

BRITISH LABOUR AND IRISH NEEDS.

(By JAMES WINDER GOOD, in *Studies*.)

It would be stupid as well as churlish to refuse to recognise that the attitude of English to Irish Labor is one of goodwill. There may be differences of opinion as to the practical value of goodwill as measured by the warmth of resolutions passed at the tail-end of conferences at Caxton Hall and in Unity House, or of the declarations of sympathy which on platforms and in Parliament are nowadays amongst the stock utterances of trade union leaders. But it cannot reasonably be doubted that goodwill exists; and this is a factor, as even thorough-going professors of *realpolitik* are aware, which (provided other things are added to it) may be of incalculable political importance.

Why is it that in the main English Labor in its dealings with this country limits itself to abstract declarations of sympathy, and even in crises which it is no less important to English than to Irish democracy should be solved in the Irish way stops short of deeds while lavishing eloquent words? The question urgently demands an answer, but the answers that have been given are not seldom dictated by the particular bias of the questioner rather than by an impartial desire to discover the truth. I do not think it is profitable to waste much time on arguments which seek to solve the riddle by attributing to British trade unionists sinister Machiavellian schemes which, under the guise of a proffer of friendship, are really inspired by racial rancor. The hypocrisy, if it exists, is (I imagine) wholly unconscious, and though racial differences do contribute to the misunderstanding their significance does not lie in the fact that English Labor sets itself to exploit and accentuate them, but that, on the contrary, it fails to allow for them and endeavors to act as if they did not enter into the issue.

The great stumbling-block, to my mind, is the genuine inability of the British worker and his leaders to realise what are, in Irish opinion, fundamental facts. Probe deeply enough into their minds, and one finds at every critical juncture the assumption that Irish democracy, in so far as it pursues a different course from that which English democratic opinion would map out, is recklessly abandoning the straight and narrow path to hunt after will-o'-the-wisps. On another plane this is the hoary fallacy which vitiates all English thinking on Irish questions, and though the trade unionist deplors and denounces the blindness of other parties in their efforts to frame an Irish policy, he displays an almost equal lack of comprehension. He jibes at the partisans who proclaim that, if Irishmen would only become good Liberals or good Conservatives, all their ills would disappear as if by magic; but in practice he insists no less strenuously that the one thing necessary for our economic and political salvation is that we should sink everything else to become good Labor men after his peculiar fashion.

For the Irishman, however, the vital thing is to be a good Irishman, without which he instinctively realises he can hope to be nothing. He does not reject Liberalism, Conservatism, or Labor; his problem is to clear the ground so that he and his fellows may be free to choose their own line of development. This is exactly what our neighbors on the other side of the Irish Sea fail to understand. The lumber and shot rubbish which all our energies are directed to removing from our path are not in their eyes serious impediments. And certainly they are not impediments which in their opinion justify the subordination of class differences to national ends. Therefore, when Irish Labor persists in giving battle in causes which cross-Channel Labor decides are not class causes, one finds, not perhaps expressed in words, but always implicit in action or in the refusal to act, the conclusion that this is part of the perversity which, for the English, is inherent in the Irish temperament.

Perversity is the last charge that can be sustained against Irish Labor. Whether one agrees or disagrees with its ideals and methods, one must admit that these are simple, coherent, and rigidly logical. Dominating all other considerations in its policy is the rooted conviction that the sole hope of progress lies in establishing conditions in Ireland under which Irish influences will have the power to shape national destinies free from outside intervention or dictation. Once this fact is grasped, the difficulties raised by doctrinaires as to tactics are seen to be wholly irrelevant. By combining with other sections of their countrymen in a united effort to eliminate alien rule Irish workers, far from betraying their special interests, are adopting the only method by which these interests can be successfully advanced. A family may wrangle fiercely over the division of property; but if armed burglars invade the house, the disputants will have little hesitation in joining hands to expel them. No Irishman asserts that the ending of foreign rule means necessarily

the coming of Utopia; but he knows in his bones that, until he is master in his own house, not only is Utopia an impossibility, but it is idle to hope for any radical improvement in the existing social fabric. This is not an illusion created by hysterical nationalism; it is the impression of a belief founded on the solid and unassailable facts of history. To no one does it come home more forcibly than to the worker, who has no need to make up evidence from blue-books and reports but collects his proofs from his own experience in everyday life.

Unoubtedly the forces which are resolved to hold Ireland in thrall to her neighbor would maintain their stranglehold even if Labor had never emerged as a problem. But those whose special interest it is to ensure that the worker shall always be under-dog look to the bludgeon of British domination as the best weapon in their armory. As the bludgeon has been used in the past, and is still being used when a suitable opportunity offers, to prevent industrial progress, so it is used even more ruthlessly to defeat the aspirations of Irish Labor. At the worst, Irish prosperity was and is feared only by an English minority who see in it a menace to their profits; the demand of Irish Labor is regarded by the property owners and profiteers, whose policy the English Government (even in "a world made safe for democracy") exists to enforce, as a challenge which threatens their very existence.

Irish Labor seeks to establish a new status, to supersede the theory of crumbs from the master's table and the cash nexus beloved of Victorian economists by a settlement based on human rights and conforming to an ethical ideal. The Irish people on the whole recognise the justice of this claim; and though, I admit, much will have to be done, even in a self-governing Ireland, before difficulties are finally removed, the best brains and the best thought of an independent Ireland will be directed to the framing of a charter which will ensure that class divisions shall not, as in existing capitalist states, perpetually imperil the ideal of national unity. The reactionaries who have poured out hundreds of millions, not (as they profess) to punish Lenin for crimes against humanity but to compass the ruin of a government which rejects their economic creed, are alive and alert to the danger which would accrue to them from an Ireland which would settle labor difficulties by reason and goodwill instead of by coercion and machine-guns.

Irish poverty has in the past always been held by the dominant minority to be the guarantee of English security, and the minority is still more strongly convinced that to retain class divisions and perpetuate class antagonisms in Ireland is equally essential to the maintenance of its economic ascendancy nearer home. But what of the British majority for whom the overthrow of this economic ascendancy is a matter of life and death? Why does it fail to realise the bearing of the Irish struggle on its own battle? Its opponents make no concealment of their belief that an Irish victory would be for them a disaster, and they are mobilising all their resources to prevent such a victory. Their activity, far from spurring British Labor to act, seems on the contrary to induce a state of still more inglorious passivity.

Even the Carsonite pogroms—the most deadly blow levelled at Labor, and not at Irish Labor alone, in living memory—have evoked from the elected leaders of English Labor no more than a few weak protests, which for all their practical effect might as well have remained unuttered. The men who rushed to join in a blockade to end the White Terror in Hungary and declined to load ammunition for the Poles have made no effort to meet the challenge of Belfast, though it is a matter which concerns them more nearly than anything that has happened in Budapest or Warsaw. They affect to regard it as a mere explosion of sectarian bitterness, a medieval survival peculiar to Ireland and without any bearings on affairs outside its borders. This view is entirely misleading. Undoubtedly these passions were loosed by men to whom the burning of Catholic houses and the maiming or even the murder of their owners and occupants are in themselves desirable things. But the gusto of the outrage-mongers is all the greater if their exploits can be made to serve other purposes equally dear to their heart. And in Ulster they serve a very definite purpose. The underlying object of the pre-war Carsonite campaign was not merely to defeat the Asquith Home Rule Bill, but to discredit the whole theory of democratic rule. Thanks to the supineness of British Liberalism this was accomplished with entire success, and illegal force superseded legal right and justice as the dominant influence in Irish affairs. The post-war campaign now in full swing aims at completing the triumph by destroying the solidarity of Labor, and involving its Protestant and Catholic wings in an internecine conflict for the advantage of plutocrats and profiteers.

The movement is represented in Great Britain as a protest against Sinn Fein, but its real genesis is to be found in the Belfast general strike of January and February, 1919. To the Ulster leaders, who are capitalists