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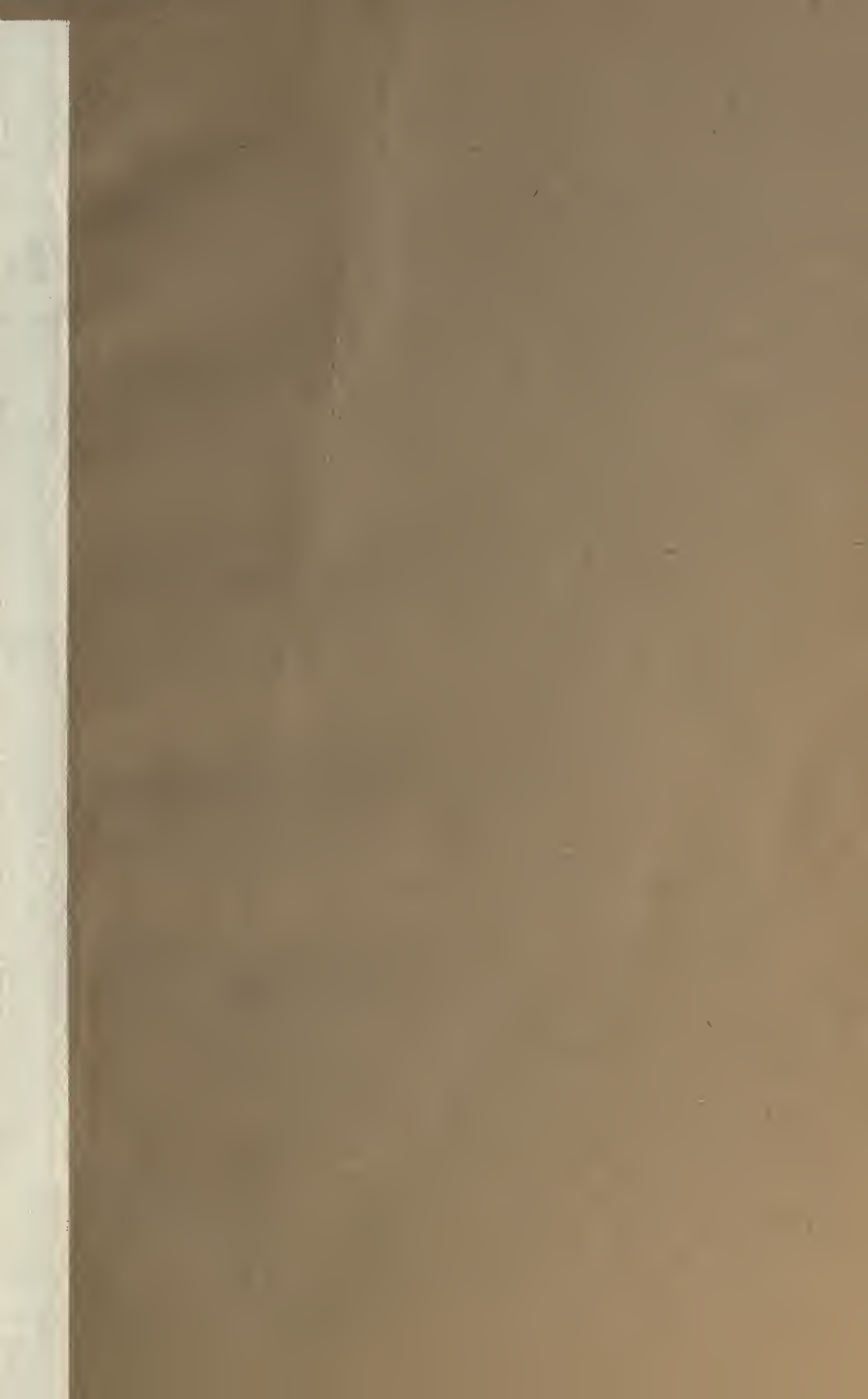
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FREE THE COLONIES!

R. PALME DUTT

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"White" and "Black" workers together

No. 5 OF WORKERS' CHARTER PAMPHLETS

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FREE THE COLONIES!

THE EIGHTH POINT OF THE WORKERS' CHARTER

8. FOR JOINT STRUGGLE WITH THE COLONIAL WORKERS AGAINST IMPERIALIST ATTACKS. WITHDRAWAL OF TROOPS FROM INDIA AND THE COLONIES, AND COMPLETE INDEPENDENCE OF THE COLONIES.

“EMPIRE Unity!” “Buy Empire Goods!” “Protect Empire Markets!” “The Strong Hand in India!” “Empire Economic Unity will solve the crisis.” These and similar cries are to-day heard on all sides.

All three capitalist parties, Conservative, Liberal and Labour, preach the gospel of the British Empire. They proclaim that the Empire must be maintained, strengthened and developed by every means; that it is a great world union of “peace” and “liberty” and “brotherhood” and “economic progress,” that it is a “sacred trust” or even a “nucleus of world socialism,” etc. They send troops and guns and warships to every quarter of the globe to maintain it against the struggles of the peoples under its rule. They proclaim that the Empire is the basis of prosperity in Britain, and that Empire development is the path to better conditions and employment for all.

What is the truth behind this? Is the Empire an interest of the working class to maintain? Or is it only an interest of the profit-making capitalist class? Does the strength of the Empire mean better conditions for the workers, or only worse conditions and heavier exploitation for all the workers within it? Does the path of the workers in Britain lie in unity with the capitalists against the colonial peoples, or in unity with the colonial peoples against capitalism?

The Workers' Charter, the common platform of the workers' immediate struggle against capitalism to-day, proclaims its definite policy in answer to these questions. The Workers' Charter fights all this Empire propaganda as the deadly enemy of the workers' struggle. It proclaims that the Empire is only the plunder preserve and slave plantation of the ruling class. It declares that the interest of the working class lies in unity with the colonial peoples against the common enemy, capitalism, and calls for the full independence of all the colonies. And this, not only in the interests of the colonial peoples, but in the direct interests of the immediate struggle of the British workers.

That this policy is the only correct policy for the working class, a short consideration of the facts will show.

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The power and wealth of the British capitalist class is not only

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built up on exploiting the British workers. Britain for them is only the central base of a world system. Their power and wealth is built up on the control and plunder of one quarter of the world. This world system of dominion and plunder, which is the principal source of strength of British capitalism, is the British Empire.

The British Empire extends over nearly fourteen million square miles, or more than a hundred times the area of the British Isles. It has a population (including Egypt and the "mandated" territories) of over four hundred and sixty millions, or more than ten times the population of Britain. Of the subjects of the British capitalist class, nine in ten are outside Britain. One quarter of the human race is directly ruled by the handful of lords of finance-capital in London.

All the orators of imperialism, the schools, the churches, the press and the labour leaders, speak of the Empire as a great "Commonwealth of Nations," a "free union of free peoples," a federation of "our brothers and cousins across the seas," as bringing "peace" and "justice" and "free institutions" to "backward peoples," etc.

This is deliberate hypocrisy. When they speak of "free" institutions or "our kinsmen across the seas," they mean to refer to the Dominions, such as Canada, Australia or New Zealand. These represent offshoots of the British bourgeois system, settlements which have either wiped out almost entirely with the utmost cruelty the original populations of the territories they have seized, as in Canada and Australia, or have enslaved them, as in South Africa. Here a subsidiary British bourgeoisie has developed, and established a growing measure of independence from the home British bourgeoisie (limited still by considerable financial dependence, as shown in the present events in Australia). But what proportion are these of the Empire? The total white population of all the Dominions is only some twenty millions or less than 5% of the population of the Empire, and the majority of these are wage-workers exploited under similar conditions to the British workers.

The overwhelming majority of the populations of the Empire, some four hundred millions or 95% of the population of the Empire outside Britain, are conquered subject peoples of non-British race held under conditions of unlimited servitude and exploitation. They are subject to the autocratic rule of British Imperialism, of the India Office and the Colonial Office, without the slightest pretence of "free institutions." All the talk of "democracy" and "parliament" in which the statesmen and labour leaders love to indulge is for home consumption only. The actual rule which they exercise over this vast majority of the Empire, the rule which the Labour Government exercises, is as despotic a rule as was the old Tsarism that was overthrown in Russia.

These enslaved peoples are the real colonies, the real Empire. They constitute nineteen twentieths of the Empire outside Britain. The question of the Empire is above all the question of these enslaved peoples, of these four hundred millions under despotic British rule, and their struggle for freedom.

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

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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