

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.

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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.

withstand them; the invincible industrial republic would "crack the shell" of the old political State and "step into its place in the scheme of the universe."

The S.L.P. propaganda for industrial unions found a ready ground in the metal factories and shipyards, because the struggle of the workers therein was handicapped by a multiplicity of craft unions. The workers engaged in the manufacture of a single article were often divided into numerous unions, pursuing conflicting policies; many of them autocratic in constitution, and manned by permanent officials unresponsive to the new ideas permeating the workshops. The task of replacing or amalgamating these organisations must be a long and difficult one. The Socialist industrialists in the S.L.P. and elsewhere did not shirk the task, despite the difficulty of the meddlesome law which prevented any amalgamation of registered unions except by a two-thirds majority of the entire membership.¹ When, however, the war-time abdication of their Trade Union functions by officials, in conformity with the political truce and the Treasury Agreement, had rallied the workers behind the shop stewards for mutual protection, the most active S.L.P.ers turned with disgust from official unions of any sort, even industrial. They now set their hopes on the unofficial organisation of the rank and file workers. That the organisation should have no paid officials, that it should be managed wholly by volunteers, earning their living as wage earners in the shops, and responsible to their work-mates, was held to be essential. It was anticipated that the Workers' Committees would entirely supersede the old Trade Unions as the fighting organisations of the working class. To the Trade Unions, which were held to be dwindling products of the Capitalist era, would be left merely the administration of the sickness and other friendly benefits.

It was confidently believed that the social revolution, which was to emancipate the workers and establish the classless order of Socialism, was at hand. The unrest among the workers, which united them staunchly and defiantly behind their shop stewards, and sent them flocking in droves to the great meetings, was seen, not as the result of war conditions, but as a token that the hour of the decisive struggle with Capitalism was approaching; and that the control of the great contest would be in the hands of those who were leading the workers within the fabric of industry. In the meantime their struggle was to unite the workers against the oppression of the Government and the employers, and in revolt against official Trade Unionism, on account of its faulty structure, its restricted objectives, and because it had in some measure allied itself with the interests oppressing the workers.

The Clyde Workers' Committee demanded that the Government take over all industries and give the workers an equal share in the management. Despite this far-reaching demand, and the revolutionary doctrines which stirred the imagination of its S.L.P. leaders, the objectives for which the Committee actually took action were piecemeal ameliorations of hard

¹ In 1917 an Amending Act substituted a 50 per cent. poll and 20 per cent. majority.

conditions in defence of fellow-workers, which made no attack upon the Capitalist foundations of industry. The methods of the Committee were solidarity and the sympathetic strike. It adopted the slogan of the American Industrial Workers of the World: "An Injury to One is an Injury to All!" Its declared policy was that if a worker were charged under the Munitions Act, and his work-mates struck work in his defence, the strike should be extended, if possible, to all the yards and factories in the area.

Having a similar conception of the co-operative social order which would some day replace this sad era of conflict, I was eager to come in contact with the pioneers who were leading this workshop movement. If I found them sometimes both truculent and exclusive, I was not disposed to complain, regarding such peculiarities as excrescences born of their struggle, and the natural defects of the aggressive qualities necessary to overcome the obstacles with which they had to contend.

Of the Clyde shop stewards the three who received most prominence were David Kirkwood, Willie Gallacher, and Arthur MacManus. Kirkwood, the convener of the Parkhead shop stewards, was in those days a fair, well-knit man, in appearance more like an Army officer than a factory worker. An I.L.P.er and later a Labour Member of Parliament, he was singularly unlike the typical members of the Left Wing industrial movement, with which, as it proved, his connection was brief. He knew little, if anything, of the doctrines of Marx and De Leon; his opinions were often utterly illogical and inconsistent; but he was the sort of good-natured, impulsive, emotional person who can rise to the occasion when indignation and enthusiasm need a leader, and a spice of daring is required to take the lead. So he shot to the fore, past men who may have been abler, and since he had a touch of pity and chivalry in his nature, he took up the case of the women, as will presently appear.

Gallacher was a jolly and volatile fellow, more Irish than Scotch in blood and temperament. He had a fund of genuine kindness, was ready to help any work-mate in trouble. Genial and brotherly, almost paternal in manner, though he had barely reached his forties, he seemed impelled by a readiness not to climb out of the workshop on the backs of his mates, but to struggle for the betterment of his class. This trait endeared him to men who were smarting under the desertion of their Trade Union officials.

McManus was also a Scots-Irishman, several years younger than Gallacher but of a very different type. Exceedingly small, almost a dwarf in stature, his ambitions were great. His reputation as a daring and dangerous revolutionary was for a time extensive. An S.L.P.er of several years standing, he had nevertheless supported the War during the first eight months of its duration.

In his lighter moments Gallacher prided himself as a rhymster; his particular *penchant* was for humorous songs. He told me with child-like pleasure of his great success in a ditty he had written for a variety theatre artiste of local repute with the refrain: "Oh Cavannah, Give me a sweet Havanna!"

McManus poured scorn on such efforts, and once, as Gallacher told me plaintively, he had even destroyed the manuscript of some of his most cherished jingles. In the view of McManus, it was Gallacher's duty not to act the irresponsible comedian but to add dignity and popularity to the Clyde Workers' Committee.

A great source of discontent on the Clyde was the appointment, as the representative of the Minister of Munitions for the area, of a prominent employer of munition workers, William Weir, the managing director of C. J. Weir, Ltd., the Holm Foundry, Cathcart. Such a choice, for a position of such power over munition workers, was a glaring injustice no worker could fail to discern. It is amazing that Henderson—who was in the Government, we must remember, as its Labour Adviser—should have consented to it. Weir, acting both as Minister of Munitions for the area, and as managing director of his firm, was employing women on big shells at 15s. a week, and was resisting the Trade Union demand of £1 a week for women which Lloyd George had recommended, and now, under pressure—for we and others were still pressing him—had promised to make compulsory in Government factories.

On November 30th, in the Central Hall, Westminster, Lloyd George addressed representatives of the Trade Unions concerned in munition making, telling them that workers should no more be permitted to appeal against the refusal of discharge certificates by their employers, than soldiers in the trenches against the orders of their officers. During war, he averred, the State could not permit advances in wages in accord with the law of supply and demand. In the House of Commons on December 20th, he urged the employers to press forward with the dilution of labour, undeterred by any fear of trouble with the skilled operatives, for the Munitions Act would be enforced in support of any employer who put unskilled men and women to the lathes.

It was decreed that the munition factories and shipyards should work through Christmas. Lloyd George determined to address the stubborn recalcitrant workers of the Clyde on Christmas Day. Opposition to his purpose was immediately manifest. Arthur Henderson, with two Government officials, rushed up to Glasgow, and with Lord Murray of Elibank, addressed the Trade Union officials, in the vain hope of securing a friendly atmosphere. The Christmas morning meeting in the St. Andrew's Hall was fairly well attended, but violently hostile. Lloyd George was greeted by a storm of hooting, followed by the singing of "The Red Flag." He was unable to get a hearing till David Kirkwood, the Parkhead shop steward, called for order. The meeting ended in uproar when John Muir of the Clyde Workers' Committee claimed to be heard in defence of the workers, and was refused. Lloyd George then visited Parkhead Forge. The workers there had been called together before his arrival. When he entered with Henderson, Murray of Elibank, and the manager, the workers paid no attention, but continued debating some business of their own, so fearless was their defiance! Again it was only by Kirkwood's intervention that Lloyd George obtained a hearing. George conveyed, through the manager, a desire to be introduced to Kirkwood, and a request to

him to act as chairman. Kirkwood agreed, announcing the Minister in truculent style:

"This is Mr. Lloyd George . . . we regard him with suspicion, because every Act with which he is associated has the taint of slavery about it."¹

He demanded for the workers a share in the management of the works. Unless this were granted they would fight the Munitions Act "to the death."

Logan, one of the Parkhead shop stewards, was dismissed for an altercation with the manager arising out of Lloyd George's visit. A stay-in strike was organised in Logan's defence, and 28 men were fined £5 each in consequence. Hundreds of munitioners left work to attend the trial, and the strike continued for some time.

Lloyd George had warned every Glasgow newspaper, save one, to publish no unauthorised account of his Christmas Day visit; to every paper, with one exception, a report of his doings, edited by himself, was circulated by the Press Association. The one exception was the *Glasgow Forward*, a Socialist weekly edited by a clever good-looking young Scotsman, Tom L. Johnston, who later got a place in the Labour Government of 1929. He edited the *Forward* with a scathing pen throughout the War, and gained for it a wide popularity in the Labour Movement so far afield as London, which it lost when he left the editorial chair.

The *Forward*, as might have been expected, published a detailed and graphic report of Lloyd George's visit. At Lloyd George's direct instance² the paper was promptly suppressed by the military authorities under the D.O.R.A. Eventually the *Forward* was permitted to reappear, on promising to submit all doubtful matter to the Government Press Bureau. In the meantime the Clyde Workers' Committee had begun to issue a weekly publication of its own called *The Worker*. Its pages were illuminated with a racy and acid humour, which emanated from its editor, John S. Clarke, a genuine original, an odd figure, Atheist, Republican, and rebel Socialist. His caustic verse on topical subjects was much admired by a wide working-class following; his vitriolic epithets, which in some quarters might have been dubbed at times both blasphemous and obscene, were quoted with awe and delight as gems of priceless and daring wit. Clarke's biting propaganda rhymes, which added prestige and circulation to their paper, and were beyond their power to emulate, were regarded by McManus and his colleagues with a respect denied to Gallacher's guileless and unpurposed songs.

About this time Lord Balfour of Burleigh, that hugely built old Conservative, a most hardened reactionary in theory, who yet not infrequently proved more liberal in judgment than those who accounted themselves Liberals, was appointed, with Lynden Macassay, K.C., to enquire into the unrest on the Clyde. Their report in many matters justified the workers' most bitter complaints. They recommended the easing of

¹ Reported in the *Glasgow Forward*.

² This was stated in the House of Commons, January 4th, 1916, by J. H. Tennant.

the pressure imposed by the Munitions Act, notably in the refusal to permit workers to change their employment for legitimate reasons. The main outcome of the enquiry was that Munitions Tribunals were deprived of the power to impose imprisonment, but given authority to make orders for fines to be deducted by instalments from wages. To counteract any easement of compulsion which this might effect, came an announcement by the Law Officers of the Crown threatening legal proceedings by the Attorney-General against the trustees of any Trade Union issuing strike pay to workers controlled by the Munitions Act. The Government Committee on Production issued to certain Trade Unions a statement enjoining them not to press for further advances in wages.

Government Commissioners were appointed for further enquiry into the unrest on the Clyde and Tyne; for strikes were unpleasantly frequent, and the inflow of new workers, the dilution of labour, as it was termed, was not proceeding at the pace which the Ministry desired. The shop stewards of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers now mutually agreed to insist that the basis of any arrangement for dilution must be the payment of the old rates to all new-comers to the work, whether men or women. Further strikes were called in support of this principle. Again David Kirkwood came to the front, leading the men and women at Beardmore's Parkhead Forge so successfully, that this principle was accepted for that factory by the Government officials and by Sir William Beardmore. Whilst this agreement was operating at Parkhead 150 skilled men earning 8d. per hour were dismissed from another Clyde area factory and replaced by women paid from 12s. to 14s. a week.

CHAPTER XXXVI

CONSCRIPTION—CLYDE WORKERS ARRESTED—MILITARY SERVICE TRIBUNALS

CONSCRIPTION was swiftly advancing. The Lords were forcing the Government to the plunge, by threatening to reject the Bill for staving off a General Election. In the Commons the Liberal, Labour and Irish Members who had declared for the maintenance of the Voluntary System still held the majority, but little reliance could be placed on the stability of their convictions.

In the last week of the old year it was announced that the Cabinet had decided on the immediate redemption of Asquith's so-called "pledge to the married men," that before they were called on to fulfil their undertaking to serve, compulsion should be applied to the unmarried.

A special Conference was hastily convened by the Labour Party and Trade Union Congress, for January 6th. It was a great gathering; it seemed that everyone was there who cared for Labour. The delegates rejected the official resolution to leave the Labour Members free to vote as they thought fit; and by a huge majority of 1,998,000 to 873,000, declared against Conscription, urging the Labour Members to vote against the measure at every stage.

A Liberal, Sir John Simon, left the Cabinet, but Henderson and his Labour colleagues held to their posts, through those days of thunderous suspense, when all awaited the next event, wondering if any power or influence in the country could impede the introduction of a Conscription Bill.

Actually, a meeting of the Labour Party Executive and the Labour Members of Parliament had instructed Henderson, Brace, and Roberts to withdraw from the Government. Their resignations were therefore tendered; but a meeting took place between Asquith, the Parliamentary Labour Party, and the Labour Party Executive. The resignations were withdrawn, pending the Labour Party Conference, which was to meet at the end of January. Conscription would be established before that date, if the Government had its way.

A little conference¹ was called in the Fabian Rooms in Tothill Street, by the No Conscription Fellowship, the Society of Friends, and the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a pacifist group of war-time growth. From this conference emerged a deputation to the House of Commons, and a body called the National Council against Conscription. I was elected to both. We passed, a little irregular stream of us, along the pavement to the House; mainly bourgeois, middle-aged, and elderly, black lace mantles and black

¹ January 10th, 1916.