

# The first world war - Labour recruits for carnage h

Dave Stocking Tue, 05/02/1985 - 23:00

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Part three of a history of the Labour Party

Since 1904 the Labour Party had been affiliated to the Second International. Though unlike most of the other mass parties belonging to it, it did not claim to be socialist. It rejected Marxism and the class struggle as a foreign dogma. As GDH Cole, Labour's historian and a witness of those years, but it; ?the party had In fact not taken its affiliation very seriously.?

In addition to the Labour Party, the socialist groups - the British Socialist Party (the renamed Social Democratic Federation) and the Independent Labour Party - were members, as was the small elitist Fabian Society. Their leaders, HM Hyndman, Keir Hardie and to a lesser degree the Webbs played a role in the great International Congresses of the pre-war years, Hardie gained fame as the co-sponsor of a resolution, with one of leading French socialists Eduard Vaillant, which called for a general strike in the event of war.

The last years of the Second International were occupied with the mounting Imperialist rivalry between the two great alliances, the 'Entente' of Britain, France and Russia and the 'Central Powers', principally Germany and the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. Crises in Morocco and in the Balkans, where these powers or their lesser allies and dependants clashed, threatened a European, and even a world-wide conflagration.

Fear of this deeply alarmed the labour movements of all the major European countries and those of North America. At the Congress of the Second International in Stuttgart in 1907 a Comprehensive resolution was passed identifying the causes of the war threat, the attitude of the international workers' movement to it and its duties should it be faced with the actuality of war The resolution pointed out that: ?Wars are ... inherent In the nature of capitalism; they will only cease when capitalist economy is abolished, or when the magnitude of the sacrifice of human beings and money, necessitated by the technical development of warfare, and popular disgust with armaments, lead to the abolition of this system".

It went on from this to commit the representatives of the workers in the various national parliaments "to fight with all their strength against naval and military armament and to refuse to supply the means for it ....." The resolution was further strengthened by an amendment moved by the Bolshevik leader Lenin and by Rosa Luxemburg, leader of the left-wing of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). This stated; "In the case of the threat of an outbreak of war. It is the duty of the working classes and their parliamentary representatives to prevent the outbreak of war by whatever means seem to them most effective, which naturally differ with the intensification of the class war and of the general political situation. Should war break out in spite of this, it is their duty to intercede for its speedy end and to strive with all their power to make use of the violent economic and political crisis brought about by the war to rouse the people, and thereby to hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule.?

The International thus committed itself to a war against the war threat. British socialists addressed mass

rallies in Berlin during the Morocco crises of 1908. In this context, at the next world congress of the International held in Copenhagen in 1910 Keir Hardie and Vaillant came forward with the idea of the international general strike to prevent war. It was sharply opposed by the German SPD and was deferred to the next congress, due to be held in 1913. The SPD leaders' reasons for opposition were opportunist. They felt that to endorse it would lay their party open to attack from the Kaisers' authoritarian government.

### **War fever**

The Marxist left also heavily criticised it for different reasons. They pointed out that a general strike was not some sort of special method of struggle against war. The general strike could not be started, as it were cold, but had to relate to the whole preceding state of the class struggle. The circumstances existing at the time of an outbreak of war - fear of attack, chauvinist press hysteria, army mobilisation and its attendant martial law - all created very unfavourable circumstances for launching a general strike unless the working class was already on the verge of a general strike for reasons related to the more general class struggle. Moreover a general strike alone could not stop war. An insurrection to remove the war monger class from power was necessary to ensure peace. In fact Hardie's resolution was that of a desperate reformist and pacifist, not that of a revolutionary.

Lenin, views were borne out by the experience of the outbreak of war in 1914. Disorientation and war hysteria made a general strike impossible even in Russia where during the month immediately preceding the war huge mass strikes were taking place and where many of the Russian workers' leaders resolutely opposed the war. Elsewhere the workers' leaders were carried away with chauvinism and led support for the war. But whereas Hardie and pacifists like him were completely demoralised by the 'failure' of the working class and the International to prevent war, Lenin and the Bolsheviks set out, in the words of the Stuttgart resolution, "to make use of the violent economic and political crisis brought about by the war to rouse the people, and thereby hasten the abolition of capitalist class rule." The result of that crisis and the Bolsheviks leadership was the revolution of 1917.

When general war finally came in the summer of 1914 the parties of the Second International (with exception of the Russians, the Serbians and the Bulgarians) shamefully reneged on their promises at the Stuttgart and Basle Congresses. The parties had sworn not to vote for war credits yet all the major ones did.

The French Socialist Party stated in the Chamber of Deputies. "These credits should be voted for unanimously. The Belgian socialists declared: "The time has come when socialists must fulfil their duty without any hesitation. We must vote for all the credits that the government requires for the defence of the nation." Most shocking of all was the action of the SPD - the one million strong jewel of the international. On the 4th August its spokesmen addressed the German Parliament, the Reichstag, with the words: "We need to secure the independence and culture of our country. We shall not abandon our Fatherland in its hour of peril... we agree to the proposed loan."

By November of 1914 Lenin had drawn a decisive lesson from the collapse of the major parties of the world labour movement. "The Second International is dead, overcome by opportunism. Down with opportunism, end long live the Third International..... Rosa Luxemburg came to the conclusion: Since August 4th German Social Democracy has been a stinking corpse."

What had happened in the British Labour movement in these fatal days? The Labour Party had never made any serious attempt to fulfil the Stuttgart resolution, even on the question of opposing the arms race. It was as Lenin noted before the war "a very opportunist labour organisation imbued with the spirit of Liberal-Labour politics." In 1913 Lenin noted that when the British parliament debated a motion by leftwing

'socialist' members of the Labour Party to reduce the Naval estimates, of the Labour members only fifteen voted against the government whilst twenty one absented themselves and four voted for the government.

## **Pacifism**

The Labour Party had never managed to hold a principled line of refusing to vote a man or a penny for the capitalist 'father land.' Its actions were thus perhaps less surprising than those of self-proclaimed Marxists. They were no less serious for that. In August 1914 the British Labour Party and the unions were forced to come off the fence. They had never been working-class internationalists. Rather they identified themselves with the lower middle class pacifism of the radical wing of the Liberal Party. The outbreak of an Imperialist war - a war either to protect the existing division of the world between the great powers which favoured Britain or to redivide it in a way favourable to Germany - faced every real mass Labour movement with an either/or decision.

Either they had to oppose the war and thereby weaken the 'defence of the fatherland' or they would be obliged to collaborate in the prosecution of the war and thus support to the hilt its imperialist aims. The first course required accepting that defeat in war was a lesser evil than the working-classes' complicity with its own exploiters. The second course tied the workers to every act of Imperialist brigandage the German workers to the 'rape of Belgium', the British to the rape of Ireland. Pacifism and a purely passive resistance to the war effort could be a personal solution for isolated individuals. It was not a policy that could be pursued by the organisations of the working class - either trade union or political.

The bourgeoisie, when it is fighting a life or death struggle for its profits, its colonies, its markets cannot afford to allow its labour force to be neutral. It does not leave the working class the democratic option of dissent. In the hypocritical pretence of "defending democracy," actual democratic rights, freedom of the press and assembly, the right to strike are simply abolished "for the duration". Thus the only real alternative to complying with the war drive was (and for Marxists remains) opposing it with the methods of the class struggle, to fight to prevent the bosses offloading onto the workers misery and super exploitation necessitated by their war. Through this struggle the need to abolish war by abolishing capitalism and seizing power from the ruling class becomes clearer and clearer - first to thousands, then to millions.

The Labour Party, rapidly chose the option of supporting the war. The transition to war was less dramatic than on the continent. Britain unlike the other major powers had neither been invaded nor yet invaded another power. Most people remember 'poor little Belgium' as the cause of war. In fact it was simply a pretext, a fortunate one indeed since it appeared to cast Britain in the role of defender of small nations. In fact the British ruling class had already begun the process of intervention on the side of French Imperialism and its ally the Tsar against Germany. Since no treaty compelled it to assist France, Asquith, Grey and the Liberal Government were in some difficulty in how to present this war. Even if France was a 'more democratic' country than the German Empire, the Tsar's crimes against his own people were only too fresh in the- popular memory.

## **EVASION**

As late as August 2nd Keir Hardie, Arthur Henderson and George Lansbury were denouncing war from the plinth of Nelsons Column to huge crowds. A resolution was passed protesting against the threatened war and against secret diplomacy. The Red flag and the Internationale were sung. Ramsay MacDonald, Chairman of the party in parliament was, however, not there. He was in Number 10 Downing Street. MacDonald's first biographer records that, "he found Ministers still doubtful as to whether there would be popular support for the war, and he grimly reassured them. This he said, "would be the most popular war the country had ever fought." Here we have the essence of Ramsay MacDonald's opposition to the

war. He feared it.

He spoke carefully against war in the Commons on August 3rd "We think he (Grey) is wrong" he said on behalf of the Labour Party. But war was not yet declared. On August 5th the Parties Executive still passed an evasive, MacDonald inspired, resolution which said "We condemn the policy which has produced the war we do not obstruct the war effort, but our duty is to secure peace at the earliest possible moment." Yet that very day Labour MP's fell easy prey to the press propaganda about German atrocities in Belgium. Faced with a hysterical pro-war sentiment they were swept away. The Prime Minister demanded a war credit of £100 million. MacDonald proposed to speak against and the MP's refused to let him. He resigned as Chairman of the Parliamentary Party which proceeded to vote the war credits. MacDonald was replaced by Arthur Henderson - a man for just such a season as this. He patiently threw the party and the official labour movement into support for the war.

On August 29th the Party agreed to a political truce - ie no contested by-elections for the duration of the war. Thus Labour colluded in the suppression of its beloved 'democracy'. It agreed to co-operate in a mass recruiting campaign. The TUC had already declared an industrial truce five days earlier and the trade union bureaucracy set about suppressing all strikes.

After "victory by Christmas" failed to materialise and the long stalemate of the Western Front set in, it became obvious to the ruling class that the war was a battle for production. Lloyd George, a wily demagogue with radical 'friend of labour' credentials, was set the tasks of wooing and winning the labour movement to the fullest participation in the war drive. On May 19th 1915 Arthur Henderson entered the coalition government nominally as President of the Board of Education but actually as the representative of organized labour. Lloyd George summoned the trade unions to abandon all 'custom and practice' that might impede the war effort. All the gains of 50 years of trade unionism were thrown into the maintenance and expansion of munitions production. In July 1915 these voluntary concessions were given the force of law with the passage of the Munitions of War Act. A strike of the South Wales miners was declared unlawful, though the miners called the Governments bluff. Locking up 200,000 miners was no easy task! The Defence of the Realm Act gave the government virtually dictatorial powers.

## **Resistance**

Indeed towards the end of 1915 opposition to the effects of the war began to mount. Skilled workers resisted the destruction of the gains their powerful unions had wrested from the employers since the 1850's. Since their national officials sat on war production committees and used the whole machinery of the union against them, these workers turned to their directly elected and recallable workshop representatives for leadership. Soaring prices, astronomical war profits, the hardships of the wives and widows of soldiers, shortages and the introduction of conscription added to weariness of the horrific slaughter of the trenches all deflated the halloon of patriotism. In these circumstances local shop stewards committees came to the fore. In Glasgow the Clyde Workers Committee led a series of struggles against rent increases, against dilution, against conscription. In the other crucial war production area the Sheffield Workers Committee played a similar role. Gradually the militants became more political, more openly anti-war.

In Spring of 1916 a series of strikes erupted on Clydeside. The leaders had to be deported to break the strike. Henderson was implicated in this repression. Moreover Ramsay MacDonald despite his "opposition to the war" made it clear that he had no sympathy and gave no support to elemental working class resistance to its effects. He told the House of Commons, in the midst of the Clyde strikes, "unfortunately certain opinions which I have come to conscientiously, have some-what divided me from old colleagues, but I beg this House to believe me when I say that, rather than that division of opinion should make me an

agent to bring men out on strike, I should wish that something should happen which would destroy every particle of influence that ever I have had with the working men of this country" The leaders of these struggles turned to revolutionary Marxists like John Maclean for their inspiration.

The "division" between the old colleagues was more apparent than real. MacDonald tried to keep the anti-war feeling under control and impotent. Henderson allowed MacDonald to hawk his conscientious objections around, preventing any split in the Labour Party over it since it did nothing to upset the war effort. The lengths to which Henderson would go in his service to British Imperialism and the depth of hypocrisy involved in the claim to be fighting for the 'rights of small nations' was revealed over Ireland. The Easter Rising of 1916 failed. Its leaders included not only nationalists like Pearse, Clarke and MacDonagh but Ireland's most famous socialist, James Connolly. After some brief hesitation the British Government had the captured leaders shot. Not only did Henderson do nothing to save them but he was reported to have joined in the cheering of the rabble in the House of Commons when their execution was announced. The Daily Herald closer to MacDonald and the pacifists sanctimoniously editorialised "No lover of peace can do any thing but deplore the outbreak in Dublin."

In less than a year the disintegrating nature of the war became obvious in a yet greater "outbreak" - the February 1917 revolution in Russia. To the war weary troops and workers of the belligerent countries it seemed a beacon of hope. As the going got tougher for the warmonger politicians like Lloyd George their reliance on their 'labour lieutenants' grew greater. When Lloyd George ousted Asquith and went for total victory he bought Henderson into the inner five-man war Cabinet itself.

### **Fabianism**

The needs of all-out production for total victory forced the ruling class into far reaching state intervention and control-measures it would never have contemplated in peace-time. War munitions factories were "controlled" by the state. Planning on a vast scale took piece with the big industrialists brought into the Whitehall Ministries - as were in a junior capacity many trade union leaders. The mines and the railways were temporarily taken over by the state. The sight of all this state intervention and their own involvement in it, filled the Fabians with enthusiasm and opened the eyes of the trade union bureaucracy to the virtues of "social ownership."

The Webbs, who could never distinguish between the capitalist state and a workers state, regarded it as all good "collectivism" that simply had to be built on after the war. They could not see that these interventions were state capitalist, not socialist ones although the astronomic war profiteering should have indicated that here were no anti-capitalist measures. Moreover they could, and indeed would, be speedily reversed once the war was over. The Webbs, from their positions on the various war committees proceeded to draft series of projects continuing and extending the war time controls, adding a few of their favourite social reforms. Thus the old laissez-faire liberalism whose influence had been strong amongst the pre-war trade union leaders, declined dramatically during the war and opened the road to Fabianism.

But a more radical shift "from below" was needed to transform Labour into a "socialist" party i.e. a pseudo-socialist party. In February 1917 Russia erupted in Revolution and soon its influence was felt in the British Labour Movement. Russia was covered by a network of soldiers and peasants councils - soviets. Dominated as yet by reformist Mensheviks these bodies were not seen as organs of insurrection or working class power. But they did suggest a means of putting enormous organized working class pressure on their government and even bringing an end to the war. On the initiative of the Daily Herald a huge unofficial conference was held in Leeds on June 3rd 1917. The delegates were largely militant anti-war socialists and revolutionary shop stewards. The conference witnessed the curious spectacle of Ramsay MacDonald hailing the Russian soviets! The Conference called for the formation of local workers and

soldiers councils throughout the country.

In fact it was, indirectly the Russian soviets that drove Henderson, though not Labour, out of coalition. The Congress of Soviets called for a Socialist Congress in Stockholm to consist of neutral and belligerent 'socialists' to press for a negotiated end to the war. The Labour Party and behind the scenes Lloyd George, despatched Arthur Henderson to Russia to investigate and to help prevent the Russians from making a separate peace.

In Russia 'Uncle Arthur' came face to face with a revolution and heartily detested it. He exclaimed on his return: "The men are not content with asking for reasonable advances. Their demands are so extravagant that it is obvious they are prompted not so much with a desire for economic improvement as to secure a complete change in the control of industry." And that Henderson would not hear of. Why they even wanted "supreme control in the hands of workers themselves." The result of this would be "disaster to the whole concern." He did become convinced of two things. One was that an international 'socialist' conference was needed to keep Russia in the war and to bolster the flagging prestige of the reformist socialists in Russia. The other a longer term question, was that the Labour Party needed a thorough organizational and ideological overhaul if it was to do better than the Mensheviks against its own Bolsheviks, the shop stewards and the hard anti-war socialists like John Maclean. Lloyd George, after some typical duplicity, refused to allow a Labour delegation to go to the Stockholm Conference and Henderson resigned from the Cabinet. Now, combining with the Webbs, Henderson set about reorganising the party. In September he persuaded the national executive to undertake: "the reorganization of the party with a view to a wider extension of membership, the strengthening and development of local parties in the constituencies .... and the suggestion that a party constitution be adopted."

By October the outlines of the new constitution were clear individual membership, not hitherto possible except via the ILP or the British Socialist Party was to be introduced. Thus these dangerously radical organizations with their own conferences and policies could be swamped or disciplined. The election of the national executive was henceforth to be by a conference dominated by the block vote of the unions - ie by the top union bureaucrats - and finally a reformist 'socialist' objective was needed to help outflank the more radical socialists and syndicalists who hitherto had had a monopoly of socialist ideology.

In the midst of this process the news of the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks provided an added spur to Henderson and Webbs' reforms of the old purely federal ie 'non-socialist' party. These proposals were considered at two conferences - in Nottingham in January and February 1918. Thus the Labour Party adopted the famous clause 4: "To secure for the producers by hand and by brain the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry and service."

Alongside this clause went Sidney Webb's programme for post-war reconstruction "Labour and the New Social Order." Obviously a profound change had come over the old trade union parliamentary pressure group which had existed up to that point. The war had dispelled many naive illusions. It had brought Labour into government albeit in a junior role. It had tested and found abundantly present the patriotism of the parliamentary leaders. That is to say it proved that in a conflict between the interests both historic and international but also immediate and material, of the workers and the needs of imperialist capitalism, Labour could equivocally side with the "class enemy." The 'innocent' muddle headed opportunism symbolised before 1914 by Keir Hardie was definitely replaced by the cynical chauvinism of an Arthur Henderson and the hypocritical semi-pacifism of a MacDonald. On the surface Labour became 'more socialist' after 1918. In fact this was an adjustment made necessary by the leftward move of the British

working class - a weapon against Bolshevism and a disguise of the party's deep, fundamental commitment to "its own" ruling class,

### **Reformism**

Lenin was later to sum up the Labour Party's nature quite crisply. Criticising as mistaken those British socialists who called the Labour Party "the political organization of the trade union movement" or its "political expression" he went on: "Of course for the most part the Labour Party consists of workers, but it does not logically follow from this that every workers' party which consists of workers is at the same time a "political workers party"; that depends upon who leads it, upon the content of its activities and of its political tactics. Only the latter determines whether it is a political proletarian party. From this point of view, which is the only correct point of view, the Labour Party is not a political workers party but a thoroughly bourgeois party, because, although it consists of workers, it is led by reactionaries and the worst reactionaries at that, who lead it in the spirit of the bourgeoisie."

In the years 1914-1918 the Labour Party had become definitively what it remains today, a bourgeois workers party.

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