

23. Linzer Konferenz
8.-12. September 1987

Referat zum
Tagesordnungspunkt 1

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Peace, Anti-Militarism and the Scottish Labour Movement, 1917-1918

In contrast to elsewhere in Britain, the Scottish labour movement was strongly anti-war. In campaigning for the restoration of peace from the very beginning of the First World War, John Maclean, James D. MacDougall, Helen Crawford and many others prepared the ground for what was to happen in 1917 and 1918.

As the most important figure in the anti-war movement and the only British socialist who possessed a 'revolutionary will to power', John Maclean's socialist activities have somewhat obscured the general vindictiveness and repression of the Scottish ruling class and the emergence of mass militancy. For though the authorities failed in their attempt to dismiss Maclean as a school teacher in March, 1915, they finally got rid of him a few months later.¹

But the victimisation of socialist militants simply heightened rather than stifled the anti-militarist resistance of an increasing number of working-class men and women; and in 1917 the Scottish working class was still further radicalised by the outbreak of the Russian revolution. In June the All-Russian Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies decided to organise 'an international conference of world socialism' in Stockholm;² and the Scottish miners, steel-smelters, railwaymen and shop assistants in Scotland soon gave 'a solid vote for Stockholm'. In Glasgow 10,000 working men and women could not gain admission to a packed meeting in the St. Andrews Hall in support of the Russian revolution; and the annual conference of the Scottish Trades Union Congress carried unanimously a resolution calling for peace negotiations.⁵

Moreover, frequent debates on militarism versus anti-militarism were organised in diverse Scottish towns and cities, and the tendency for the Scots to be more outward-looking than the English labour movement was discerned by men who wanted to give the Scottish labour movement a nationalist orientation. The difference of attitude towards militarism was summed up in The Scottish Review:

The strength of the hostility to militarism in Scotland may be gathered from the fact that the War Party is a discredited minority in nearly all the Trades and Labour Councils north of the Tweed. Only in Aberdeen and Edinburgh has it been possible to secure a bare majority in favour of the policy of the Labour Party in the Westminster Parliament... In all the other Trades Councils, so far as I have been able to find out, the⁶ feeling is strongly anti-militarist and even pacifist.

The Scots were committed to the agitation for peace negotiations from the very outbreak of the war. Further, the agitation for peace was in socialist eyes quite inseparable from the struggle for social change and socialism. Despite the arguments of conservative historians about the lack of a serious threat to the established social order in industrial Scotland during the war years, the authorities thought otherwise.⁷ Besides, as the socialists who had been influenced by the ideas

of Daniel De Leon, the American socialist leader, propagated the doctrine of Syndicalism in the workshops and factories, the Scottish ruling class were scared of the rank-and-file workers' challenge to 'the duly authorised executive councils and district committees of the trade unions'.⁸ Furthermore, as the propaganda of the socialist minority began to fuse with the struggle against the dilution of labour and the anti-war sentiments of the 'masses', the authorities deported the leaders of the Clyde Workers' Committee, sent spies into the trade unions and socialist groups and engaged in widespread repression.⁹

Then in February 1916, the Independent Labour Party organised a mass meeting in the Scottish mining town of Lochgelly where resolutions were carried denouncing the war and militarism;¹⁰ and in April, 1916, John Maclean was imprisoned for agitating against the war. Far from eradicating the Scottish labour movement's agitation against the war, the almost simultaneous imprisonment of James Maxton and James D. MacDougall for anti-war activities galvanised their fellow socialist all over Scotland into renewed activity. In September the Highland Land League launched a bitter and blistering attack on the Duke of Sutherland for withholding fishing rights from returned soldiers who had been wounded in the war; and the Scottish conference of the Labour Party called for the repeal of the Military Service Acts and urged the Government to open immediate peace negotiations.¹¹

If the Scottish Independent Labour Party's peaceful co-existence with capitalism before the outbreak of the war had made it difficult for them to attract new members, aggressive socialist militancy and anti-militarism transformed the whole of the labour movement.¹² As the Scottish Independent Labour Party membership jumped by three hundred per cent and the number of branches increased by fifty per cent between the outbreak of the war and the end of 1917, the whole of the labour movement developed a new confidence and sense of socialist self-awareness.¹³

In February 1918, when hundreds of Glasgow engineers met Sir Auckland Geddes to discuss the manpower situation, a resolution was carried calling for an immediate armistice.¹⁴ And then the Scottish coal miners in the coalfields intensified their anti-war activities under the influence of the teachings of John Maclean. As James D. MacDougall explained:

The victory of the revolution in Russia had breathed new life into international socialism, almost killed by the antagonisms the war had bred. The proposal to adopt the May Day holiday was carried. Despite the protests of the Admiralty and a campaign of calumny in the press, the strike took place. At the huge gatherings held at Hamilton and elsewhere solemn declarations of opposition to the continuance of the war were carried with absolute unanimity.

and in the Lanarkshire coalfields the Miners' Union conducted a ballot on peace negotiations, and 18,767 miners voted for immediate peace negotiations and only 8,249 voted for the continuance of the war.¹⁵

Yet despite the theses outlined above, a number of right-wing historians deny

that (a) the Scottish were actually radicalised by the experience of the First World War and (b) ignore the relationship of this process of radicalisation to the agitation for peace. In fact Christopher Harvey has denied that the Scottish working class was radicalised at all.

The Scottish workers growing industrial militancy gave them a new awareness of their own importance as producers of wealth. Further, the organised workers' agitation for peace grew out of the strikes and stoppages that they were engaged in. Also, in dismissing the importance of industrial militancy on Clydeside between 1914 and 1922, Christopher Harvey ignored the observations of two contemporary observers who pointed out that 'the Clyde trouble was the most spectacular of the cases of friction in the munitions trades' in conditions where militancy was a 'serious offence'. To suggest that workers, who struck work in the midst of hysterical militaristic propaganda were not radical or left-wing, can only be described as somewhat elitist, unimaginative and un-historic.¹⁶

Although the process of radicalisation was sometimes interrupted during the First World War, it repeatedly re-emerged on a higher level when it again found an outlet. By the summer of 1916 'the militant labour movement on the Clyde reached, as Helen Vernon said, 'its lowest ebb'. Nevertheless the Government's policy for coping with disaffection in Scotland - and especially on 'Red Clydeside' - was not very successful. As Paul Kellogg and Arthur Gleason put it: 'Its experience with deporting the strike leaders from the Clyde worked out so disastrously that it never again attempted drastic measures wholesale...McManus was deported from Glasgow to another city which had been a centre of labour conservatism, with the result that the city thereafter became a hotbed of agitation'.¹⁷

In any case by the spring of 1917 Clydeside was again at the centre of militancy, socialist activity and peace agitation. As early as April 1917, there were strikes at the shipyards on Clydeside - despite Harvey's inaccurate assertion to the contrary.¹⁸ In summing up the relationship between the repression of 1916 and the militancy in 1917-1918, Helen Vernon said:

Socialist agitators had been either imprisoned or deported from the trouble centre, and Glasgow sank back into industrial and political apathy. But in the long-run the Government's reliance on strong-arm tactics did more for the socialist movement than years of revolutionary propaganda, for it caused a deep-rooted resentment amongst many sections of the population and reinforced the ingrained suspicion of authority.¹⁹

Moreover, there was an important ironmoulders' strike on the Clydeside in the summer of 1917. It was led by Tom Bell and John McBain of the Socialist Labour Party. Although this strike has been ignored by Christopher Harvey and other right-wing historians, it worried the authorities at the time. It was also accompanied by the General Iron Fitters' Association's opposition to the Government's attempt from early 1918 to 'hustle many of our members into the army'.²⁰ In evaluating

these developments, Helen Vernon says:

If the ironmoulders' strike stimulated a renewal of industrial militancy on the Clyde, political awakening was effected by the influence of the Russian revolution of February.

Then the large attendance at the May Day demonstrations in Scotland in 1917 prefigured the ongoing process of radicalisation down to 1922.

As early as 1909 John Maclean had written:

In 1889 the International Socialist Congress determined to call upon the workers to strike work on the first day of May. This is done on the Continent, where hundreds of thousands in Berlin and Paris and other huge centres lay down their tools and come out to demonstrate the growing force of the revolutionary spirit that now inspires the workers of Europe. We in Scotland have, so far, selected the first Sunday in May... Ere long we expect the workers to follow their Continental comrades and celebrate the first of May as the workers' self-selected holiday.²¹

Maclean's dream came true in 1918 with the Scottish workers' growing agitation for peace negotiations. In May, 1918, the Scotsman newspaper reported that: 'For the first time in the history of the Scottish labour movement May Day was celebrated in Glasgow on the first day of the month, and not, as formerly, on the first Sunday'.²² When it really happened in Glasgow is seen as a historical process rather than as just an episode, Christopher Harvey's interpretation is less convincing than it might appear to be in a contextless, un-historic setting.

At a time when the Scottish newspapers were censoring news' reports of socialist of militant industrial activity, the ruling class conducted a systematic campaign against working men and women who were proposing to take the day off work without pay to halt war production, to celebrate May Day, to demand immediate peace negotiations, the Russian revolution and socialist internationalism. Even the hostile Glasgow Herald was forced to admit that over 100,000 working men and women took part in the procession through the streets of Glasgow.²³ In a note of triumph, the editor of the Glasgow socialist newspaper, Forward, summed up:

They appealed about "Our brothers in France"; they threatened dismissals wholesale; they filled their press organs with lamentation; they circulated the young unskilled men in munitions works with offers to appeal for them under the new comb-out, if they would only stay at work on May Day; they issued official appeals and unofficial appeals - and it was all of no avail.²⁴

In 1919, 1920 and 1921 the Glasgow Herald noted that working-class men and women - and especially the women - were in the forefront of the May Day celebrations; and anti-militarist demands occupied a prominent place in their propaganda. By 1920 there was a general stoppage of work in such Scottish towns as Greenock, West Calder, Falkirk and Hamilton.²⁵ By 1923 much of the revolutionary fervour of the previous years had disappeared; and the Glasgow Herald gloated over what it depicted as 'the

poor turn out'. Even so, it noted that a number of 'unemployed women' were playing a prominent part in working-class agitations and the socialist women's peace movement.²⁷

In 1924 the Scottish labour movement reverted to the previous practice of celebrating May Day on the first Sunday in May. The more radical, self-sacrificing practice of celebrating it on the first of May died with John Maclean in 1923 - a significant year in the history of the Scottish working class. The decision to revert to the pre-war practices of Labourism was much more important for the later history of the working class in the specific sense that anti-militarist propaganda ceased to be quite so important in working-class movements' agitations.

But what of the permanent legacy of the activities of John Maclean and Helen Crawford and the legend of the 'Red Clyde'? In response to the question, 'How red was the Clyde?', Christopher Harvey produces a simplistic and un-historic answer that 'If the 1914-1922 period is taken as the "glad confident morning" of Scottish socialism, evening soon came on'. Furthermore, he suggests that the legend of the 'Red Clyde' has survived into the 1980s because 'the subsequent reality has been so dispiriting'. It has also survived because present-day militarism in the Western world has led Scottish workers to rediscover the agitation for peace negotiations in 1917-1918.

Revolutionary legends survive in class-divided societies because of the social tensions and bitterness engendered by inequality, unfairness, injustice and war-orientated militarism. But when they do survive, they survive within the class-consciousness of militant labour movements. From a socialist perspective, Walter Benjamin explained why the legends of past struggles of the oppressed classes sometimes, but only sometimes, survive:

Not man or men but the struggling, oppressed class itself is the depository of historical knowledge. In Marx it appears as the last enslaved class, as the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the down trodden... German Social Democracy thought ~~it~~ to assign to the working class the role of the redeemer of future generations, in this way cutting the sinews of its greatest strength. This training made the working class forget both its hatred and its spirit of sacrifice, for both are nourished by the image of enslaved ancestors rather than that of liberated grandchildren.²⁸

Between 1917 and 1918 the Scottish, and particularly the Clydeside, working class was radicalised, partly because it put the issue of immediate peace at the centre of its preoccupations, and partly because it identified with its 'enslaved ancestors' in the past.

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Footnotes

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 - 2 Julius Braunthal, History of the International (London, 1967), p.70.
 - 3 William Diack, 'Scottish Trade Unionists and Industrial Unrest', Scottish Review, Autumn 1917.
 - 4 Forward, 19 May 1917.
 - 5 Ibid., 5 May 1917.
 - 6 'The Future of the Scottish Labour Party', Scottish Review, Spring 1917.
 - 7 'Report on the Clyde Munitions', Parliamentary Papers, Vol.XXIX, 1914-1916, p.2.
 - 8 'Commission of Inquiry into Industrial Unrest', ibid., Vol.XV, 1917-1918, p.3.
 - 9 James Hinton, The First Shop Stewarts' Movement (London, 1973), p.147.
 - 10 Forward, 26 February 1916.
 - 11 Ibid., 30 September 1916.
 - 12 Labour Leader, 16 April 1914.
 - 13 Forward, 12 January 1918.
 - 14 Ibid., 2 February 1918.
 - 15 James D. Young, The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class (London, 1969), p.181.
 - 16 William A. Orton, Labour in Transition (London, 1921), p.90.
 - 17 Paul Kellogg and Arthur Gleason, British Labor and the War (New York, 1919), p.213.
 - 18 Helen Vernon, The Socialist Labour Party and the Working Class Movement on the Clyde, 1903-1921, M.Phil. thesis, University of Leeds, 1967, p.156.
 - 19 ibid., p.165.
 - 20 Report of the Iron Fitters' Association, 1917, p.2 and ibid., 1918, p.3.
 - 21 Pollockshaws News, 28 April 1909.
 - 22 The Scotsman, 2 May 1918.
 - 23 Glasgow Herald, 2 May 1918.
 - 24 Forward, 4 May 1918.
 - 25 Glasgow Herald, 2 May 1919, 2 May 1920 and 2 May 1921.
 - 26 Falkirk Herald, 4 May 1920.
 - 27 Glasgow Herald, 3 May 1923.
- Christopher Harvey's right-wing Labour theses are expounded in Scotland and Nationalism (London, 1979) and in 'How Red was the Clyde?', The Scotsman, 18 April 1981.