70 years of the World Peace Council

LIZ PAYNE pays tribute to the WPC and its struggle against imperialist aggression as it enters its eighth decade this weekend

Summoned to the microphone, he captured the sentiment of the whole convention when he said: “We in America do not forget that it is on the backs of the poor whites of Europe and on the backs of millions of black people that the wealth of America has been acquired. And we are resolved that it shall be distributed in an equitable manner among all our children.”

He condemned the contemporary war hysteria and concluded: “We are determined to fight for peace. We do not wish to fight the Soviet Union.”

His speech was to cost him dearly — a passport revoked, mass media vilification, scores of concerts immediately cancelled across the US and denunciation before the House Un-American Activities Committee — an example for all to see of what happens to those who campaign for peace when the ruling class depends on wars and rumours of war.

Not surprisingly, the world movement for peace was subject to attempted sabotage by governments lined up with the US from the outset.

In the run-up to the 1949 Congress in Paris, French officials refused visas to hundreds of delegates from the socialist countries. They hoped this would halt proceedings, but a simultaneous meeting of the Partisans for Peace was convened in Prague in which all could participate.

A major outcome of the Paris Congress was the setting up of a permanent body — the World Committee of Partisans for Peace — and plans were soon under way for a second World Congress in 1950 in Sheffield.

The Labour government, doing the bidding of the British Establishment, was extremely hostile. It would not allow organisers of the event from outside Britain to enter the country, refused visas to over 200 delegates, turned away others at the border — only after ascertaining details of their peace movement contacts in Britain (for security purposes) and withdrawing its initial consent to allow 18 charter flights to bring delegates from eastern Europe.

Despite this, a packed one-day meeting of 3,000 people was held in Sheffield City Hall, while the main World Congress was transferred to Warsaw.

Here the organisation was named the World Peace Council, with Frederic Joliot-Curie becoming its first president (1930-44).

Its second president (1950-65) was the British scientist and socialist, JD Bernal, whose invaluable Peace Archive is housed in the Marx Memorial Library.

The power of the WPC lies in its principled stance against imperialism as the prime cause of war and barrier to lasting peace.