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Report of the Labour Party on its Goodwill Mission to the USSR

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Summary:

UK Labour party representatives' summary of their trip to the Soviet Union. Visiting multiple cities, the representatives discussed Soviet education, rebuilding, economic conditions, and more. The members also spoke with Stalin about improving relations between the USSR and UK.

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Private & Confidential

International Sub-Committee
of the National Executive
Committee.

GOODWILL MISSION TO THE U.S.S.R.

We left London on Sunday, the 28th July, breaking our journey in Berlin where we were met by representatives of the British Military Government and a representative of the Russian Foreign Office. We left Berlin the next day for Moscow where we were received by representatives of the Russian Foreign Office, the Moscow Soviet, and the British Embassy: we also faced a barrage of newsreel cameras and press photographers.

On the journey from the airport to the Hotel, in cars provided by our hosts, three of our number had their introduction to Moscow. We were later invited to the Foreign Office to meet Mr. Dekanozov, the Third Minister of Foreign Affairs, who, during the absence of Mr. Molotov and Mr. Vishinsky in Paris, was in charge at the Foreign Office.

Mr. Dezanov, in welcoming the delegation on behalf of his Government, indicated that they had been anticipating our visit for some time. They were very happy to meet us and were anxious to place such facilities at our disposal as would make our visit as interesting and as useful as possible, for they were deeply conscious of the vital importance of maintaining friendship and goodwill between our two peoples. We responded in appropriate forms and stressed the strong desire of the British Labour Movement and, indeed, of the British people, for a real and abiding friendship with the Russian people. The Government of both countries were charged with the great responsibility of pressing forward schemes of Socialist Reconstruction with all possible speed. Neither country could afford to see that work impeded as it might well be if there was international distrust and the fear lurking in the minds of men that there would again be international insecurity. In our view, a real understanding between our two peoples could be a decisive factor in preserving the peace of the world. Our desire was to further that understanding and to that end we desired to meet the leaders of Russian thought, political, industrial and intellectual. We therefore expressed a wish to see the President of the U.S.S.R., Mr. Shvernik, to whom we desired to pay our respects, Generalissimo Stalin, Leader of the Russian people, members of the Politburo, and the Chairman of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, Mr. Iuznitzov. We also asked if we could examine the progress made in the development of the educational services, as we were deeply interested in the general cultural level of the Russian people. We suggested that we should like to see a collective farm and some factories in order that we should observe the progress of transformation from a war to a peace economy and get some first-hand knowledge of factory conditions and welfare provisions. We hoped, the time permitted, that visits to Leningrad and Stalingrad could be included in our itinerary. There were also places of interest such as the Marx Engels - Lenin Institute, the Museum of the Revolution, which we would like to see.

We emphasised that as far as the delegation was concerned, meeting with the leaders to whom we had referred and with others who the [ILLEGIBLE] important.

Mr. Dekanozov, in reply, said they had been expecting the delegation for some time and he thought it was appropriate that we should arrive at the time of the opening of the Peace Conference. He had taken a note of our requests and would report them to the Government and he believed that steps would be taken to meet the wishes of the delegation. In association with his colleagues he had prepared a preliminary plan, which included talks with Trade Union leaders, the Chairman of the Moscow Soviet and visits to Union Leningrad and Stalingrad. In addition, he had anticipated that the delegates would like to meet representatives of the Party. He was pleased to see that in broad outline his views and ours coincided. His colleagues and he himself felt the same sense of responsibility as we had affirmed and he thought that those concerned would be pleased to meet the delegation. He expressed the view that our stay in the Soviet Union was all too short and he pressed us strongly to extend the period of the visit. We said that, unfortunately, that was not possible in view of other important duties. Mr. Dekanozov accepted our reply with regret but said that if we later found we could stay longer they would make arrangements to make the additional time interesting and useful. He concluded by referring to the great tasks of domestic reconstruction and the building of world peace in which our two peoples were engaged. During our stay they would give us all the assistance we desired and he felt that the success of the mission was assured.

On the following day we received an invitation to meet Mr. Popov, the Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party and Chairman of the Moscow Soviet. In company with the Vice - Chairman, he received the delegation in the City Chambers. We expressed our pleasure at the opportunity of visiting Moscow and for the courtesy already extended to us. After indicating that we would prefer to talk to him as Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party, we explained who the members of the delegation were, the sections of the movement they represented, and the status and position of the delegation. We emphasised that we were a Labour Party delegation and that our visit to Russia arose from the universal desire of the British people for friendship and understanding with the peoples of the U.S.S.R. In Britain, the Labour Party had won the General Election with a tremendous majority and the Government was not only charged with the task of transforming a war economy into a peace economy but to a Socialist economy. The unprecedented destruction caused by the war and the wide spread shortage of materials and man-power had brought about a situation where the maximum energies of all would have to be utilised in the tasks of reconstruction if the goal was to be reached in a reasonable time. This, in the view of the delegation, was the position, not only in Britain but in the U.S.S.R. Both were therefore concerned in building an economy which served the interests of the people and not those of a privileged few. Our two movements had also great responsibilities in this building of peace and its preservation, essential prerequisites to industrial and social progress. There might, from time to time, be differences on our approach to the problems which arose, but if there was a real understanding between our two peoples, such differences would fall into their proper perspectives.

Mr. Popov said that it was the earnest desire of the people of Russia for complete friendship with the people of Britain. He was not, however, in a position to dispute the political questions we had raised. We pressed certain of the points we had already raised but it was clear that at that time he was not able to discuss them. In those circumstances we proceeded to discuss the work of the Moscow Soviet and the problems of the city. During an interesting and useful discussion, there was an interchange of experience between Mr. Popov, his Vice - Chairman, and members of the delegation.

On the following morning we met Mr. Shvernik in his suite in the Kremlin. After a preliminary conversation we gave an outline of the development of the British Labour

Movement, the election of its Government, the significance of that event and the achievements during its first year of office. We also drew attention to the importance of by-election and local government elections since the General election. Mr. Shvernik evinced great interest in the progress made in Great Britain and raised a number of points with us. He then talked of the problems which were facing the U.S.S.R. in the domestic field and the steps they were taking to overcome them. He outlined the structure of Government in the Soviet Union which, in his view, had been fully tested by a powerful and ruthless enemy in the course of the war - it had stood the test. Large areas of the country had been devastated and this had left them with a terrific problem of reconstruction both in the provision of homes and in industry. Although they had started to make provision for the homeless before the end of the war, a small proportion of the people still lived in dugouts. Special difficulties also existed in the industrial towns and cities which were partly in the process of rehabilitation and partly of reconstruction. The solution of the tremendous problems with which they were confronted necessitated the immediate concentration of a large part of their natural resources upon capital development. He believed that the war had done more than anything else to prove the wisdom of their system of collective farming. He felt that under any other system they would have been in great danger of losing the war through a shortage of food especially after the loss of so much agricultural machinery. In the war years food production had been carried on by women and young boys and girls who were imbued with the will to win through. They were hoping, and indeed it was their intention as the result of their first post-war five year plan to bring the mechanisation of the industry to its pre-war level. In relation to the current food situation, he said that if the weather remained reasonably good the harvest should help them to relieve the food situation throughout the country. In the course of the subsequent conversation on the questions which had been raised there was agreement that any interruption in the work of internal rebuilding due to international uncertainties would be inimical to the people's interests; we jointly could ensure that there was no such interruption.

The time with Mr. Shvernik passed so quickly that we found we were much overdue for a luncheon to which we had been invited by the Chairman of the Moscow Soviet. This function was extremely interesting, for in addition to enabling us to meet Mr. Popov again, we met a number of Ministers and Leaders in the political, educational, and industrial fields and engaged in informal discussions of many subjects of mutual interest.

From the Minister of Education for the R.S.F.S.R. we received an invitation to a conference on education. This conference, over which the Minister presided, had been specially convened in order that we might have an opportunity of obtaining information about educational organisation, method and practice in the Soviet Union. During the conference there was an interesting exchange of ideas and experience. We gathered that the basis of the educational structure in the Soviet Union was the general school, catering for children between the ages of seven and ten years. There were Secondary Schools organised in seven class groups up to the age of fifteen and a form of Higher School with groups of ten classes catering [sic] for children and adolescents up to the age of eighteen. There were fees in the Secondary Schools and the Higher Schools but we gathered that these could be so graded that no hardship was entailed.

Though the general provision in the towns and cities covered seven school years or classes, in the rural areas this was limited to four or five and the majority of the children left school at twelve for work on the countryside. Some provision was, however, made for special educational institutes for the use of those who work on the farms, particularly those between the ages of twelve and seventeen. We were also informed that there is an expanding development in the field of technical education and that this is having a wide appeal particularly to those employed in the factories. Technical education was not narrowly conceived, for attention was [ILLEGIBLE] given to cultural subjects and social science.

In the Russian Federation of Soviet States, we learned that there were approximately 116,000 schools, of which roughly 85,000 were Elementary Schools, 25,000 Secondary and over 6,000 Higher Schools. In the year 1945 - 46, the number of pupils was given as 14½ millions and for 1946 - 47 the figure is expected to reach 16 millions. Over 2½ million children entered the first classes of elementary schools during the year. The provision of teachers is a real problem in Russia, as it is in our country. Serious attention was being given to this question by the Minister and his colleagues and we were informed that there were already 61 teachers' institutes with 16,000 students attached to the Pedagogical institutes and colleges; there were, in addition, 46 unattached institutes with 13,000 students. He is inevitable under conditions arising from or accentuated by the war, there is also improvisation on the teaching side and it would appear that this must continue for some little time.

The Minister is responsible for all institutes, the training of teachers, publication of school books and all subjects in the school programme. We were impressed by many of the books we saw but for our purposes we felt that our method of dealing with the curriculum was more suitable and advantageous.

We later met the Minister for Higher Education throughout the U.S.S.R. with certain of his colleagues. We were privileged to hear in some detail of the developments in this sector of the educational field. Despite losses sustained in the war, we were informed that they now have 35 classical Universities, 143 higher technical schools or colleges, 133 higher agricultural schools and 520 pedagogical schools mainly concerned with the training of teachers. They have also a number of institutes for additional and specialist education.

At our request, arrangements were made for us to meet the Chairman of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. We were received by Mr. Kuznitsov and a number of his colleagues - men and women. We made it clear that we were not in Russia as the official representatives of the British Trade Unions; that was the prerogative of the Trade Union Congress. We were, however, keenly interested in the development and work of the Russian Trade Unions. We dealt with many questions raised with us about the political and industrial position in Britain, including the structure of the Labour Party and its relationship with the T.U.C. Interest was displayed in our references to the General Election and the subsequent achievements of the Labour Government. Mr. Kuznitsov and his colleagues gave us an outline of trade union structure, the way in which the unions work and the [ILLEGIBLE] with which they deal.

They referred to the wage structure in industry basic or minimum wages were fixed by the Soviets. The trade unions had, however, their part to play in the consideration of incentive payments and matters related thereto. Safety and welfare arrangements were also their concern as was the provision of cultural and recreational facilities. They also took pride in the work they had done in connection with the provision of hospitals, convalescent homes, holiday centres and other places of culture and rest. We had some discussion on earnings in various branches of industry but we had not the time then or later to get the detailed information on earnings and prices to make a reasonable assessment of the standard of living.

The following day we were the guests of Mr. Kuznitsov and other trade union colleagues at a luncheon where we met other representatives of Russian social activity. We feel that these two gatherings arranged by the Central Council of the Trade Unions were an extremely valuable contribution to the success of our mission.

The members of the delegation had all looked forward with more than ordinary interest to the meeting with the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the U.S.S.R., Mr. Stalin. We had no doubts, after our talk with Mr. Dekanazov, that a meeting with Mr. Stalin would be arranged but we had no knowledge of the date or time. It was at 9

o'clock on the evening of the 7th August when we entered the Generalissimo's room at the Kremlin, and met the leader of the Russian people. We were met by a man simply dressed, smaller and somewhat older looking than we had expected, but whose merry smile and twinkling eyes welcomed us before he had uttered a word. There was nothing formal about the meeting; we sat at a table with the interpreter at the end, Mr. Stalin, Harold Laski and Mr. Dekanozov on one side, Morgan Phillips, Harold Clay and Alice Bacon on the other, and we talked in an easy conversational manner for 2¼ hours upon the tasks which confronted the people of our two countries.

Our Party Secretary expressed our deep sense of pleasure at meeting Mr. Stalin and then in a succinct statement explained the purpose of our mission, the changes which had taken place in the political shape of Britain as the result of the General Election, the achievements of the Government since the election and stressed the desire of the Labour Movement in Great Britain and the whole of the British people for real and enduring friendship with the people of Russia. After a general discussion, in which many points were raised, Mr. Stalin said that he was gratified to know that two great countries were travelling in the Socialist direction. In Russia they were travelling to Socialism in the Russian way, which he believed was shorter but more difficult, whereas in Britain we were going in what appeared to be the more roundabout British way - to which there was an aside that 'we had a habit of getting there'. He felt that in both countries we could reach the Socialist objective. As Marxists and Leninists the Russians did not think that theirs was the only road to Socialism. They recognized that though they believed that theirs was the shortest, even if the most difficult, way, and that it may be accompanied by bloodshed; by the British method, the change may be less violent but the process was much longer.

He was glad to receive the assurance of the delegation of the desire of the British people for the maintenance of friendship with his people but he felt that it would be amazing if there was not friendship between the two peoples, and particularly so now that we have both the same aim, the achievement of Socialism. The fact that the British people had these feelings of goodwill towards the Russian people was well known but it was not so well known that those feelings were reciprocated by the Russian people. At this point he reminded us of the assistance given by the Russian people to the British miners during the 1926 dispute and we, in turn, referred to those acts of friendship displayed by the British Labour Movement over a long period of years, to the victims at Leningrad in 1905 and in various other ways since that time.

Mr. Stalin felt that the Labour Government had adopted the right line in dealing with the public ownership of the basic industries first, but said he would like to know what were the dangers of reaction from the political enemies of the Labour Movement and from the industrialists who were dispossessed as the result of the action by the Government. That, he felt, was a contingency against which we should have to be on our guard and he referred to a return to power of people whom it had been contended would never again be in a position of power and authority in the State. From their experience in Russia they knew that if basic industries and commerce rested in the hands of the State, the State could direct its policy to reduce prices and raise real wages. In those fields in which commerce was not directly under the State, policy could be influenced by State action and this would be to the workers' advantage. In the development of industrialization, particularly in the early stages, they in the Soviet Union had experienced great difficulty. They had a peasant population much greater and in many ways different from that in Britain. To win them over to an understanding of Socialist objectives was a difficult task; much care and thought had to be given to the many problems which arose. Problems of a different order arose so far as the industrial workers were concerned but these were overcome. For a time, a considerable proportion of the women were not active industrially. As that situation changed, it had a great effect upon their economy and today the role occupied by women was vitally important in the building of socialism. He thought that so far as domestic reconstruction was concerned, there was, and would continue to be, the fullest understanding between the two countries, and he

felt that in international affairs, we could get the same degree of understanding. Russia would welcome the opportunity of the fullest co-operation between our two peoples. At this point, he indicated that a delegation from the Supreme Soviet would visit England in response to a British invitation, and with an ingratiating smile, he expressed the hope that when they came, Mr. Bevin would not "scold them too much". And in just the same spirit of light raillery Mr. Clay responded, "I know of no problem to which you and Mr. Bevin would not find a solution".

Mr. Stalin then dealt at some length with the industrial policy which they were pursuing in the U.S.S.R. and their determination to use the normal profits or surplus from industry and commerce for the extension and improvement of industry and, secondly, to raise the standard of life by (a) a reduction in prices which improved real wages and (b) raising money wages where considered desirable. The extent to which they succeeded in their first objective would make easier the attainment of the second. They had already achieved in some fields a substantial reduction in prices and an increase in production but there was still a long way to go. They were, however, moving with all possible speed. Things could, of course, be speeded up if the armed forces of the State could be reduced, but care must be taken to ensure that there was no further danger of aggression. In this connection suitable mutual treaties of defense would help to reduce the Forces and thus allow of the allocation of more manpower to production, thereby increasing the amount of goods available for improving the welfare of the Russian people.

[ILLEGIBLE]

The level of culture was one of their deep concerns and this was having their urgent attention. They had also a large peasant population whose approach to socialism and its implications was different to that of the industrial workers. This problem had to be faced and the facts of achievement rather than the theoretical approach was more important in their case. These two questions presented difficulties for them of a character which we had not to face. We had not a substantial peasant problem but we had a highly organised working-class and a higher level of culture. We had, of course, other problems and difficulties; for example, our businessmen were wealthier, much more clever and experienced than the Russian businessmen. He nevertheless felt that we had the opportunity in Britain of a more peaceful approach to Socialist construction than they had in Russia. He expressed the hope that the confidence pronounced by the delegation in the future political prospects of our movement would be justified by the events. At an earlier stage, Mr. Stalin had said, in reply to a question, that he was surprised at the result of the General Election. He had not thought that such a result was possible at that time. On both sides many questions were raised and answers given but the delegation got the impression that there was still a fear in Russian minds about the possible strength of reaction in Britain.

Facilities were made available for visits to Leningrad and Stalingrad. We met the Soviet authorities in both cities, discussing with them a variety of problems and exchanging experiences. We were also entertained to dinner by the leaders of the Soviets in both these places, when we had the pleasure of meeting representative people whom we might not otherwise have met. These functions were pleasant and friendly affairs and we also found them of value because of the opportunities they provided for informal discussions on a variety of questions.

Leningrad we found to be a beautiful city with magnificent buildings and a refreshing air of spaciousness about it. Squares, parks and other open places were pleasing to the eye. We also saw the advantages which the people of Leningrad enjoy from its rivers, not on the side of utility only but because they add substantially to the attractiveness of the city. We saw the evidence of the destruction which had occurred during the long siege and we were impressed by the way in which the people were dealing with this problem. We discussed with leaders of the city their plans, not only for the repair of the damage, but for the extension and development of the city. The

tribulation which the people had undergone during the 900 days siege had not damped their spirits. They were determined that the city of tomorrow would be finer than that of 1939.

In Stalingrad we came upon what had recently been a battle-ground and we saw what had once been a city built after the Revolution reduced to rubble and ruin. The damage was appalling but what struck us most was the spirit and determination of the people. Some factories are back in production and others are well advanced in rebuilding and extension. Schools, hospitals and other social buildings have been rebuilt and are in use. Housing is having attention but this is a terrific job and there will have to be improvised arrangements for some considerable time. When we talked with leaders of the city and others about the task ahead and asked how long they thought it would take to build the city, they replied 'about 15 years', and they said that with a full realisation of the gigantic task before them. We doubted whether they could do the job in the time stated. Whether they can realise their objective is not really the point now. What is important is that they believe they can and there is the will and the spirit to realise it. We thought that the spirit displayed by those we met was of the same quality as that displayed by the Russian General who was in command during the great battle for the city and who talked with us about many of the events in that epic struggle.

Wherever we went we noted that the tasks of rebuilding the economic and social life of the country, special emphasis was laid upon the production of capital goods, the equipment of the basic industries where tractors, commercial vehicles and turbines, etc., could be turned out with increasing rapidity. There was a large concentration on these things now in order to ensure a much wider range of consumer goods in greater quantities a little later.

A fair amount of house building is going on but there is a terrific housing problem to face. We were informed that last year there were approximately 25,000,000 people homeless and that some 2,000,000 lived in dugouts in the ground through the rigours of the Russian winter. Confronted with problems of that magnitude, we could understand the feverish production drive and the adoption of incentives of various kinds which would not find favour in Britain.

We visited factories and the Metro, museums and art galleries. We were able to see the various rooms and halls in the Kremlin, including the chamber where the Supreme Soviet meets. We saw modern Concert Halls and enjoyed a high standard of musical entertainment. At the match between the Russian Dynamo team and the Yugo Slavs in the Dynamo stadium, one of our numbers had his introduction to Association Football.

We were given a private showing of the special film 'The Vow', which is a film featuring Stalin. It is a good medium of propaganda for the Russian Communist Party, but as history it would not stand the test. Events were displayed in such a way that the needs of the Party were met though without too great a regard for accuracy.

During our stay we learned that the Communist Party had a membership of approximately 6,000,000 but some concern was expressed in the Party about the type of people being recruited. A warning was issued to local parties to exercise care about those who were accepted into the Party. A special drive was being organized amongst scientists and academicians to bring them into the ranks of the Party.

We met many people during our stay in Moscow including members of delegations from other countries with whom we had interesting conversations. We also met a number of foreign press correspondents who all indicated the extreme difficulty, even the impossibility, of carrying out their work owing to the rigidity of the censorship. This view has been supported by a British journalist since our return. Our information

was that the censorship had virtually passed from the control of the Foreign Office to the control of the Party. In those circumstances, we were told that it was not possible to get stories out of the country that were not acceptable to the Russian Communist Party.

In contradistinction to this, we found that there was a development of criticism internally and that this was not discouraged. We found many examples of criticism and the objective examination of problems. This, however, appeared to relate solely to methods and matters of detail and not to broad questions of policy.

We visited the offices of 'British Ally' and met the people who produced it. They appeared to be doing a good job of work on a paper which has a circulation of 50,000 at two roubles a copy. There was also a form of black market circulation at about 30 roubles per copy. An interesting sidelight on this was the story we heard that whenever Mr. Ernest Bevin made a speech which did not appear to be fully reported in the Russian papers, the price of the 'British Ally' in the black market rose to 60 roubles.

Every courtesy was extended to the delegation, and having regard to our limited stay, we saw all that we had asked to see and met everyone we expressed a desire to meet. We were lavishly entertained and both the informal and more formal discussions were carried on in the friendliest manner possible. From all quarters we received assurances of the desire of the Russian people for friendship with the people of Britain. We did not regard it as part of our duty, particularly as the Paris Conference had opened, to discuss international questions. Nor did we discuss the relationship of the two parties except insofar as it had a bearing upon the development and maintenance of friendship between the peoples of the two nations. We should be foolish to assume that difficulties and differences do not exist or that all misunderstanding has been dispelled. We do, however, believe that as a goodwill mission our visit was well worthwhile. The publicity given to the delegation together with the response from the people we met justifies our saying that the mission was a successful one.

We could not conclude this report without expressing our appreciation to the British Ambassador for his courtesy and consideration towards us and to the members of the British Embassy for their kindness and assistance in a variety of ways. We are indebted to them.

Alice Bacon
Harold Clay
Harold Laski
Morgan Phillips

[Note: this document is dated "7 AUG '46 LABOUR PARTY ARCHIVES (copyright Labour Party)" in a handwritten note]