

NO TO IMPERIALIST WAR



**Three Articles from
Workers' Weekly Internet Edition
on the Centenary of the First World War**

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World War I and the Anti-War Movement

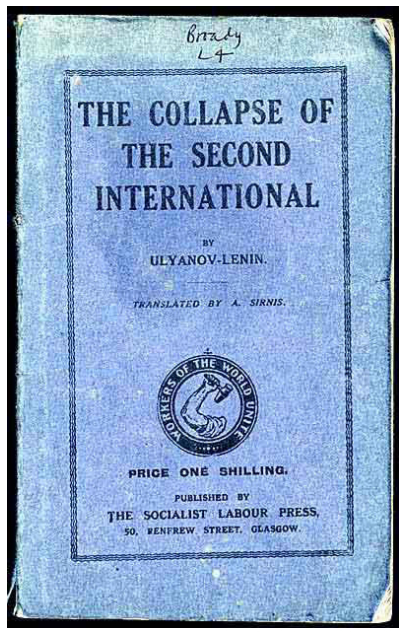
The commemorative events to mark the centenary of the start of World War I, as well as the speeches of various politicians, seek not only to distort the predatory imperialist nature of the conflict, waged by Britain and the other big powers to re-divide the world, but also to hide the fact that there was sustained opposition to



Speech of John Maclean from the dock at his trial for sedition, May 9, 1918

the war and its consequences, not only in Britain but also in many other countries, in which the working class played a leading role.

In the period before 1914, workers in Britain had waged strikes, organised themselves in new ways and taken increasingly militant action in defence of their interests. It was in these circumstances that before the outbreak of war in 1914 the Labour Party, along with the other social democratic parties of Europe, had pledged to oppose an inter-imperialist war between the big powers. It had adhered to the resolution, re-adopted at the Basle Congress of the Second

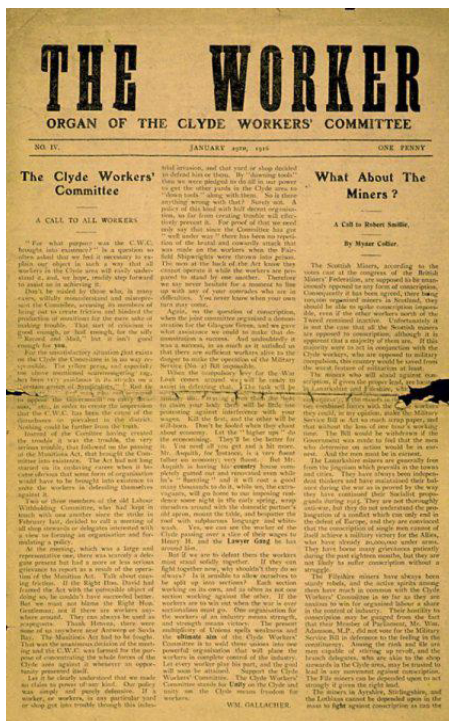


Lenin's work "The Collapse of the Second International" in which he excoriated the socialist parties of the Second International for their betrayal (from the Red Clydeside collection)

International in 1912, that all such parties "should use every effort to prevent war by all the means which seem to them most appropriate". In the event of war, "it was their duty to intervene in favour of its speedy termination and with all their powers to utilise the political and economic crisis created by the war to arouse the people and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule".

However, as soon as war was declared the Labour Party and TUC leaders declared "that an immediate effort be made to terminate all existing disputes...and, wherever new points of difficulty arise during the war a serious attempt should be made by all concerned to reach an amicable settlement..." They declared their support for the predatory war, created the conditions for the government to declare strikes and other trade union activities illegal in many industries for the duration of the war, and to introduce the draconian Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), which made active opposition to the war a criminal offence. In 1915, leading members of the Labour Party joined the warmongering coalition government.

Nevertheless, opposition to the war and to its economic effects

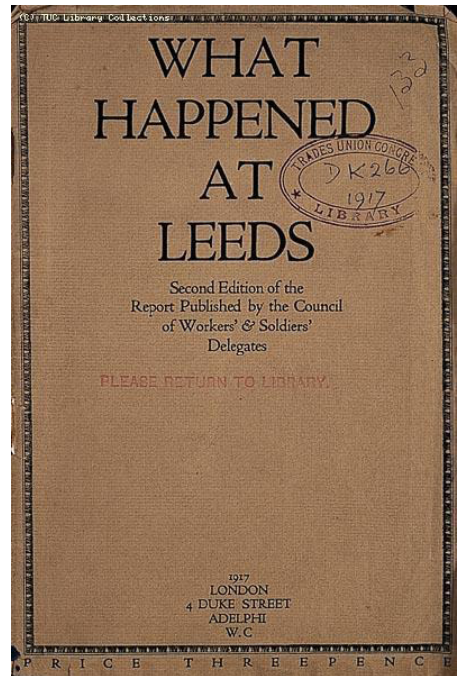


The Worker, January 29, 1916

continued, most famously amongst the workers in the munitions factories in Scotland. As early as 1915, over 10,000 workers in Glasgow took unofficial strike action against the attacks on their living standards. Local shop stewards organised what became the Clyde Workers' Committee, with hundreds of delegates elected directly from the workplace meeting on a weekly basis. Thousands of workers in South Wales also took strike action against repressive government legislation aimed at curtailing their

rights, while in 1917 engineering workers throughout Britain went on strike in opposition to government plans for more widespread military service and other anti-worker measures.

Opposition to the war and the government's policy of forced conscription was widespread. There were 16,000 officially declared "conscientious objectors", who refused to join the armed forces on principle and several thousand of them were imprisoned for their stand. DORA gave the government the power to suppress the activities of the anti-war movement and to attack the right to speak and to publish. Several leading anti-war activists, including the Scottish teacher and revolutionary John Maclean, were arrested and imprisoned as a consequence. Opposition to the war and the demand for its termination were greatly strengthened after the revolutionary events in Russia in 1917. At the Leeds Convention of over a thousand delegates from labour, trade union and socialist organisations held in June of that year, there was overwhelming support for an end to war and for establishing workers' and soldiers' councils throughout Britain to usher in an anti-war government.



Leeds Convention to end the war and establish workers' and soldiers' councils

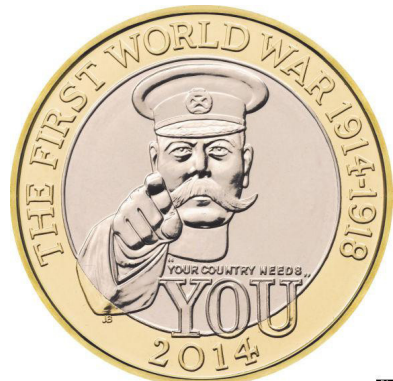
One of the key features of World War I was that it was waged not in "defence of democracy" or for a "noble cause", but by the rich and their governments to pursue their interests abroad against the interests of the workers of Britain and other countries. The war aims of the rich were in practice supported by those forces which rapidly conciliated with the warmongers on the grounds of defending Britain and its empire against "German militarism" and who thereby betrayed the interests of the workers and the cause of peace. It showed

that to safeguard their interests the workers themselves had to organise to be at the forefront of the anti-war

movement. In this centenary year, this is a crucial lesson for the working class movement.

The First World War and the Betrayal of the Workers

In the period before 1914, the Labour Party, along with the other social-democratic parties of Europe, had pledged to oppose an inter-imperialist war between the big powers. It had adhered to the resolution, re-adopted at the Basle Congress of the Second International in 1912, that all such parties “should use every effort to prevent war by all the means which seem to them most appropriate”. In the event of war, “it was their duty to intervene in favour of its speedy termination and with all their powers to utilise the political and economic crisis created by the war to arouse the people and thereby hasten the downfall of capitalist class rule”. The Basle Congress placed particular emphasis on the actions of the workers of Britain, France



and Germany to prevent the governments of these countries from launching an inter-imperialist war.

However, as soon as war was declared the Labour Party and TUC leaders declared “that an immediate effort be made to terminate all existing disputes...and, wherever new points of difficulty arise during the war a serious attempt should be made by all concerned to reach an amicable settlement...” They

declared their support for the predatory war, supported mass recruitment, and created the conditions for the government to declare strikes and other trade union activities illegal in many



industries for the duration of the war, and for the introduction of the draconian Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), which made active opposition to the war a criminal offence. In 1915, leading members of the Labour Party joined the warmongering coalition government. European socialist parties of the Second International had sunk to the ignominious level of supporting their own imperialist powers in the slaughter of World War One.

Unity with the exploiters was justified as “defence of the fatherland”, the need for national unity in the time of war and other chauvinistic phrases. The most far-sighted revolutionary thinkers of the time therefore concluded that such parties were no longer organisations that could advance the interests of the mass of the workers and posed the question as to what kind of

party was required.

This experience of the First World War also demonstrates the need today never to be reconciled with the warmongering of the big powers, particularly that of the British ruling class which continues to pursue its imperialist interests, no matter what “humanitarian” or even “revolutionary” phrases it cloaks them in. The experience of the First World War showed that the workers of Britain and other countries must organise themselves, based on their own independent programme, in order to play a leading role in the anti-war movement. Such a programme necessitates the workers organising with the perspective of creating their own anti-war government, building the proletarian front to bring this about, and settling scores with all pretexts for the betrayal of their interests.

British Imperialism and the First World War

In this year of the centenary of the start of the First World War, government ministers and even some historians, who should perhaps know better, have been intent on presenting the conflict as a noble and just cause. They assert the British government declared war in response to Germany's invasion of Belgium and therefore "in defence of international law and a small state faced with aggression". Some go even further declaring that the government of the day acted to end "warmongering and imperial aggression". Today every effort is made to blame other countries for starting the bloody conflict, just as occurred a century ago, without any attempt to look at the underlying causes of the war, which include the "warmongering and imperial aggression" of all the big powers, including Britain.

It has to be recognised that Britain was one of the leading warmongers and imperialist powers and that it was the intense rivalry arising out of the imperialist system

of states at that time which created the conditions for war. By 1900 the world had already been almost completely divided between the big powers that had already staked out colonial territories and spheres of influence. Nevertheless, contention continued with all the major powers seeking a re-division of the world in order to gain an advantage over their rivals.

Britain's "entente" with France, for example, was a consequence of its evident international isolation following earlier imperial aggression in South Africa. Britain's alliance with France then led the government to threaten Germany with war when the latter squabbled with France over which power should invade and occupy Morocco. It is



clear that in this case Britain did not defend the sovereignty of a small state faced with aggression. It was content to support the aggression of France against their common rival Germany, because France had agreed to accept Britain's prior invasion and occupation of Egypt.

British imperialism chose to use Belgian "neutrality" as a justification for war against its rival Germany but did not seek to prevent the aggression of the Belgian monarch, Leopold, against the people of the Congo. In the thirty years preceding the First World War, Belgian imperial aggression led to the deaths of some 10 million Africans, probably half the Congolese population, without any intervention by any of the big powers. This is not surprising because all the major powers fought wars of aggression and conquest not only in Africa and Asia but wherever their predatory interests necessitated it. It needs to be remembered that Britain was the most aggressive and predatory of all the big powers at this time.

The British government's war-mongering and imperial aggression was also expressed in the rapid expansion of the navy and the secret naval agreement with France in 1912, both of which were directed

against Germany. A new alliance with Russia in 1907, which opened a new chapter in what was then known as the "great game" of Anglo-Russian contention in Central Asia, was based on a joint agreement that denied Afghanistan and Persia their sovereignty and placed the resources of these countries at the disposal of banks and monopolies of Russia and Britain. Such alliances were clearly undertaken in the context of British imperialism's predatory interests and in contention with Germany, its main rival in this period.

The division and re-division of the world precipitated war and created the conditions for the international alliances that turned Europe into two camps of armed robbers. Secret negotiations and treaties also occurred during the war in order to sanction further re-division. In 1915, the British government reached a new secret agreement with Russia over the division of Persia, which it was decided would fall into Britain's hands, while Russia was compensated with rights over parts of the Ottoman empire, including its capital Constantinople; Britain and France would acquire other Ottoman territory. When Italy joined the Allied powers, the British government entered

into a further secret treaty partitioning the Austro-Hungarian empire and allowing Italy to seize further territory in Africa, including Libya and in the Horn of Africa, thus violating the sovereignty of the Libyan, Somali and other peoples in that



Newcastle Meeting on World War I

continent. Secret plans were also made for the dismemberment of Ethiopia. These secret agreements also paved the way for France to annexe Syria and Lebanon; Britain would take what is today Iraq. The secret treaties also paved the way for the British government's Zionist occupation of Palestine, which since that time denied the rights and sovereignty of the Palestinian people.

The notion that the British government entered the First World War to uphold "civilised values" or for a "just cause" or to defend the rights of small nations is a dangerous fiction that has no basis in fact. It is advanced with the aim not just of spreading disinformation about the past but also of creating illusions about current warmongering, intervention and aggression and the growing contention between the big powers in Africa, Central

Asia and elsewhere. The conditions for the First World War grew out of the conditions of the imperialist system of states at that time, not least the intense rivalry between the big powers for markets, raw materials and spheres of influence, which could only be secured by a violent re-division of the world. A hundred years later, the economic and military contention between the big powers is again only too evident in Libya, Syria, Ukraine and elsewhere.

It is the task of the working class and all peace-loving people to stay the hands of the warmongers. We must learn the lessons of history and have no illusions that any of the Westminster parties are a factor for peace. The working class and people must take matters into their own hands and establish an anti-war government.



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**170 Wandsworth Road, London SW8 2LA
office@rcpbml.org.uk
www.rcpbml.org.uk**