

HISTORY & POLICY TRADE UNION FORUM

KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

15 November 2014

As is well known, the industrial relations climate in Britain in the summer of 1914 and for much of the three years before had been unusually fraught, and the picture in London mirrored problems nationwide.

Most famous of all, throughout 1914 the London building workers had been in dispute with the master builders over union recognition. Walkouts on building sites over unionists refusing to work with non-union men had provoked a backlash among the employers at a time when house construction and other building had been unusually flat. After many such 'lightning strikes' a walkout on the Pearl Insurance offices site in Holborn at the end of 1913 had proved the final straw and from 24 January 1914 a general lock-out by the masters laid off some 30,000-40,000 men and shut every big site in the capital, including the London County Council's new County Hall on the south bank.

The dispute gripped the trade union world –two of the ten platforms for the huge May Day demonstration in Hyde Park this year were devoted to the building workers and their cause. Later that month it seemed that the dispute might spread to the provinces with the masters talking of a national lock-out to bring the London men to heel. By June, after nearly six months out of work, only the stonemasons had voted to accept a compromise offered by the employers and their members returned to work in early July. But the other building unions rejected a similar agreement after numerous ballots, despite their leaders urging a settlement. As late as Wednesday 29 July there was an 'ultimatum' from the master builders threatening once more a lock-out nationwide.

That spring and summer in London was marked by industrial strife in every direction. In May the militant London and Provincial Union of Vehicle Workers threatened a 'general strike' on the buses over hours, wages and paid holidays, and there was trouble on the trams over the employment of boys in men's jobs in late-July. A strike in May at Pink's jam factory in Southwark saw attacks on carmen driving wagons from the yard, the warehousemen demanding higher wages and an end to boy

labour; the works closed pending negotiations. A public campaign by shop assistants for shorter working hours tried to win over London churches and metropolitan borough councils in May. And on Friday 3 July a strike at Woolwich Arsenal, the nation's premier armaments factory, brought out 1,500 men, members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. One of their number had refused to erect a machine on a concrete bed laid by non-union labour and had been sacked, bringing the Royal Gun Carriage Department to a halt. A day later and some 8,000 were out seeking 100 per cent trade union membership – 97 per cent were thought already to be members – and almost all the Arsenal's 10,000 workers were on strike by Monday. Mass picketing round the Arsenal gates led to some violent scenes, quickly quelled by the strike committee, anxious to get public opinion on the workers' side. Even Prime Minister Herbert Asquith was involved in settling the dispute. After four days the sacked worker was reinstated pending a Court of Inquiry into the dispute, and the Arsenal returned to normal working on 9 July.

Most worrying of all was the threat of a Triple Alliance – the phrase borrowed from European diplomacy, the partnership of Austria, Germany and Italy from 1882 – involving the miners', railwaymen's and transport workers' unions. Negotiations began in late May to establish that a strike by one union would mean a strike by all, London railwaymen prominent among the militants. The threat of a coalfields dispute in remote Durham or Ebbw Vale bringing the national rail network to a halt and closing the Port of London took on nightmarish possibilities for government and business. The unions debated and endorsed the Alliance through June, with sympathy strikes becoming the biggest artillery in the workers' industrial armoury, ready-primed for that autumn's negotiations over pay and conditions. The prospect provoked both fear and wrath. That July the Rev. William Inge, Dean of St Paul's, denounced trade unions as 'criminal combinations whose leaders deserved to be executed as rebels against society.'

That May Day demonstration of 1914 had also been notable for the many expressions of transnational worker solidarity, a sentiment that continued to be fostered and valued by – no doubt among many other fraternal organisations - the London Trades Council (LTC). It was a sentiment that did not extend to everyone, because on 30 July, at the final meeting of the Executive Committee before the declaration of war, an event that still seemed not to weigh on many minds, the LTC

had pledged its help to the Transport Workers' Federation 'campaign against cheap coloured labour' and was proposing to organise a conference on the question that autumn. But it certainly did extend to the workers of Germany, with a delegation of Messrs Kloth, Brückner and Wendel from Berlin arriving at Victoria Station on the evening of 31 July.

In the event, they had to scuttle back, just managing to evade the travel blockade imposed as Britain declared war on Germany at 11pm on 4 August. Pretty much overnight – well, within two or three weeks, I think - the industrial relations climate was dramatically transformed. The 'bulk of the Labour Movement became vociferously patriotic', as Martin Pugh puts it, and that was true for both industrial and political arms. The Triple Alliance was effectively suspended for the duration; strikes quickly ended on 5 August or soon after, and even the adamantine builders' dispute was eventually settled on 14 August when the last of the building unions, the plasterers, agreed to the terms offered in June. Most of London's leading labour figures like Will Crooks in Woolwich, Will Thorne in West Ham, Robert Blatchford of the *Clarion*, the veteran former Marxist HH Hyndman, Ben Tillet of the Dock, Wharf, Riverside and General Workers' Union (the DWRG), Jimmy Thomas of the railwaymen, Havelock Wilson of the seamen, and many others became active on the recruitment platforms. Even so, we should note the confusion that still permeated the ranks of labour in these opening weeks of the war, with workers only relinquishing their internationalism reluctantly. The LTC's first wartime delegate conference at Club Union Hall, Clerkenwell Road, on 13 August, with 101 delegates representing 69 TU societies or branches and eight local borough-based Trades and Labour Councils, expressed 'its horror at the present state of Europe, recognising that the war is a war of rulers and not of the peoples; expresses its fraternal greetings to the workers of all countries and expresses the hope that they may be able to maintain their organisations in order [an International Congress of the International Socialist Bureau had been planned in Vienna for the end of the month] that a closer bond of unity may be brought about under a United States of Europe.'

As the war on the home front unfolded it became plain that it would bring momentous changes for labour in London. I want to summarise briefly four main changes impacting upon trade unions and their members, though there were doubtless many others.

First, the dramatic shift from a London economy of traditionally chronic labour surpluses, most notably revealed in seasonal unemployment and the casual labour problem. There were extraordinary manifestations of this across every London industry but I'll restrict my examples to the Port of London. As early as January 1915, the *Times* journalist Michael MacDonagh counted thirty steamships in the river 'waiting their turn to be unloaded', held up in 'inextricable confusion' 'due to the scarcity of labour. Not enough labour available at the London docks! What an unprecedented state of affairs.' Average daily employment of labourers at the Port rose from 7,846 in 1914 to 11,149 in 1915. To supplement the labour supply boys of 15 and 16 were taken on and so were older men unfit for army service. From 1916 the Transport Workers' Battalion, soldiers who were often former dockers, boosted local labour at times of shortage on application of the Port employers and sometimes to the resentment of the unions. Even so the DWRG flourished, organising parts of the riverside (like the Foreign Cattle Market at Deptford) never organised before, continuing to negotiate ship by ship in the handling of difficult cargoes, frequently made more difficult by the exigencies of war, negotiating pay rises at a time of spiralling prices, and in 1917 taking on Mary Carlin as Assistant Organiser recruiting men but especially women in the docks and in factories, especially those manufacturing munitions of war.

This unprecedented demand for labour had some strange almost dramatic effects in London. The Salvation Army night hostels for homeless men and women emptied as if by sorcery. So did the London workhouses for the able-bodied poor. In Lambeth forty-eight inmates of Princes Road workhouse had left by March 1915 to work at Woolwich Dockyard – forty-one of them were over 60 years old and a further four over 70. At Wandsworth an institution built for the able-bodied became essentially an old people's home by early 1916. Space could be rationalised to free up workhouses for other purposes, like internment camps for German-born Londoners, or as hostels for Belgian refugees or as overspill military hospitals. Similarly, despite the stresses of war and a probable rise in London's population, the number of 'certified lunatics' in metropolitan mental hospitals was lower by almost 16 per cent between 1914 and 1918. Even more dramatically the number of men received in the London prisons fell by nearly 63 per cent between 1913 (33,776) and 1918 (12,631). The Commissioners of Prisons concluded that 'the prisons of the country may be largely

emptied of the petty offender when the conditions of labour are such as to secure full and continuous employment for all....’

I mentioned the women brought into wartime industries and Deborah will be speaking about women and the war. But there was one other factor related to the labour shortage that’s worth dwelling on here. I mentioned the LTC’s concerns around ‘coloured labour’ before the war, but the wartime labour shortage meant that men were needed wherever in the world they might come from. So worries over foreign labour reached something like a fever pitch among some London TUs during the war.

The numbers of Chinese seamen in the East End, for instance, said to be displacing British seamen for lower pay, began to provoke questions in parliament in the summer of 1916. In September the TUC expressed alarm at the extent of ‘Chinese and cheap Asiatic labour’ in the merchant fleet. A *Times* journalist considered the number of Chinese in the East End ‘has certainly increased’, with lodging-houses spreading beyond Limehouse Causeway and Pennyfields – ‘the invasion is becoming serious.’ This drum was beaten loudest by the Seamen’s Union, at this point still named the National Sailors’ and Firemen’s Union, and led by Havelock Wilson and Captain Edward Tupper, racist ultra-patriots both. Its fortnightly professionally printed paper for members, *The Seaman*, carried frequent articles on the threat to British sailors’ jobs from ‘the yellow men’, or Chinese sailors, and ‘Asiatic labour’. The Union claimed that the Chinese population of East London had increased by 7,000, though true figures are unobtainable and almost certainly this was a large exaggeration – in 1918, for instance, Pennyfields was home to just 182 Chinamen and it seems unlikely that even in the war years many more than a couple of thousand were living in the East End at any one time in a population that remained highly mobile.

One new departure, however, did become apparent by early 1917, a tendency of employers, desperately short of labour everywhere, to recruit Chinamen into industries beyond the riverside. The London Hospital’s attempt to employ Chinese porters and kitchen staff was met with hostility from other workers who refused to work with them. The proposal was abandoned though a Chinese chef, Yan See, proved indispensable and was allowed to remain in the hospital kitchens for the

duration. Around the same time the Bethnal Green Board of Guardians decided to employ Chinese porters in the workhouse, chosen from men 'submarined whilst in boats carrying provisions to England', and replacing 'old men who used to do the work, but who had since left the House.' The proposal caused a row but seems to have been implemented nonetheless. Later in the war Chinese labour was also used on aerodrome construction for the new Air Ministry. By then there were diplomatic difficulties in the way of boycotting the Chinese workmen – China had declared war on Germany and Austria and so became an ally in August 1917.

The same difficulties were apparent in the employment of black men from Asia, Africa and especially the Caribbean. Again, seamen were key. West Indian seamen 'have always formed part of our marine, and many of [them] are married to English wives and domiciled in the Port.' They were noted as men of 'good character' and regarded as 'good comrades' by 'white seamen'; they made up much of the small black community in Canning Town before and during the war. To accommodate new arrivals from Africa and the Caribbean, and lascar seamen from the Indian subcontinent, charitable endeavour opened a Sailors' Rest in St Anne Street, Limehouse, in October 1917. But by then the new arrivals had been joined by a 'much less desirable' element – this the judgment of a Charity Organisation Society worker in the Port – of 'young unsettled men who come over on banana boats and as emergency hands and get discharged here.' They 'have no very keen desire' to go back to the Caribbean and 'loaf about the Port, sponge where they can, and are a cause of trouble and disorder.' This latter migration, bolstered by West African seamen, seems likely to have been the origin of the black lodging-house and cafe district in Cable Street, Stepney, which became so notorious after the Second World War.

This aspect of 'coloured labour' also raised Trade Union hackles. One delegate of the London and Provincial Union of Licensed Vehicle Workers at an LTC meeting in January 1917 moved a resolution 'That this Council, realizing that Black Labour will have to be introduced into this Country if the War continues, calls upon the Government to enter into peace negotiations at once'. The motion was ruled out of order, on procedural grounds rather than as a matter of policy, it seems. And to show that these union members were reflecting more widely-held opinions, there were

some occasional anti-black disturbances in the East End during 1917 and 1918, and indeed just after the war.

If the labour shortages of war had a contradictory impact on the labour movement, removing unemployment on the one hand but fostering anxieties of foreign competition on the other, the second effect of the war had a unifying and energising impact on trade unions. This was the extraordinary rise in wartime prices for all the staples of life apart from rents, frozen with effect from Christmas Eve 1915 after agitation involving rent strikes and protests across London and other great British cities. Price rises of course impacted adversely on the real value of wartime wages. Throughout the war the cost of living generally outpaced any gain in wage rates. Most workers' hourly pay, men and women alike, struggled to play catch-up in an economic climate where, measured by wages alone, the prices of food and other commodities made ever-bigger claims on family resources. The one very important exception to this general picture is the case of unskilled London men in previously overstocked industries like the building trades and on the docks, where the huge pool of available labour had traditionally kept wages cripplingly low. But during the war the wages of the poorest paid dockworker in the Port of London more than doubled from a daily rate of 5s 10d in July 1914 to 11s 9d in October 1918; and a bricklayer's labourer earning 6½d an hour in 1914 was getting 1s 3d by the end of the war. Both these increases outstripped the rise in the cost of living over the same period, which approximately doubled. As the journalist Arthur Gleason truly remarked in 1917, England 'now paid a living wage to people who had never had it before....'

These and other wage gains did not take place without a struggle. In 1915, a strike on the LCC's tramways began to shut down the network from 14 May. The strike was over pay and conditions and the inequitable distribution of a cost of living 'war bonus' that only applied to better-off employees. The LCC sacked strikers of military age and hired new men, leading to some violence and stoning of 'blackleg' trams. By 1 June the LCC conceded the main demands and the strikers returned to work, though the position of sacked men was still unresolved.

In general though, 1915 and 1916 were the quietest years for industrial militancy in a long time. But in 1917, food prices climbed steeply to peak in September at 106 per cent of July 1914 levels. From the spring of 1917 in London, trade union militancy at

last rose to something like prewar levels. The London bus workers came out in May for changes to union recognition and a 10s weekly increase for drivers and conductors with 5s for garage staff. For three days London was virtually without buses. Interfering with public transport for munition workers was a wartime offence and the risk of legal action was one influence on the unions to settle. After government intervention the strikers went back on the promise of an industrial conference and consideration of the pay claim as a war bonus.

More worryingly for government, this same month unofficial strikes of munition workers in Lancashire spread all over the north of England and then to the London munition-making districts. Wage rates were one important grievance and so were threats by management to withdraw exemption certificates from military service for men not considered to be pulling their weight. There were strikes of skilled engineers in Crayford, Erith and chiefly Woolwich, bringing out thousands of workers who, though not on strike, depended on tool-makers to keep their machines running. Eight of the national strikers' leading shop stewards were arrested under DORA and brought to Bow Street where they were remanded in Brixton Prison, and there were police raids subsequently on trade union premises in London. Under this formidable pressure the strike was settled and the men returned to work with a promise of no further victimisation.

These harsh, almost panic-stricken, government actions were fuelled by news of the first Russian Revolution and the abdication of the Tsar, which reached London on 16 March. It gave heart not just to British democrats but to all those who opposed the war and its continuation. On 31 March a 'vast' rally at the Royal Albert Hall 'to rejoice' over the Revolution was filled with an audience of nearly 12,000; a further 5,000 were turned away at the doors. The Revolution was fancifully seen by many in authority to be irritating, if not directly causing, the industrial unrest that spring. Yet while there were more than enough domestic provocations for industrial strife it is clear that the Russian experience was one buttress of working-class self-confidence after March 1917: when Christopher Addison, Minister of Munitions, and General Sir William Robertson, Chief of the Imperial General Staff, addressed a meeting of 2,000 engineers, all men it seems, at Woolwich Arsenal in July, they were met by a chorus of *The Red Flag* sung from the back of the audience.

Government inquiries into the causes of industrial unrest this spring made worrying reading. The inquiry into London and the South East concluded that 'The unrest is real, widespread and in some directions extreme, and such as to constitute a national danger unless dealt with promptly and effectively. We are at this moment within view of a possible social upheaval or at least extensive and manifold strikes.' The primary causes were first the cost of living, aggravated by concerns over profiteering, and second the daily hard grind of wartime labour. All this anxiety brought some relief on the cost of living front: during 1917 wage increases were recorded in London in all the building trades, among cabinet makers, printers, bakers, dock workers, shoemakers, tailors, indeed practically everyone taking home a weekly wage packet.

The third effect of war on labour conditions that I would spell out here is that, despite price rises outpacing wage increases for the semi-skilled and above, living standards of London workers, especially the poorest, were transformed by the war. It was the effect of full employment on the London working class that had such an impact on the standard of life during the war. All families, especially those with children over the school-leaving age of 14, could expect to generate a household income from many sources, with each often earning well and regularly. Even where mothers did not work they usually had a separation allowance if their man was on active service.

The poorest felt the improvement most. In 1913-14 the LCC had fed an average of 35,000 poor schoolchildren with 146,000 dinners each week; by 1918-19 it had dropped to 9,500 children receiving just 22,500 dinners each week. In 1918 the proportion of 'poorly nourished' schoolchildren in London was 'considerably less than half the percentage in 1913'. As with food, so with clothing. By 1918 the LCC's school "clothing cupboards", from which exceptionally necessitous children used to receive garments before the war, are no longer resorted to....' And it showed most of all in the workers' homes, especially the poorest:

With better financial conditions, many of the homes I almost despaired of [wrote a Woolwich social worker] have become improved almost beyond belief, which goes to prove very emphatically that if we want to eliminate the slum type of human being and the slum type of home, the surest and quickest way is to give the workman a good living wage.... With more wages coming in,

all [these] difficulties disappear as if by magic, and the housewife begins to buy comforts for her family and home which never could have been afforded before. She gradually improves in health and spirits and is anxious to make her surroundings correspond with her own improvement.

A more prosperous working class and full employment impacted powerfully on the growth and prosperity of the trade union movement. In 1914, British trade unions had 4.15 million members, of whom 437,000 were women. In 1919, the total was 7.93 million members, including 1,326,000 women. The historic high point would be the following year, but from then till the beginning of the Second World War numbers fell away, though beginning to climb again from 1935. Within this broad picture, many trade unions became prosperous institutions: for Ben Tillet's Dock Workers, for instance, the income of the London District from membership subscriptions in 1914 had been £4,339; in 1918 it was £14,656.

But the trade unions did not just become more powerful and prosperous during the war. They became far more influential too. This is the final impact of the war that I wanted to mention here. The unions became valued by the state at every level. At the local level, in the London boroughs and urban districts, representatives of labour were appointed to Military Tribunals hearing conscription appeals, to local pensions committees, and to local food committees once shortages began to bite during 1917. Indeed the formation of local food committees was an early demand of the London Food Vigilance Committee, an organisation established by the LTC, the London Labour Party and the Joint Committee of Cooperative Societies to root out profiteering, and expose inequitable distribution of supplies to poor districts; they had also called vociferously for rationing, eventually brought in by government in 1918. The LTC and trade unions more generally were also in the van of those pressing for a huge housebuilding programme to be established after the war, led by local authorities building for rent. Indeed, the trade unions in London and no doubt elsewhere had done much to stimulate the debate on social reconstruction after the war from 1917 on.

Of course, some of this went backwards from 1919. But nothing I believe returned to the social conditions existing before August 1914. In particular, working-class living standards in London made a definitive leap forward that proved irreversible. When,

at the end of the 1920s, social scientists at the London School of Economics came to update Charles Booth's poverty investigations of forty years before they found that

Across every path of gradual progress the Great War of 1914-18 cut a deep gash which has not yet closed up. The reader of the present volume will again and again be confronted with the fact that the most fruitful comparison is not so much between now and forty years ago as between post-war and pre-war conditions – so much greater and more striking have sometimes been the sudden changes wrought in the conditions of London Life and Labour by the great catastrophe, than by the slighter and more gradual movements of the whole of the preceding generation.

In particular, the economic gains won by working-class Londoners from 1914 to 1918 were never reversed. The war largely wiped away the absolute poverty that Charles Booth uncovered in the 1880s and '90s and which had continued to blight the lives of millions of Londoners right up to the end of 1914: 'the reduction of the proportion of persons in poverty in the forty years is enormous, whichever figures we take,' the *New Survey* concluded, with one measure in East London showing that family poverty of 38 per cent around 1890 had fallen to 6 per cent by 1930. The war was the watershed here and it washed away forever the scourge of mass poverty that had made the East End of London known throughout the world as a byword for degradation before 1914.

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November 2014

NOTE: Much of this material comes from my *Zeppelin Nights. London in the First World War*, The Bodley Head, 2014. Additional material is drawn from the TUC Archive at London Metropolitan University, in particular the London Trades Council Minute Books; the Dock, Wharf, Riverside, and General Workers' Union of Great Britain and Ireland *Annual Reports* and *The Dockers' Record*; and *The Seaman. The Official Organ of the National Sailors' & Firemen's Union*.