

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.