

The Kier Hardie myth

The myth about Keir Hardie's attitude to war is very persistent. At an anti-Polaris rally in Glasgow last December, the Co-operative Movement representative had only to refer to him, ". . . if we could get Keir Hardie here. . ." to have his words drowned by applause. Whatever the sentiments of the audience may have been, it was certainly in error about Hardie's attitude to war.

In 1914, with the Great War drawing near, the Second International called for "Peace demonstrations" throughout Europe. On August 2nd, in Trafalgar Square, Hardie spoke at the "Peace demonstration". Sentimentality and emotionalism were offered in place of the sound education and organisation needed by the workers. Two days later the War began, and the Second International collapsed, its unsound base giving way beneath the strain. In the Labour Leader Hardie proclaimed, "The I.L.P. will at least stand firm. Keep the Red Flag flying!" "Brave words indeed, but wholly false. For the I.L.P. turned out to be standing firm on one issue and that was on the question of party unity. To preserve this unity, to retain the greatest number of members within the fold, the most opportunist and unprincipled formulas were applied to justify the conduct of individual party members. The flag hoisted by Hardie and his fellow "Labour Leaders" was a clear and unmistakeable Union Jack.

In articles directed at his electorate in Merthyr, Keir Hardie made his position clear. "A nation at war must be united especially when its existence is at stake. In such filibustering expeditions as our own Boer War or the recent Italian war over Tripoli, where no national danger of any kind was involved there were many occasions for diversity of opinion and this was given voice to by the Socialist Party of Italy and the Stop the War Party in this country. Now the situation is different. With the boom of the enemy's guns within earshot, the lads who have gone forth by sea and land to fight their country's battles must not be disheartened by any discordant note at home." (Pioneer, Merthyr 15th Aug., 1914). The man who recoiled from the talk of waging the Class War was quite prepared to have workers serve "their Motherland" in Imperialist War; he wrote that "We must see the war through, but we must also make ourselves so familiar with the facts as to be able to intervene at the earliest possible moment in the interests of peace" (Pioneer 15th Aug., 1914.) Let no one be deceived by the mention of the "earliest possible moment" because for Hardie this was a very long way off and he was in fact prepared to support a long, drawn-out conflict in Europe. As he put it on 28th November, 1914, "May I once again revert for the moment to the I.L.P. pamphlets? None of them clamour for immediately stopping the war. That would be foolish in the extreme, until at least the Germans have been driven back across their own frontier, a consummation which, I fear, carries us forward through a long and dismal vista" (Pioneer, Merthyr).

Time after time Hardie fed workers the lie that they were part of a "nation " and as such were bound up in the quarrels of their masters. Not "International Working Class Solidarity". but "Class Collaboration" was his rallying cry, for Hardie was a patriot and proud of it. "I am not a pro-German".

he wrote, "and still less am I a pro-Russian. I am a pro-Briton, loving my country and caring for her people. Any war of aggression against the rights and liberties of my country I would resist to the last drop of blood in my veins. But I have not seen, outside the columns of the yellow Jingo Press, any proofs that our interests as a nation were in any way imperilled or threatened by a war in which Austria and Germany and Russia and France were involved" (Pioneer, Merthyr. 22nd Aug 1914).

But although he was a patriot, Hardie would not appear on the official Government recruiting platforms. In the first place he could not stomach the crude jingoism and Imperialism that emerged from these platforms and secondly he wished to remain free to present the I.L.P. version of the events that had led to Britain's involvement in the war. He believed that if the people were told frankly about the "Secret Diplomacy" that had piloted Britain into the war, and were shown how the war, though "unjust," had put the country in peril, the needed volunteers would emerge and there would be no need for jingoistic exhortations or conscription. This in Hardie's view was the "right method" and belief in this method led Hardie to boast that he had been instrumental (together with his colleagues) in securing more recruits for the Armed Forces than his Liberal opponents.

Writing in the Pioneer of November 28th, 1914, Keir Hardie made his claim thus: "I have never said or written anything to dissuade our young men from enlisting; I know too well all there is at stake. But, frankly, were I once more young and anxious to enlist, I would resent more than anything the spectacle of young, strong, flippant upstarts, whether M.P.s or candidates, who had the audacity to ask me to do for my country what they had not the heart to do themselves. Of all causes, this surely is the one in which actions speak louder than words. If I can get the recruiting figures for Merthyr week by week, which I find a very difficult job, I hope by another week to be able to PROVE that whereas our Rink Meeting gave a stimulus to recruiting, those meetings at the Drill Hall at which the Liberal member or the Liberal candidate spoke, had the exactly opposite effect." Hardie was so determined to prove his point that he tried on a number of occasions to obtain the relevant recruiting figures.

The figures were refused him, but this did not daunt Hardie. In the meantime, his staunch supporter J.B. (John Barr). writing in the Pioneer enthusiastically endorsed Hardie's claim; he wrote. "I am still of the opinion that the Rink meeting gave a fillip to recruiting, and my opinion is based on the belief that the I.L.P. method is the right one. . ."

Two weeks later Hardie was able to proclaim that he had obtained the recruiting figures for his constituency and was able to make good his boast. He set out his claim in this manner: "(1) That for the five weeks before the Rink Meeting, recruiting had been steadily going down week by week; (2) that our I.L.P. meeting was held on Sunday, October 25th, and that for the next three weeks the number of recruits secured in Merthyr kept steadily rising. . . If Mr. Jones challenges this statement I shall produce the figures, though not inclined to do so for very obvious patriotic reasons. Unlike my colleague I am more concerned with aiding the army than with trying to take a mean advantage of a

political opponent" (Pioneer, 19th Dec., 1914).

Ample evidence exists to prove that in supporting the War Hardie in no way acted as a renegade. His actions were in fact in concord with the actions of his colleagues in the party leadership and these actions were never repudiated, but were endorsed and underwritten by the party as a whole. MELVIN HARRIS