its rise out of early colonialism to its present-day savage and murderous decline, in *The Crisis of Britain and the British Empire*, by R. Palme Dutt.* If only this book could be the subject of study in every workshop! And why not? This is a matter of life and death for the British workers. Colonial people are dying in the struggle for freedom and independence. The same struggle the Irish people have carried forward century after century and which has still to be completed through the removal of partition.

Yes, colonial people are dying and young lads from Britain are dying in these far off lands, but the imperialism for which they are dying is also dying, but in its death throes it can destroy all that the workers of this country have struggled so hard to achieve in years gone by. With the boast of empire went the self-satisfied bourgeois boast 'This is the wealthiest country in the world'. Can anyone say that today, with Churchill, Butler, O'Brien and others making their doleful speeches of national bankruptcy, unless the workers put their last ounce of energy into the job. We aren't going upwards, despite all the great technical and scientific advances. We're going downward, downward towards ruin and this downward process, this crisis, is inseparable from the 'Crisis of Empire'.

So this book must be made the subject of widespread study. Every page is alive with lessons for the people of this, and of other countries, and particularly for the people of America, from where the more strident imperialists are systematically pushing their way into what hitherto were the profitable reserves of Britain. R. Palme Dutt is recognised throughout the international working-class movement as a master of Marxist theory and practice. And he demonstrates this to the full in his treatment of this great and far-reaching subject. As he says on page 26, 'The crisis of empire cannot be side-stepped. The peoples of Britain and Western Europe are faced with the inescapable necessity to build their lives anew,

* Lawrence & Wishart, 512 pp. 25s.

and to carry through a radical reconstruction of their own countries and of their relations with the present dependent peoples of their empires in such a way as to break once and for all with the old rotten parasitic basis of imperialist domination and exploitation'.

How can they 'build their lives anew' unless they understand the nature of the problem and the character of the forces arrayed against them? The answer is given in chapter after chapter, tracing every stage in the growth of imperialism and of its first mighty crash in 1914, with the emergence of the new, great liberating forces in the October Revolution of 1917. Now, as Dutt says on page 27, 'From Prague to Peking a new world has come into being which has freed itself from the orbit of imperialism'. Do we rise with the new world or sink down in ruin and decay with the old? Surely an important question for the workers everywhere. No more imperialism, croak the right-wing labour leaders. I would just refer workers to a table on page 56. It gives the capital and profits of seven big colonial monopolies for 1951: Capital £1,115 million; Profit £468.4 million or a percentage of profit to capital assets of 42 per cent. That represents wholesale robbery. It goes on in Malaya, it goes on in Africa, in the Sudan, and until a short time ago in Persia. It goes on wherever the big financiers can get control of helpless exploitable people and soldiers to shoot and labour leaders to cover up. Consider those profits (and that's only seven of a multitude of exploiters) and then take the appalling condition of Jamaica, one of the oldest British colonies (as described on page 64). There you have in two striking illustrations the greed and the curse of imperialism. Millions for the parasitic monopolies, misery and starvation for the colonial people.

In a chapter on 'Crisis of the Colonial System,' he deals with the rise of the colonial freedom movement, the wars in South-East Asia, the war in Malaya, the bankruptcy of Western imperialism. Then he opens a chapter entitled 'New Dreams of Empire! Africa,' thus:

The ageing lion of British imperialism, with its ancient prey in Asia escaping from its jaws, and its hold on the Middle East growing daily more precarious, turns increasingly to Africa for its final hopes of rejuvenation to build there its new main base of empire, exploitation and power. But even there it finds 'another lion' in the field—or rather, an eagle with powerful talons and even there the storm of popular unrest and rising revolt spreads with lightning speed.

He goes on to show that the imperialists with the full backing of the right-wing labour leaders hope to find this great continent an 'Eldorado' rich with plunder. But the peoples of Africa despite

terror and bombing planes will end this dream as the Liberation forces have ended the American dream of conquest in China.

In this period of rapidly declining imperialism with the colonial peoples battling for freedom with supreme courage and resolute determination, the right-wing labour leaders sank right down to the lowest depths in their attempts to cover up and justify the robbery and terror that is being practised with ever increasing ferocity. The chapter on 'Labour and Empire' will be a revelation to members of the Labour Party. Morrison's utterly shameless grovelling (page 334): 'We are great friends of the jolly old empire and are going to stick it' is indicative of the deserter from the camp of socialism. I was going to say that this was a great chapter, but every chapter is of the same high standard. I have never read a book that shows such wide and deep study. Marx and Engels, Lenin and Stalin, provide some really priceless quotations. Then there are quotations from the press, from British and American politicians, from a whole range of publications, all carefully fitted in to bring out and emphasise the lesson the workers of this country, of Western Europe and America must learn. That lesson is hammered home in the final chapter, 'The Future of Britain and the British Empire'. Discussing the crisis in Britain he says:

The petition in bankruptcy of the old imperialist order was filed by the British Prime Minister, Mr. Churchill, in Parliament, on July 30, 1952, when he said: 'Tragic indeed is the spectacle of the might, majesty, dominion and power of the once magnificent and still considerable British Empire having to worry and wonder how we can pay the monthly bills. I am tortured by this thought'. This was in truth the confession of bankruptcy of the old imperialist order.

And America, old Churchill might have added, was the grasping, insatiable creditor. And what is the way out of the crisis and out of the curse of imperialist exploitation? Here is the answer:

By their united exertions and actions, by building up a mighty popular alliance, with the working class in the leadership, for the aims of peace, national independence and economic and social change, they can not only save themselves. They can also hasten the liberation of all the peoples of the Empire over one-quarter of the world. They can turn the balance in favour of world peace and world socialism.

This book can mark a turning point in the history and in the policy of the British labour movement, away from the shoddy, second-hand imperialism of the petty-bourgeoisie right wing towards the great and goodly goal of socialism and an end forever to imperialist exploitation and the hunger and misery it carries in its train.