

CHAPTER XXXV

THE TURBULENT CLYDE

ON the morrow of Christmas we knew that there had been trouble on the Clyde. The advocates of compulsion and economy complained that both soldiers and munition workers were too independent and too highly paid. *The Times* said:

"We must deal as harshly with strikers who throw down their tools as with soldiers who desert in the field."

The great curtailment of profits which it was promised the Munitions Act would effect was already proving an illusion. In the case of one great manufacturing company, the balance sheet of which showed a net profit of £103,822 against £65,096 the previous year, the *Manchester Guardian* declared that matters had been so arranged that the Chancellor of the Exchequer would get none of the increased profit.

A Health of Munition Workers Committee had been appointed by the Government. It issued grievous reports of weary workers, spent by excessive toil, struggling for a place in overcrowded trains and trams, spending long hours in journeying to their homes. It stated:

"Family life is impossible. Mothers and grown children make munitions, younger ones suffer neglect at home. In the lodgings of munition workers beds are never empty, rooms are never aired, as day and night shifts prevent this."

Sometimes a woman wrote to me, broken down in health by overwork, complaining of long walks over sodden, impromptu tracks, ankle-deep in mud, to newly-erected factories; of night shifts spent without even the possibility of getting a drink of water; of workers obliged to take their meals amid the dust and fumes of the workshop.

By the end of the year there were three women to one man in the munition factories and *The Times* announced that the proportion of women would presently be doubled. Despite all promises their wages still averaged from 8s. to 14s. At a controlled factory in Croydon, women got 8s. a week, forewomen in charge of 50 or 60 others, 12s. 6d. Women replacing men who had earned £2 to £3, got 12s. 6d. The workers complained to me that some well-to-do ladies were paid up to 35s.

As to the men whom women were steadily replacing, their wages were variously estimated. Lord Charlemont, who had gone into a munition factory as a munition worker, said he earned from £1 15s. to £3 10s. on piece rates—scarcely an extravagant sum. The *New Statesman* reported that the wages of semi-skilled men on the Clyde averaged 39s. per week and of the women 15s. These rates were in fact common.

The promise that the men dilutees should be paid the standard rate of the skilled men who had previously done the work was soon broken, although the pledge had been embodied in the Treasury Agreement and the Munitions Act itself. Workers complained that the new-comers were getting 15s. a week less than their predecessors, and that whoever objected was dismissed. Some of the skilled men who had been replaced by the new dilutees were obliged to take work as unskilled labourers in other factories.

The Clyde Workers' Committee had sprung into being on the passage of the Munitions Act. It rapidly gained many thousands of supporters. Its object was to build up in the factories and shipyards a system of workers' committees, linked together by their chosen representatives or stewards. It was an essential principle that the organisation should be built "from the bottom up," each workshop sending its delegate to the committee for the factory, each factory to the committee for the area. The shop stewards were already established, the employers and trade unions alike recognising them as their medium of contact with the workers. Each factory had its convener of shop stewards, and so far as they could be brought into line, it was these conveners who formed the Clyde Workers' Committee.

In the height of its strength the Committee had supporters in all the local sections of the working-class movement in Glasgow. Its originators, and most active spirits, were members of the Socialist Labour Party, a small body founded in 1905 by James Connolly, the Irish Socialist and industrial unionist, on the model of the organisation of the same name created by Daniel De Leon in the United States. The De Leonite theory differed widely from the ideas entertained by the average I.L.P. and B.S.P. Socialist of the time, whose notions of the desired future Socialist community centred around Parliament and the City Council, and whose thoughts turned to the Post Office and the municipal tram service when occasionally they considered the management of industry in the Socialist State. The De Leonites assigned to industry the primary place in the Socialist community, conceiving it as managed by industrial unions built on the basis of the workshop. "Socialism must proceed from the bottom upwards," wrote Connolly, "whereas capitalist political society is organised from above downwards." The central administration of the country was to be entrusted to representatives elected by the various departments of industry. In Connolly's words: "Socialism will be administered by a committee of experts elected from the industries and professions of the land; capitalist society is governed by representatives elected from districts, and is based upon territorial divisions."¹ It was the guiding axiom of the S.L.P. that, as an essential prelude to the Socialist era, the workers should be fully organised on the basis of industry, and the industrial unions linked together to form an industrial republic within the shell of the old political state. When the workers, thus practically organised for the management of the Community, and consciously desirous of power, should appear on the political battle-ground, no power could

¹ *Socialism Made Easy*, by James Connolly. 1905.

me; the audience shifted and fluctuated; the speakers had lost their grip.

The No Conscription Fellowship¹ had officially decided to organise no resistance, and to submit to the ordeal of the Tribunals, but many of its members were not of this mind. The Glasgow branch declared its refusal to appear before the Tribunals.

Whilst the Tribunals were still forming, the *Worker*, the newly-published organ of the Clyde Workers' Committee, was suppressed. Gallacher, Muir, and Bell were arrested under the D.O.R.A. and charged with attempting, through its pages, to cause mutiny and disaffection, and to impede the production of war material. The *Worker* had called for common action between munition workers and miners, to compel the withdrawal of Conscription, and had named Robert Smillie as the man who could secure unity in the effort. The Clyde workers were advised to "approach Robert Smillie, and offer him their assistance and co-operation in any measures he may take to make Conscription ineffective."

Robert Smillie did not respond to this appeal. His speeches, whether he meant them fully or not, were incitements to industrial action against the Government and its policies. They created a ferment in the minds of others; but he took no steps to implement them.

Now that Conscription was in force notices were sent by the military authorities to unmarried men, ordering them to present themselves for service, and threatening them with arrest as deserters should they fail. These notices made no mention that exemption could be obtained for any cause, or of the Tribunals to which appeal might be made. Even *The Times*, which had vehemently and persistently demanded the Act, complained that men previously rejected as medically unfit were receiving these notices, and that when they displayed exemption certificates these were often taken away and destroyed. An atmosphere of terror was created to prevent resistance. At Lancaster, on February 22nd, a poor mother was sent to prison for "harbouring" her son, who was found crouching between the rafters and the ceiling of their home.

A special Non-Combatant Corps was formed exclusively for Conscientious Objectors. Their duties would be to dig trenches, erect barbed-wire entanglements, assist the lines of communication, sweep up mines, and any other work of danger which might not compel them to take part in actual fighting. A military representative rightly observed that the members of this corps would not have a very happy time! Prominent Conscientious Objectors at once announced their determination not to undertake war work, of this or any other sort. The vast majority of the C.O.'s refused to take service in the Non-Combatant Corps.

The public were admitted to the Tribunals. I attended a sitting at Bethnal Green, as soon as the Tribunal there was formed. The appeals of four Conscientious Objectors were heard and wholly rejected, though all

¹ It had counselled signing the National Register, adding a refusal to undertake military service or munition work.

could prove they had long held anti-militarist views, and one was a widow's only son. A fifth C.O. was a local propagandist of some prominence, well known to the members of the Tribunal. They cleared the court to hear his case, and awarded him service in the Non-Combatant Corps, which he promptly rejected.

Amongst the other appellants was a small greengrocer and furniture remover, who pleaded for total exemption to carry on his business, as the sole support of his aged father, and of his two widowed sisters and their children. He was brusquely allowed a month's exemption to wind up his affairs before joining his regiment. Jews were treated even more relentlessly than other applicants; the destruction of their small businesses seemed to give real satisfaction to the Tribunal.

A large proportion of the cases rejected by the Local Tribunals passed on to the Appeal Tribunals, but usually received from them no kindlier treatment.

Numbers of physically defective men were passed into the Army, despite their appeals. When they broke down, pension was refused on the ground that their disabilities did not originate through service.

Philip Snowden¹ cited the case of a Conscript whose eyesight was so defective that when he laid his spectacles on the table he could only find them by groping. The Under-Secretary for War had written to say that if the poor fellow had *three pairs of spectacles*, to change as the lenses became dimmed in battle, he would be fit for active service. Another Conscript was so far advanced in consumption that he died three weeks after enlistment, another was a physical wreck with a crippled hand, whilst one was vomiting blood and when taken for service, could only digest Benger's Food.

Asquith had said that agitation for the repeal of the Military Service Act was legal, and would not be prosecuted; yet the police were confiscating anti-Conscription literature, and police and military were breaking up meetings against the Act. When Members of Parliament complained that soldiers broke up meetings Tennant replied: "I must defend my military." When it was shown that Tribunals denied to Conscientious Objectors the protection accorded to them by the law, Walter Long protested he must "defend and maintain" the Tribunals. The Home Secretary admitted that the Press Bureau had prohibited the printing of a record of the decisions of Military Service Tribunals for the information of Members of Parliament.²

Nellie Best, a frail white-faced woman I had never seen before, was tried under the D.O.R.A. and imprisoned for six months. She had republished as a leaflet an appeal on behalf of starving and broken men discharged from the War, which had appeared in *Ainslee's Advertiser* in America, over the signatures of some of the richest and most prominent leaders of United States Society. She headed the leaflet: "*A Warning to those*

¹ House of Commons Official Report, August 23rd, 1916.

² Official Parliamentary Report. May 18th, 1916.