

Strikes for peace

Signs are steadily growing that the working class of Europe are becoming weary of the war, with its endless slaughter, its lack of decisions making for peace, and the increased privation and misery that result from its continuance.

Enthusiastic at first for the war, with an enthusiasm inflamed and fed by the Press and the preachers – religious and political – of the master class, the workers of the various belligerent countries rushed to the fray, to the cry of “On to Berlin!” “Paris in a week!” and the like. Three and a half years of appalling slaughter have intervened, with immense improvements and developments in the instruments of torture and destruction, but the belligerents are no nearer a military decision now, on either side, than they were in 1914.

Food is becoming short, not only because millions of men have been called to the armies and navies, but also because millions more have been taken from the production of the necessaries of life and put to making instruments and articles for its destruction. And this second army has to be fed along with the first.

This food shortage is further aggravated by the favouritism that is rampant all round. Working-class women may wait for hours in queues for meat or margarine, and then fail to obtain any, but wealthy novelists, paunchy parsons, triple chinned quondam “white-feather” ticklers, and prosperous “patriots” in general, can easily obtain hundreds of pounds weight of good things to nourish their determination to sacrifice and strengthen their “will to victory.” Shops in working-class neighbourhoods are often shut for days because of the lack of supplies, but there is no shortage of first class meat, genuine butter, choicest tea, and so on at the big hotels and clubs of the West End of London, and of certain fashionable resorts. The wives of the capitalists *never* stand in queues for anything except a view of the latest extravagance in expensive fashions.

Although the news published here of things that are happening on the Continent has to be taken with a certain amount of caution, as we must remember that the Censor will only allow the publication of items that suit the interest of the master class, it seems fairly certain that disaffection is growing there and strikes are increasing. In many cases the avowed object of the strikes in Germany and Austria is the securing of food, but nearly always accompanying this demand, and in some cases forming the sole object, is the call upon the governments to declare an armistice and enter into negotiations for peace.

In this country a similar movement is spreading and strikes are not only in progress, but more are threatened. This movement has received a great impetus from the introduction by the Government of a measure for extending the power of Conscription by the military authorities, usually referred to under the misleading but catchy title of the “Man Power Bill.” In the Press the greatest prominence has been given to the attitude taken up by the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, though this society is not the only, or even the most important, section affected by the Bill. The reason for singling out the ASE has been the refusal of the Executive of that body to take part in a joint conference with the other trades and Sir Auckland Geddes, on the details of applying the Bill. The ASE Executive claim that, as they have a separate agreement with the Government on this question, they should be consulted separately on the withdrawal of that agreement.

While this Government have a complete answer to this objection, it is significant that, so far, they have not attempted to bring that answer forward. Sir Auckland Geddes or Mr. Lloyd George (whose title will no doubt arrive later on) could easily have answered the ASE Executive somewhat as follows:

“It is true we made that agreement with you, but what of it? Did we not point out at the time that there was no guarantee that we would keep it? Did not Mr. Henderson answer your question on this point by telling you point-blank that no such guarantee would be given? And, far more important than this, is it not a fact that we have made various promises, pledges, and agreements, several of them embodied in Acts of Parliament, not only to sections, but to the whole working class. Even now your protest is not on behalf of the working class, but a claim that a small section – the members of the ASE. – should not be placed in the Army until the ‘dilutees’ have been taken. Surely if you did not complain when we

smashed agreements and pledges given to the whole working class it is illogical to complain now when a section of that class is being similarly treated.”

This latter fact is the fatally weak point in the ASE. case, and is being used effectively by the capitalist Press and spokesmen against them.

While such narrow, short-sighted views are held by sections of the working class the master class have an easy task in keeping alive the jealousies and divisions that are so useful to them in their fights with the workers.

Sir Auckland Geddes was quite successful in urging the other trade union leaders whom he met in conference to accept his proposals and to promise to persuade their followers to accept them without trouble or friction. One reason why the ASE. officials were not so ready to follow their old methods on this occasion is the growth of the “Shop Stewards” movement up and down the country. This movement has helped to undermine the influence of the “official” cliques in the trade unions, as shown by the numerous “unauthorised” strikes, and with the loss of this influence over the rank and file the officials realised that their chance of bargaining for jobs with the master class would be gone.

Apparently some of the Shop Stewards, however, are merely rivals for the “official” positions and refuse to move far outside the beaten track. According to the *Daily Telegraph* for Jan. 30th, 1918, the “National Administrative Council of Shop Stewards” passed the following resolution:

“That they are not the body to deal with the technical grievances arising out of the cancellation of occupational exemptions from military service embodied in the Man Power Bill, and must, therefore, leave such grievances to be dealt with by the official organisations concerned.”

Most of the “official organisations” are swallowing the “grievances” whole.

It would be a big mistake to suppose that these strikes and threats to strike indicate an acceptance of the principles of Socialism, or even a general awakening to the fact that they are slaves to the master class, on the part of those engaged in this movement. In some cases there may be some suspicion as to the good faith of certain Ministers and the War Cabinet, but even this suspicion is only of a faint type, as is shown by several of the resolutions passed at various meetings. According to Press reports resolutions of similar character have been passed (up to the time of writing) at meetings held at Woolwich, Albert Hall (London), Barrow, etc, in the following terms:

“That the British Government should enter into immediate negotiations with the other belligerent Powers for an armistice on all fronts, with a view to a general peace on the basis of self-determination of all nations and no annexations and no indemnities. Should such action demonstrate that German Imperialism was the only obstacle to peace they would co-operate in the prosecution of the war until the objects mentioned in the first part of the resolution were achieved. Failing this they would continue their opposition to the man-power proposals” – *Daily News*, 28.1.1918.

These resolutions show the confused mental condition of the workers concerned. Does their claim for “self-determination” apply to Ireland, India and Egypt? If so, do they really imagine the British capitalist Government will agree to such application? Certainly they must be simple if they believe a threat to strike would bring such a result.

A resolution moved at Glasgow at a meeting where Sir A. Geddes was present struck a firmer note in the following terms:

“That having heard the case of the Government, as stated by Sir Auckland Geddes, this meeting pledges itself to oppose to the very uttermost the Government in its call for more men. We insist and pledge ourselves to take action to enforce the declaration of an immediate armistice on all fronts; and that the expressed opinion of the workers of Glasgow is that from now on, and so far as this business is

concerned our attitude all the time and every time is to do nothing in support of carrying on the war, but to bring the war to a conclusion.”

The supporters of the war could of course point out that, as far as the workers are concerned, there is as much – and as little – reason for carry on on the war now as ever there was. Better late than never, however, and if the Clyde workers realise even at this late date that they have nothing to gain but a good deal to lose by the continuance of the war it is a point to the good.

Of course the Government soon arranged for a counterblast to these resolutions, and the Press gives somewhat vague and rather circumstantial accounts of meetings where resolutions of support of the Government were supposed to be passed. But this action itself is a proof of how widespread, if not deep, is the movement.

It would be folly, or worse, for the workers to fail to recognise the forces that can be employed against them by the Government if it chooses. Already in certain cases where men have refused to work in a particular factory or on a particular job the protection cards have been withdrawn, the men called to the colours, and then ordered back to the factory or job at ordinary soldier’s pay. With its present powers and without troubling to pass the “Man Power” Bill at all the Government could withdraw the protection cards and exemption certificates of the engineers and others concerned, call these men to the colours, and then draft them back into the shops and shipyards under military orders and discipline and on army pay.

The messages, more or less reliable, purporting to show that this action is also taking place in Germany against certain of the strikers there may merely be the newspaper preparation for an extension of such action here.

It is true that, to the outsider, signs of another sort are not wanting. The sudden calling of the Labour Party Conference to formulate what it called its “Peace Aims” without even taking time to consult its constituent bodies was undoubtedly the work of the Government to prepare for a “climb down” on their previous bombastic claims. The contemptuous treatment of Mr. Havelock Wilson at the Conference shows how readily the capitalists throw aside their tools when they have served their purpose. Mr. Lloyd George’s speech a few days later was practically a withdrawal of almost every claim, from Constantinople to Alsace-Lorraine, previously put forward. Of course the game of bluff will not be dropped all at once; but how transparent it is becoming is shown by the official statement of the Inter-Allied War Conference published on 4th February, 1918:

“The Allies are united in heart and will, not by any hidden designs, but by their open resolve to defend civilisation against an unscrupulous and brutal attempt at domination” – *Daily Telegraph*.

To draw up such a statement during the very week that the question as to whether the war was to be continued till the objects of the secret treaty with Italy were attained was being raised in the British Parliament was certainly an exhibition of irony.

Rumours have been floating round that the Bill was introduced with the object of raising disturbances so as to give grounds for a further abatement of claims on the part of the Government, and whether these rumours have any foundation in fact or not, it is certainly curious that a Bill should be introduced to give the Army authorities power they already possess in substance if not in method. The excuse that the matter is too pressing to allow the time necessary for the present procedure, while valid, hardly seems strong enough for the introduction of such a trouble-raising measure.

By far the greatest danger to the workers lies in another direction,. The ablest representative of the master class to-day on the public Press is Mr. A. G. Gardiner, of the *Daily News*. Not only has he a firm grasp of the situation from the masters’ side, but he is easily the cleverest of their agents at the game of misleading the workers by using a style of seeming honesty and openness to cover up a substance of slimy deceit. A good example of this was his ‘Open Letter to the Clyde Workers’ (*Daily News*, 19.1.1918). His articles, while appearing to condemn the Government, are strenuous attempts to defend the existence and maintenance of capitalism. Another instance of danger from this direction is the employment of Mr.

Henderson as a decoy duck to lure the workers into dangerous waters. Despite his unceremonious and contemptuous dismissal at a moment's notice from his position in the Cabinet, he is again engaged on dirty work for the masters in the statement he issued to the Press on 1st Feb. In that screed he urges the workers to realise the gravity of their threatened action because it –

“. . . may precipitate a crisis which in the interests of the whole international working-class movement we must do all in our power to avert” – Daily Telegraph, 1.2.1918).

The cant and humbug of talking about an “international working-class movement” that has no existence, while the capitalist governments refuse to allow even a meeting of international delegates, is characteristic of one who has done all in his power to urge the workers to slaughter each other for the *national* interests of the capitalist class.

But these statements, along with those of Mr. Gardiner, sound plausible. Their purpose is to persuade the workers to still leave in the hands of the masters' agents the manipulation and direction of affairs. And there is a great danger that the workers, so long used to following this course, so long in the habit of following “leaders” will succumb once more to this influence. Some of them not daring to trust themselves to manage affairs, will believe it better to leave the management to these “experts.” If only half of the blunders and appalling crimes of this war should be brought into the light of day, these timid workers will have a rude shock concerning the ability of those “experts.” Even such reports as have leaked through up to now show what a gigantic hypocrisy is their claim. The revelations that have been published in regard to Mesopotamia should convince every worker that they simply could not themselves manage matters worse, while the contempt they are held in by both the master class and its agents may be illustrated by a small incident from one of the war fronts.

A certain road on a portion of the line is used to bring up munitions and food to the men in the trenches. The “enemy” knows the position – and use – of this road quite well. It is therefore watched during the light hours, and swept with shell and machine-gun fire during the night. The transport vans are stopped just outside the area of fire *to save the mules* (four-legged ones) and the supplies are then carried through the shot-swept zone by the men.

As the working class begin to understand the position they occupy in modern society; as they begin to take a hand in settling affairs of social importance, they will make many blunders and mistakes. In the main, however, these will be easily recognised and corrected. But the biggest danger that confronts them – the biggest mistake they can make – is to place power in the hands of “leaders” under any pretext whatever. It is at once putting those “leaders” in a position to bargain with the master class for the purpose of selling out the workers. It allows the master class to retain control of the political machinery which is the essential instrument for governing Society. All the other blunders and mistakes the workers may make will be as dust in the balance compared with this one, and not until they realise this fact will they be on the road to Socialism.

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