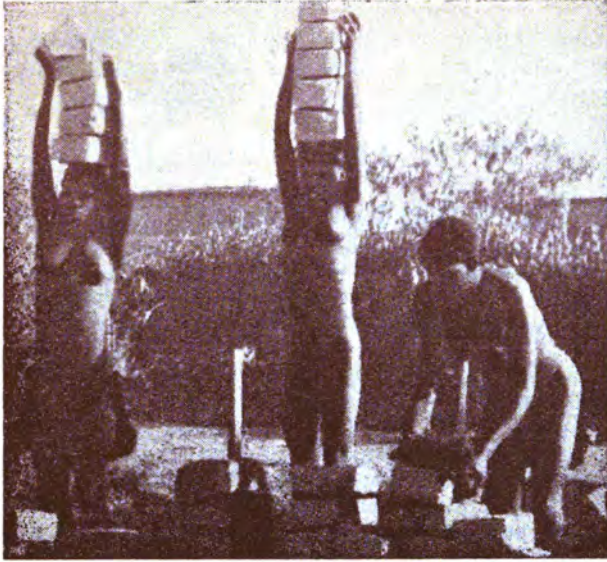


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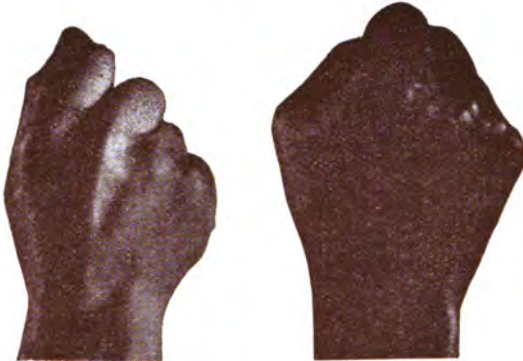
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FREE THE COLONIES!

R. PALME DUTT

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"White" and "Black" workers together

NO. 5 OF WORKERS' CHARTER PAMPHLETS

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This is the first simple fact to remember. Nineteen in twenty of the population of the Empire outside Britain are subject peoples, held down by the sword for the profit of British Capital.

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What does the Empire mean to these peoples? Capitalism, with its superior technical equipment, with its armaments, with its enormous resources, with its battering-ram of cheap machine-made goods, appears as a conqueror and plunderer, as a combined trader, moneylender and gunman, crushing resistance and extracting tribute.

Its sole purpose, as in every operation of capitalism, is to wrest the maximum profit. The colonies are throttled from independent economic development; their interests are subordinated to the interests of the imperialist country; they are turned into sources of raw materials, markets for manufactured goods, and spheres for the export of capital and exploitation of cheap labour by the ruling imperialism.

The land and its wealth are either directly seized by the conquering invaders, as in the African colonies, or subjected to crushing taxation. In either case, the effect is the same: to compel the mass of the peasantry or primitive village communities to labour for their conquerors, leaving them a barely sufficient margin for subsistence. Heavily expensive administrative systems, military expenditure and armaments, and state debts are imposed. Such handicraft industries as may exist are destroyed by the competition of machine goods, spreading ruin among the craftsmen. The result is not only the impoverishment of the peasantry and whole population (save for a tiny reactionary upper stratum of priests, princes, landlords, usurers or petty traders maintained by imperialism as props to its rule), but the creation of an ever growing proletariat, without land or other means of living. These become an inexhaustible supply of cheap labour for capital, either in the enormous plantations (rubber, jute, tea, sugar, oils etc.) under "indentured" conditions of thinly veiled slavery, or in the mines, docks, railways and factories, where the labour of men, women and young children is ruthlessly exploited over long hours for wages averaging a few pence a day. In colonies at a more primitive stage, where proletarian servitude has not yet been sufficiently established, direct slavery under the name of "forced labour" is imposed by the government—is imposed at the present day by the Labour Government in a whole series of British colonies.

The conditions of life of the exploited millions of peasants and workers in the colonial countries are the inevitable consequences of this imperialist system. They are conditions of poverty beyond description, famine, disease, overcrowding, illiteracy—conditions exceeding the worst horrors of Tsarism or the early industrial revolution in England. The babies die like flies in the early months or first years of life. The average expectation of life of a worker in a colonial country is less than half that of a worker in an imperialist country. Millions die every year of "malnutrition"

(the "scientific" word for starvation), of cholera, plague, typhus and other epidemics.

These are the conditions from which the City lords draw their profits. Hundreds of millions of pounds of profits are drawn every year from the colonies for the enrichment of the British capitalist class. The companies which operate in the colonies, the trading companies, plantation companies etc., pay out enormous dividends, ranging even in recent years up to 100, 200 and even 300%

This is the colonial system of the "glorious Empire," whose praises the Labour Party leaders sing, and which they use armed force and wholesale violence to maintain.

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What does the Empire mean to the workers in Britain? Does it mean that they benefit from the exploitation of markets, etc? So the Labour leaders try to preach, in a propaganda that is as short-sighted as it is criminal. For it is only a small upper section of the workers that has received a minute share of the spoils in the shape of privileged conditions of employment. And even here these conditions are now coming to an end. With the increasing break-up of the Empire, with the loss of markets, these conditions of employment based on imperialist domination are fast disappearing; all the workers in Britain are being brought up against the realities of the question of Empire.

The realities of the question of Empire for the workers in Britain are very different from the Labour propaganda.

First, it means that the surplus extracted from the labour of the workers in Britain, goes, not to develop production in Britain and increase employment, but to further the plunder-schemes of the capitalists overseas in the hunt for ever higher profits. These higher profits of colonial plunder lead to relative neglect of development of industry in Britain, backwardness of equipment, growth of parasitism, and so to ever renewed attacks on the standards of the workers in order to maintain a competitive level. The principal period of imperialism since the end of the nineteenth century coincides with steadily worsening conditions of the workers in Britain.

Second, the profits of empire give to the capitalists reserves of strength to enable them to fight more successfully against the working class in the home country.

Third, international working class solidarity is broken by the division of imperialist and colonial workers, of white and coloured workers, as seen conspicuously in the problems of the seamen, or in a country like South Africa. Capital plays off one against the other; and the drive becomes increasingly to bring all down to the "coolie standard."

Fourth, the ever growing conflicts of the imperialist powers over the spoils of colonial plunder lead to growing militarism and wars. Such was already the war of 1914-18 for the division of the world, and renewed and yet more intense war of the imperialist powers threatens.

Poverty and worsened conditions, working class division and

ever renewed capitalist attacks, militarism and war—these are the consequences of imperialism for the workers.

* * * * *

Against this system of imperialism the colonial peoples all over the world are in revolt. This revolt is spreading and extending in its range year by year, above all since the world war, which revealed to all the contradictions and inner rottenness of imperialism, and since the Bolshevik Revolution, which freed the subject peoples under Tsarism.

In India and Egypt, in Burma and Malaya, in Palestine and Nigeria, the fight goes forward. Hundreds of millions are awakening. Colonial wars, military operations, police terrorism are ceaseless, but cannot stay the movement of revolt.

Why does the movement of revolt spread so rapidly and on such a scale? Because all the contradictions of imperialism are now reaching breaking point. The ever growing impoverishment of the colonial masses reaches the limits of endurance. The world economic crisis, with its headlong collapse of the prices of raw materials, spreads ruin to the peasant producers. Land revolution becomes a desperate necessity to the starving peasants. At the same time imperialism is compelled by the crisis to reply with ever more crushing demands and exactions. The growing industrial proletariat advances to class-consciousness and militant struggles. The rising native bourgeoisie in the more developed colonial countries, like India and Egypt, pushes its claims against the imperialist bourgeoisie, and endeavours to use the mass struggle for its purposes.

Many argue that these movements of national revolt are only middle class movements of no concern to the working class. They point to such leaders as the lawyer Gandhi and the Congress leaders, all spokesmen of the bourgeoisie, or the rich Wafd leaders in Egypt; and they ask, Why should the masses be any better off under such exploiters than under the British?

But this is a false argument in the interests of imperialism. The bourgeoisie are not the real leaders of the national struggle; they are only half-way in it; they play a double rôle for their own interests; they are always ready to make a compromise with imperialism, as the Round Table Conference shows. The real national struggle is a mass struggle of the workers and working peasants; their fight against imperialism is a fight against capitalist exploitation, a fight for bread and freedom; they must first deal with their principal exploiters, the imperialists, in order then to deal with the small fry, the native landlords and bourgeoisie. It is with this mass struggle that the Workers' Charter proclaims the unity alliance of the British working class.

The Labour Government meets the national struggle with wholesale violence and repression towards the masses, even at the same time as it makes a show of conciliation to the bourgeoisie. The record of the Labour Government in the colonies is written in blood. Massacres and shootings in India, in Palestine, Nigeria (of unarmed women)—these are the "pacifist" answers of the Labour Govern-

ment to the colonial peoples' demand for freedom. The seventy thousand prisoners in one year in India is a record without parallel in the history of oppression.

Most ruthless is the action of the Labour Government to all signs of militant working class struggle and organisation in the colonies. The Meerut trial that is going on now for two and a half years is a prosecution of the thirty-one most active and most devoted leaders of the working class movement in India ; they are being prosecuted for " treason " to the " King-Emperor," because they have organised trade unions, preached socialism and communism, the class war, international working class unity, etc. When the " civil disobedience " prisoners of the national struggle were released, the working class Meerut prisoners have been kept in gaol. In the same way the heroic Garwhali prisoners, the Indian soldiers whose " crime " was to have refused to shoot down their fellow Indians, are held in prison under savage sentences by this " pacifist " Labour Government.

This shameful record of the Labour Government calls aloud for the militant agitation and action of the British working class to come to the aid of our comrades in India and the colonies.

* * * * *

What is the only possible policy of the British working class in relation to the struggle of the colonial peoples for freedom ?

It is to support that struggle as part of a common fight against capitalism. It is to support their fight for freedom without reserve, up to the full right of secession and independence. The only alternative is inevitably, as the record of the Labour Government has shown, unity with capitalism to shoot down the colonial masses. There is no half-way house. The choice is before us, and is heavy with responsibility for the whole future of the working class.

Imperialism is the common enemy. Unity is strength. Imperialism will be overthrown by the combined struggle of the working class and the colonial peoples. Lenin taught that this is the path of the world social revolution, to the overthrow of capitalism and the victory of socialism. And at every stage of the immediate struggle this alliance is of vital importance. The strength of the colonial struggle weakens capitalism and directly assists our fight in Britain, the strength of the fight in Britain assists the colonial struggle. We must forge the alliance close with common agitation and common action, and build up a thousand close fraternal links, we must be quick to take up every issue in India and the colonies as our own ; we must bring our propaganda to those workers who are used by imperialism as its armed forces against the colonial peoples.

There are some who argue that the colonial peoples are " not fit to govern themselves," that they will only fall victims to their own exploiters, the princes, landlords, capitalists, etc, and that therefore " guardianship " is necessary. This argument of " not fit for freedom " and " guardianship " is the old argument of the capitalists against the workers, of every ruling class against every subject class. In fact, the native exploiters are maintained and pro-

tected by imperialism, which artificially fosters every reactionary and decaying force to maintain its rule; once imperialism is overthrown, the masses will be free to deal with their own exploiters, and advance towards socialism.

Others argue that the Empire is an "economic unity" which it would be a backward step to "break up." But there can be no "unity" based on antagonism and exploitation. Such a unity by violence can only break up; it is already breaking up; and the British workers, whose conditions have made them dependent on it, as in Lancashire, are inevitably suffering in the process, because of the past crimes of capitalism. But once capitalism is overthrown, a new and different future opens up. Only when forcible subjection and exploitation is removed, can free productive relations develop. Then, the colonial peoples, freed at last to carry forward their economic development, will need to enter on an enormous process of transformation, of technical equipment and socialist industrialisation. And in this process the British workers can play a great part, based no longer on dominion and exploitation, but on free fraternal productive relations.

The alliance of the struggle of the workers in Britain and of the colonial peoples' struggle is of equal importance, both for the immediate fight, and for the future. It is an urgent need. Therefore in the Workers' Charter we take up the call:—

UNITY WITH THE COLONIAL PEOPLES' STRUGGLE AGAINST IMPERIALISM! RELEASE THE PRISONERS IN INDIA, AND IN ALL THE COLONIES! WITHDRAW THE TROOPS FROM INDIA, FROM BURMA, FROM EGYPT, FROM PALESTINE, FROM AFRICA AND ALL THE COLONIES! FULL INDEPENDENCE FOR ALL THE COLONIAL PEOPLES!

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