

First World War

Imperialist parallels then and now

Part III Resistance, opposition and splits

French socialist anti-war leader is assassinated
International Congress of Socialists agree to stop the war

A Democrat insert

We are being bombarded with books, papers, radio and TV programmes, and events to mark the First World War. The bulk of this material concentrates on the war and carnage in the trenches. Our objective is to put a different point of view.

Note. This discussion is to give some indication of the situation in several countries in the period prior to the outbreak of war and months after. Pointers are given to enable students and readers who wish to know more and a fuller understanding of this fast moving events. A full treatment of this period requires a book or two and more research!

Britain

There was opposition to the Boer War of 1899-1902 where a scorched earth policy and concentration camps were used. These policies eroded support for the war. Amongst the opponents was Charlotte Despard, a suffragette, supporter of independence for Ireland, anti-militarism and a delegate to the 2nd International.

Trade union membership mushroomed following the successful strikes at the 1888 Bryant and May factory, gas workers and dock workers' strikes of 1889. The central demand was that of the 2nd International Socialist Congress policy for an eight hour day. Between 1910 and 1914 there were numerous strikes. These took place despite laws against picketing and the infamous 'Taff Vale' judgement which enabled employers to sue unions for lost revenue during strikes. This period was known as 'the great unrest'.

The campaign for votes for women was carried out by suffragettes had widespread support from the working class and some sections of the labour and trade union movement. This included the Independent Labour Party (ILP), Keir Hardie and some Labour Party leaders who supported the suffragette movement. These same people, George Lansbury, pacifists, and Bertrand Russell opposed the growing war preparations.

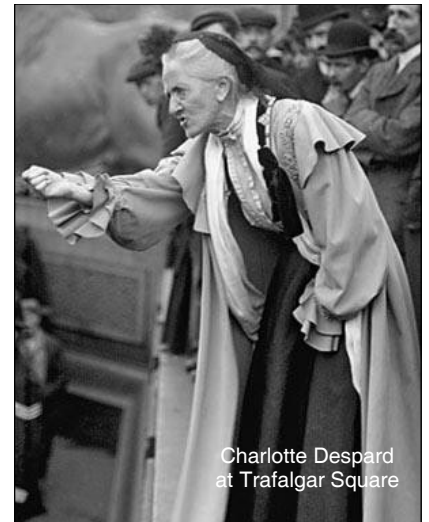
In 1913 the International Woman Suffrage Alliance (IWSA) made anti-militarism a principle of the suffrage movement. The organisation in Britain was the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) led by Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughters Sylvia and Christabel. When war was declared the WSPU supported the war and suspended activity. Sylvia Pankhurst did not go along with this and formed a suffragette movement against the war.

Trade unions and local TUC's adopted positions against the preparations for war and war itself right up to the outbreak of war. Many examples can be found of this in trade union histories.

Britain's labour organisations held an antiwar demonstration in Trafalgar Square on 2nd August 1914. Speakers included Ben Tillett, one of the founders of the Labour Party along with Keir Hardie. Anti-war policies were ignored, changed and abandoned and switched to support for the inter-imperialist war by trade unions and political parties. Many trade unions then adopted no strike agreements. An exception to all this was the Independent Labour Party (ILP).

The crucial elements of this period in Britain included an extension of democracy through the struggle for full emancipation, the independence of Ireland from the British Empire, the right to sovereignty of nations, anti war principles and quest for socialism. These were best expressed at the time by leaders including Sylvia Pankhurst, Charlotte Despard, Keir Hardie and James Connolly.

These threads were seriously weakened by the serious splits in the suffragette and labour movements.



Charlotte Despard
at Trafalgar Square



Keir Hardie addressing the anti-war rally 1914



Sylvia Pankhurst being arrested and sent to prison and hunger strike



James Larkin
Addressing a
rally during the
Dublin lock-
out of 1913



Irish Citizen
Army

James
Connolly



Royal coat of arms which today still retains the
symbol of Ireland but not the Welsh dragon

Ireland

Up to the start of WW1 England had occupied Ireland for over 700 hundred years. With the 1801 Act of Union, Ireland became part of the United Kingdom and British Empire. Support for national independence went back and forth including several attempts to gain independence or 'Home Rule'. These attempts were either put down brutally or compromised by British Imperialism. The struggle was based on an agrarian one which in turn supported the parliamentary struggle at Westminster. Like the Union with Scotland a century before, Ireland had lost her parliament and instead sent MPs to Westminster.

A joint Tory and Orange resistance to a Home Rule Bill raised the real prospect of civil war in Ireland. In January 1913 the Unionist Council reorganised their volunteers into a paramilitary Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), whose members threatened to resist by physical force the implementation of the Act and the authority of any restored Dublin Parliament by force of arms.

However, in 1913 an intense labour dispute and strikes took place involving the Irish Transport and General Workers Union led by James Larkin and James Connolly against ruthless employers who used lock-outs and scabs supported by the police. Widespread support for the struggle in Ireland was given by trade unions in Britain. Suffragette and socialist Sylvia Pankhurst and Charlotte Despard stood on platforms with Connolly in Britain.

Out of the inconclusive end to this struggle came the Citizen Army and Irish Volunteers from those who had guarded the trade union platforms and speakers with hurly sticks against brutal police attacks. Gun running took place to match that of Ulster unionists.

Irish socialists stood by the 1907 Stuttgart, 1910 Copenhagen and 1912 Basle International Socialist Congress policies with the Russians and Serbs. In the event of war it was resolved that socialists were "bound to intervene for its being brought to a speedy end" and to make use of the economic and political crises created by the war "to hasten the breakdown of the predominance of the capitalist class".

The Ulster Covenant, a 'solemn vow' to fight Home Rule for Ireland funded largely by poet Rudyard Kipling's personal wealth, was signed by half a million men in 1912. When the Home Rule Bill was passed by Parliament in June 1914 the British establishment believed a war in Ireland was becoming inevitable. This pressure, in part, led directly to Britain entering the First World War in August 1914. The Home Rule Act of 1914 was postponed and Irish supporters of Home Rule were called upon to fight for the British empire.

On 28 November 1913, Irish nationalists responded by setting up the Irish Volunteers "to secure the rights and liberties common to all the people of Ireland" The government's ability to face down the unionist threat was thrown into question by the "Curragh incident", when army officers tendered their resignations rather than fight the Ulster Volunteers, forcing a climb-down by the government.

In contrast the stand taken by those led by Connolly was a threat to the British Empire and growing British war preparations. This was well understood by the Government in Whitehall who were prepared to move troops to Ireland to quell any uprising but now could move them instead to the Western Front.

France

The defeat of the Paris Commune in 1871 decimated the French left when 20,000 Communards were executed and over 7,500 jailed or transported. Napoleonic imperialist principles were then re-established with colonies in Indo-China, Africa and the Pacific during the New Imperialism period. The labour movement was disoriented for at least two decades.

In 1894 trade unions were made legal and the General Confederation of Labour (CGT) was formed in 1902 of local workers' associations and labour exchanges. The government used these labour exchanges for surveillance to dampen down revolutionary tendencies. They were dominated by anarcho or revolutionary syndicalists.

At the same time Jean Jaures was an avid anti-militarist, a Socialist deputy to the National Assembly, leader of the French Socialist Party and founder of *L'Humanite*.

The French Socialist Party and Socialist Party of France merged to form the Unified Socialist Party and French Section of the Workers' International. In 1913 Jaures opposed legislation for an extension to a three year draft period and campaigned for a diplomatic understanding between France and Germany. In line with the 2nd International he worked hard for general strikes in both France and Germany in an attempt to force both governments to back down and negotiate.

The Socialist Party organised mass rallies and protests up to the start of the war. Tragically Jaures was assassinated on 31 July 1914 just before he was due to attend a conference of the Second International on 9 August. Many of these socialists argued against internationalist principles. They said that socialists should support their nations in wartime against the aggression of other nations, support war credits and loans.

To head off the policy of the French Section of the International and Jean Jaures, the Sacred Union was set up. The Sacred Union included some of the left and it was agreed not to oppose the government war policy and not to go on strike during the war. This caused a serious split in the CGT.

Germany

Two socialist leaders who opposed preparations for war by Germany were Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht.

Rosa Luxemburg was a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) and moved a successful resolution at the 1907 International Congress in Stuttgart. This stated that all European workers' parties should unite to stop the war. Rosa worked with Jean Jaures and others with the objective of organising a general strike when war broke out. In 1913 she told a large meeting: "If they think we are going to lift weapons of murder against our French and other brethren, then we shall shout: *We will not do it!*"

On 25 July 1914 the executive of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) called on its membership to support demonstrations against the impending war. Then at the outbreak of war on 4 August the executive did a *volte face* and voted for war credits which the Government needed to pay for the army and navy.

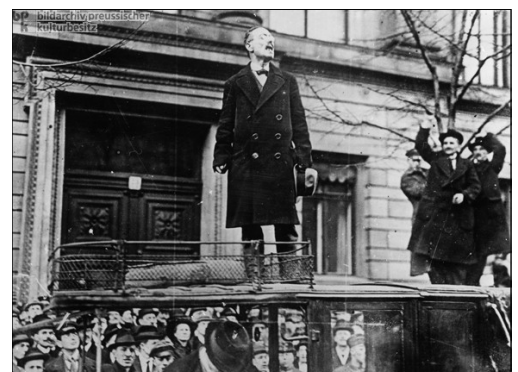
Karl Liebknecht was a socialist and active in the 2nd International and founder of the Socialist Youth International. (A famous quote of his is: "If you have the youth you have the future".) In 1912 he was elected to the Reichstag where he opposed Germany's participation in the war. Although on 4 August 1914 he abstained in the vote for war credits to avoid breaking the SPD's unity, in December he was the only Reichstag



Jean Jaures



Rosa Luxemburg



Karl Liebknecht MP addressing an anti war rally



Women working in a shell making factory whilst men were lined up to be sent to the front



Railway strike in Tiflis Russia 1905

Sources referred to in this supplement include

Christopher Clark: *The Sleepwalkers - How Europe Went to War in 1914*
 TA Jackson: *Ireland Her Own*
 C Desmond Greaves: *James Connolly*
 Bob Holman: *Keir Hardie*
 Katherine Connelly: *Sylvia Pankhurst*
 Shirley Harrison: *Sylvia Pankhurst*
 Margaret Mulvihill: *Charlotte Despard*
 George J Barnsby: *Socialism in Birmingham & the Black Country 1850-1939*
 Wikipedia with large pinches of salt
 Google and other sources for pictures

Part IV will discuss the war, recruitment and draft and opposition to the war and further splits in the labour and trade union movement and amongst the suffragettes.

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member to vote against yet further loans. Amongst those who were in support of war loans were 110 fellow SPD members. As elsewhere in Europe socialists and trade unions in Germany ended up split.

Austro-Hungarian Empire

The Austrian socialist Victor Adler is an example of the period leading up to war. At a conference in 1885 in Austria he helped form the Social Democratic Workers' Party and became the chairman. Later he was a member of the Imperial Council or parliament of the northern and western part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. From 1905 he was a leader in the quest for universal suffrage which was achieved in 1906. He fully supported the 2nd International and became leader of the Socialist Party in Vienna but then publicly supported the Imperial government's war and imperialist policies. This fell in line with other social democrats and socialists in other countries.

Russia

Industrial unrest was prominent in Russia and included a failed revolution of 1905 to topple the Tsarist regime. In 1912 a massacre of miners on strike took place. This was just one of several massacres. Russian socialists sent delegates to the 2nd international and stood firm with the Serbs and Irish for the anti-war policy and the Bolsheviks opposed war. During the first part of 1914 half the industrial workers were on strike. Just prior to the outbreak of war trade unions were made illegal or restricted. Mobilisation was to create the biggest army in the world.

Internationals

After the 1st International was disbanded in 1876 the 2nd International Workers' Association of socialist and labour parties, including Britain's Labour Party, was formed in Paris in 1889. The 2nd International initiated May 1 as International Workers' Day and March 8 as International Women's day and the campaign for an 8 hour working day. It adopted an antimilitarist doctrine and vowed to organise general strikes to bring Europe to a halt if war were declared. After war was declared this was not carried out as several national parties supported their government's war policy. At the time this was aptly labelled 'social patriotism'. After much internal discussion this International was dissolved during the war in 1916.

Conclusions

Following the splits and dominance of pro-war factions in Germany, Austria, France, Britain, Russia and Ireland, socialists literally lined up to march to their trenches, became 'cannon fodder' and kill each other on the battlefields. This was based not on internationalism but to make war on the side of those who were governed by a ruling class in their own country, imperialism and mistakenly against the 'foreign' invaders.

The basic principles in 1914 still stand today - an extension of democracy through the struggle for full emancipation, a unified Ireland, the right to sovereignty and self determination of nations, anti war principles and quest for socialism. These will not be achieved with a European Union today over which socialists are split.