ANNIHILATION OR SOCIALISM?

An Address by Comrade E. WILMOTT at S.P.G.B. Conference Rally in Conway Hall, London, Sunday, April 6, 1958

If Hamlet had soliloquised today he might have begun:—"To H.B. or not to H.B., that is the question. Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous war and perchance the iron yoke of Soviet totalitarianism or to end it all by a single throw." Today this question to H.B. or not to H.B. has caused Hamlets to pop up all over the place each with his own little soliloquy. One might, however, point out that if the old Hamlet was symptomatic of there being something rotten in the state of Denmark, the new Hamlets are also symptomatic of there being something rotten in the states of capitalism. And one might also remind our modern soliloquisers of the sombre fact that Hamlet himself came to a sticky finish.

The possibility of this world coming to a sudden and fiery finish is not new, but very old. For centuries men believed that the world would be destroyed by "an act of God." Unfortunately, what is a time-honoured piece of religious fiction has assumed the stark possibilities of scientific fact. Nor did our ancestors ever contemplate destroying the world themselves. They would never have dreamed of such a thing because they believed that the world was not their's but God's. He alone had the exclusive rights and patent in the making of the earth and presumably had the exclusive right to dispense with the patent whenever he thought fit. Therefore they could view with something like equanimity the destruction of the world by God, supported by a working force of able bodied angels, setting the whole lot alight by brimstone and fire. Such a view was at least simple, uncomplicated and even homely. But God, alas, has so often threatened to destroy the world and so often deferred his promise that men in the course of social development have finally come to arrogate to themselves this function which was supposed to be exclusively God's. And with the enormous advance in nuclear physics and the effect which a specific application of it has on the genetic structure of men, they can now perform this function more efficiently than God. In fact, so much more efficiently that one might murmur: "Thank God! that God when He put the world together with his do-it-yourself bit, knew nothing of nuclear fission and when He put Adam together in the same way, even less about biology."

At least men in the past had the consolation of believing that if and when the world was destroyed they would be transferred to new and roomier quarters. Today, we must face the melancholy fact that not even the most thorough investigation in nuclear physics discloses such a consolation. We can, in the event of the dropping of the hydrogen bomb, merely be told the alternatives in which our sojourn on this earth may end. Some say the world will disintegrate with the raising of the temperature to 10 million degree centigrade, and I must confess, if at the risk of using a mixed metaphor, that the mere thought of such heat makes my blood run cold.

Another variation via the H.B. is that the intense radio activity set up by it will mutate *homo saps* into biological perversions. A little while ago somebody with a macabre sense of humor, it seems, suggested that somewhere in darkest Africa (they still call it "darkest Africa"), a species of apes who had escaped it all might re-enact the evolutionary process and perhaps once again carry on the story of man. Such a view, I think, grossly underestimates the intelligence of monkeys. Rather I could imagine in such an H.B. event the said monkeys crossing themselves and offering thanks to Darwin that they just missed evolution!

I do not intend, however, to play the role of Dicken's fat boy and "make yer flesh creep." Whether the H.B. will or will not be dropped or will or will not destroy the world has been spoken about many times by many people, I have nothing to add. Rather, I want to deal with the H.B. in particular and war in general from the historical standpoint, because I believe that this is the best way to understand the nature of the problem and its solution.

I would like, however, to make one or two observations. First, we hold that capitalism is a social organisation whose economic rivalries, lust for profits, and overriding compulsion for the self-expansion of capital, give it an inherent bias towards war, and not only that, but makes war itself an instrument of policy which in the last analysis becomes the means of dealing with the conflicts within the system. This has not been our view merely since the advent of the H.B., the Second World War or First World War, but since the year we came into existence—1904, and it is a viewpoint from which we have never departed. When some Labourites say that they opposed the H.B. in 1954 we retort that they are fifty years behind the times, we opposed it in 1904.

This is not the view of other parties. It is not the view of the Labour Party. In spite of a tradition of semipacifist and anti-war sentiments in their early days, the Labour Party has always accepted war as a legitimate instrument of policy. Right from the start they refused to face up to the fact that the abolition of war and the abolition of capitalism were part and parcel of the same problem. Our views they sneered at as being too utopian and heroic. What is more, the acceptance of such views as ours would take too long.

So they as practical idealists, accepting war as a necessary but regrettable feature of social life; they proposed to deal with things as they are. Thus, they set out to seek to limit war, to bring about gradual disarmament and humanise as far as possible its brutalities. Although how one can humanise brutalities they never explained. In this way they said men might even come to accept in the long run that war is not the best way of settling human conflicts. This, they argued, was the short cut, practical method, and even before the First World War, sections of the Labor Party stated that war must be restricted and not include unrestricted naval warfare of the open seas. No shelling of open towns and slaughter of innocent non-combatants, as if the men who later were to be pressed and dressed in uniform were in some way guilty and responsible parties. It seemed quite all right to train men to be killed, but one in the name of decency should spare the women and kids. Only cads would do that sort of thing.

Then war came, and this being, as they said, a necessary, although regrettable, instrument of policy, they, one supposed, regretfully supported it. But they also again regrettably found themselves supporting unrestricted naval warfare and shelling of open towns and hereinafter these things were taken off the restricted list of man's inhumanity to Man. Then certain Labour elements fell back on a second line of defence. No submarine warfare. No liquid fire. No poison gas. No mass bombing of towns and cities. But war came again and in line with their views they supported it and, of course, submarine warfare, mass aerial bombing, in addition to the other things they added napalm and dum-dum bullets. And so in their practical, short-cut way of restricting war and humanising its brutalities they had come to include everything: one can only add if events have brought no acceptance to our views they turned chaos into a tragic farce.

What these elements in the Labour Party never realised or perhaps never knew was not only that the system had an inherent bias towards war but that the means of production are constantly expanding and war itself