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*** Labour and Parliamentary Democracy**

[Speech delivered at the concluding session of the All India Trade Union Workers' Study Camp held in Delhi from 8th to 17th September 1943 under the auspices of the Indian Federation of Labour.]

I appreciate very much the kind invitation of your Secretary to come and address you this evening. I was hesitating to accept this invitation and for two reasons. In the first place I can say very little which can bind the Government. Secondly I can say very little about Trade Unionism in which you are primarily interested. I accepted the invitation because your Secretary would not take a ' No ' from me. I also felt that this was probably the best opportunity I can have to speak out my thoughts on Labour organization in India which have been uppermost in my mind and which I thought may even interest those who are primarily interested in Trade Unionism.

The Government of human society has undergone some very significant changes. There was a time when the government of human society had taken the form of autocracy by Despotic Sovereigns. This was replaced after a long and bloody struggle by a system of government known as Parliamentary Democracy. It was felt that this was the last word in the frame work of government. It was believed to bring about the millennium in which every human being will have the right to liberty, property and pursuit of happiness. And there were good grounds for such high hopes. In Parliamentary Democracy there is the Legislature to express the voice of the people; there is the Executive which is subordinate to the Legislature and bound to obey the Legislature. Over and above the Legislature and the Executive there is the Judiciary to control both and keep them both within

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prescribed bounds. Parliamentary Democracy has all the marks of a popular Government, a government of the people, by the people and for the people. It is therefore a matter of some surprise that there has been a revolt against Parliamentary Democracy although not even a century has elapsed since its universal acceptance and inauguration. There is revolt against it in Italy, In Germany, in Russia, and in Spain, and there are very few countries in which there has not been discontent against Parliamentary Democracy. Why should there be this discontent and dissatisfaction against Parliamentary Democracy? It is a question worth considering. There is no country in which the urgency of considering this question is greater than it is in India. India is negotiating to have Parliamentary Democracy. There is a great need of some one with sufficient courage to tell Indians "Beware of Parliamentary Democracy, it is not the best product, as it appeared to be."

Why has Parliamentary Democracy failed? In the country of the dictators it has failed because it is a machine whose movements are very slow. It delays swift action. In a Parliamentary Democracy the Executive may be held up by the Legislature which may refuse to pass the laws which the Executive wants, and if it is not held up by the Legislature it may be held up by the Judiciary which may declare the laws as illegal. Parliamentary Democracy gives no free hand to Dictatorship, and that is why it is a discredited institution in countries like Italy, Spain and Germany which are ruled by Dictators. If Dictators alone were against Parliamentary Democracy it would not have mattered at all. Their testimony against Parliamentary Democracy would be no testimony at all. Indeed Parliamentary Democracy would be welcomed for the reason that it can be an effective check upon Dictatorship. But unfortunately there is a great deal of discontent against Parliamentary Democracy even in countries where people are opposed to Dictatorship. That is the most regrettable fact about Parliamentary Democracy. This is all more regrettable because Parliamentary Democracy has not been at a standstill. It has progressed in three directions. It has progressed by expanding the notion of Equality of Political rights. There are very few countries having Parliamentary Democracy which have not adult suffrage. It has recognized the principle of Equality of Social and Economic opportunity.

And thirdly it has recognised that the state cannot be held at bay by corporations which are anti-social in their purpose. With all this, there is immense discontent against Parliamentary Democracy even in countries pledged to Democracy. The reasons for discontent in such countries must obviously be different from those assigned by the dictator countries. There is no time to go into details. But it can be said in general terms that the discontent against Parliamentary Democracy is due to the realization that it has failed to assure to the masses the right to liberty, property or the pursuit of happiness. If this is true, it is important to know the causes which have brought about this failure. The causes for this failure may be found either in wrong ideology or wrong organization, or in both. I think the causes are to be found in both. As an illustration of wrong ideology which has vitiated Parliamentary Democracy I can only deal with only two. I have no doubt that what has ruined Parliamentary Democracy is the idea of freedom of contract. The idea became sanctified and was upheld in the name of liberty. Parliamentary Democracy took no notice of economic inequalities and did not care to examine the result of freedom of contract on the parties to the contract, should they happen to be unequal. It did not mind if the freedom of contract gave the strong the opportunity to defraud the weak. The result is that Parliamentary Democracy in standing out as protagonist of Liberty has continuously added to the economic wrongs of the poor, the downtrodden and the dis-inherited class. The second wrong ideology which has vitiated Parliamentary Democracy is the failure to realize that political democracy cannot succeed where there is no social and economic democracy. Some may question this proposition. To those who are disposed to question it, I will ask a counter question. Why Parliamentary Democracy collapsed so easily in Italy, Germany and Russia ? Why did it not collapse so easily in England and the U. S. A. ? To my mind there is only one answer—namely, there was a greater degree of economic and social democracy in the latter countries than it existed in the former. Social and economic democracy are the tissues and the fiber of a Political Democracy. The tougher the tissue and the fiber, the greater the strength of the body. Democracy is another name for equality. Parliamentary Democracy developed a passion for liberty. It never made even a nodding acquaintance with

equality. It failed to realize the significance of equality, and did not even endeavour to strike a balance between Liberty and Equality, with the result that liberty swallowed equality and has left a progeny of inequities.

I have referred to the wrong ideologies which in my judgment have been responsible for the failure of Parliamentary Democracy. But I am equally certain that more than bad ideology it has bad organization which has been responsible for the failure of Democracy. All political societies get divided into two classes—the Rulers and the Ruled. This is an evil. If the evil stopped here it would not matter much. But the unfortunate part of it is that the division becomes stereotyped and stratified so much so that the Rulers are always drawn from the Ruling Class and the class of the Ruled never becomes the Ruling class. People do not govern themselves, they establish a government and leave it to govern them, forgetting that is not their government. That being the situation. Parliamentary Democracy has never been a government of the people or by the people, and that is why it has never been a government for the people. Parliamentary Democracy, notwithstanding the paraphernalia of a popular government, is in reality a government of a hereditary subject class by a hereditary ruling class. It is this vicious organization of political life which has made Parliamentary Democracy such a dismal failure. It is because of this that Parliamentary Democracy has not fulfilled the hope it held out the common man of ensuring to him liberty, property and pursuit of happiness.

The question is who is responsible for this ? There is no doubt that if Parliamentary Democracy has failed to benefit the poor, the labouring and the down trodden classes, it is these classes who are primarily responsible for it. In the first place, they have shown a most appalling indifference to the effect of the economic factor in the making of men's life. Someone very recently wrote a book called the 'End of the Economic Man'. We cannot really talk of the End of the Economic Man for the simple reason that the Economic Man was never born. The common retort to Marx that man does not live by bread alone is unfortunately a fact. I agree with Carlyle that the aim of civilization can not be merely to fatten men as we do pigs. But we are far off from that stage. The labouring class far from being fat like pigs are starving, and one wishes that they thought of bread first and everything else afterwards.

Marx propounded the doctrine of the Economic interpretation of History. A great controversy has raged over its validity. To my mind Marx propounded it not so much as doctrine as a direction to Labour that if Labour cares to make its economic interests paramount, as the owning classes do, history will be a reflection of the economic facts of life more than it has been. If the doctrine of Economic interpretation of History is not wholly true it is because the labouring class as a whole has failed to give economic facts the imperative force they have in determining the terms of associated life. The Labouring classes have failed to acquaint itself with literature dealing with the government of mankind. Everyone from the Labouring Classes should be acquainted with Rousseau's Social contract, Marx's Communist Manifesto, Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical on the conditions of Labour and John Stuart Mill on Liberty, to mention only four of the basic programmatic documents on social and governmental organization of modern times. But the labouring classes will not give them the attention they deserve. Instead labour has taken delight reading false and fabulous stories of ancient kings and queens and has become addicted to it.

There is another and a bigger crime which they have committed against themselves. They have developed no ambition to capture government, and are not even convinced of the necessity of controlling government as a necessary means of safeguarding their interests. Indeed, they are not even interested in government. Of all the tragedies which have beset mankind, this is the biggest and the most lamentable one. Whatever organization there is, it has taken the form of Trade Unionism. I am not against Trade Unions. They serve a very useful purpose. But it would be a great mistake to suppose that Trade Unions are a panacea for all the ills of labour. Trade Unions, even if they are powerful, are not strong enough to compel capitalists to run capitalism better. Trade Unions would be much more effective if they had behind them a Labour Government to rely on. Control of Government must be the target for Labour to aim at. Unless Trade Unionism aims at controlling government, trade unions will do very little good to the workers and will be a source of perpetual squabbles among Trade Union Leaders.

The third besetting sin of the labouring classes is the easy way which they are lead away by an appeal to Nationalism. The working classes

who are beggared in every way and who have very little to spare, often sacrifice their all to the so-called cause of Nationalism. They have never cared to enquire whether the nationalism for which they are to make their offerings will, when established, give them social and economic equality. More often than not, the free independent national state which emerges from a successful nationalism and which reared on their sacrifices, turns to be the enemy of the working class under the hegemony of their masters. This is the worst kind of exploitation that Labour has allowed itself to be subjected to.

If the working classes have to live under a system of Parliamentary Democracy then it must devise the best possible means to turn it to their benefit. As far as I can see, two things are necessary if this object is to be achieved. First thing to do is to discard mere establishment of Trade Unions as the final aim and object of Labour in India. It must declare that its aim is to put labour in charge of Government. For this it must organize a Labour Party as a political party. Such a party will no doubt cover Trade Unions in its organization. But it must be free from the narrow and cramping vision of Trade Unionism, with its stress on the immediate gain at the cost of ultimate benefit and with the vested right of Trade Union officials to represent Labour. It must equally dissociate itself from communal or capitalistic political parties such as the Hindu Mahasabha or the Congress. There is no necessity for Labour to submerge itself in the Congress or the Hindu Mahasabha or be the camp followers of either, simply because these bodies claim to be fighting for the freedom of India. Labour by a separate political organization of its ranks can serve both the purposes. It can fight the battle of India's freedom better by freeing itself from the clutches of the Congress and the Hindu Mahasabha. It can prevent itself from being defrauded in the name of nationalism. What is most important is that it will act as a powerful check on the irrationalism of Indian politics, Congress politics is claimed to be revolutionary. That is why it has secured a large number of followers. But it is also a fact that Congress politics has brought nothing but frustration. The reason is Congress politics is so irrational and it is irrational largely because Congress has no rival. A Labour Party in India would be most welcome corrective to this irrationalism which has dominated Indian politics for the last two decades. The second thing for Labour

in India to realize is that without knowledge there is no power. When a Labour Party is formed in India and when such a party puts forth its claim to be installed on the Gadi before the electorate, the question, whether Labour is fit to govern, is sure to be asked. It would be no answer to say that Labour could not govern worse or display greater bankruptcy in home or foreign affairs than the other classes. Labour will have to prove positively that it can govern better. Let it not also be forgotten that the pattern of Labour Government is a very difficult one than that of the other classes. Labour government cannot be a government of *laissez faire*. It will be a government which must essentially be based on a system of control. A system of control needs a far greater degree of Knowledge and training than a *laissez faire* government does. Unfortunately, Labour in India has not realized the importance of study. All that Labour leaders in India have done, is to learn how best to abuse Industrialists. Abuse and more abuse has become the be-all and end-all of his role as a labour leader.

I am therefore very glad to find that the Indian Federation of Labour has recognized this defect and has come forward to open these study circles for the Labouring Classes. They are going to be the most effective means of making Labour fit to govern. I hope the Federation will not forget the other necessity namely to inaugurate a Labour Party. When this is done, the Federation will deserve the thanks of the Labouring Classes to have raised them to the status of a governing class.

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