

# The first shop stewards movement

The outbreak of World War One in August 1914 cut across the great industrial unrest which had been gathering pace since 1911. Abandoned by their Social Democratic Party and trade union leaders, who reneged on pledges to actively campaign against war, millions of workers

across Europe were sent to be slaughtered in the trenches of France. Yet amidst the horrors that befell the working class a new type of rank-and-file organisation was created, the national shop stewards' movement. Jim Horton explains these important developments.

This potentially revolutionary movement developed in response to the open collaboration between the government, employers and the trade union officialdom. The union leaders had agreed to sign away workers' rights to strike against increased exploitation, rampant inflation, and the obscene profiteering of the bosses.

A government inquiry in 1917 into wartime industrial unrest revealed anger over high food prices, high rents and war profiteering, and growing opposition to conscription amid unmistakable signs of war weariness. More worryingly for the government, many workers believed their union officials could no longer be relied on to defend their interests.

Barely one month into the war the TUC declared a unilateral industrial truce. The number of strikes had dwindled to 20 by the end of August 1914, yet within just seven months this increased to 74 as workers moved into action.

In 1915 the Labour Party entered the coalition government. In the same year wages disputes led to strikes of 700 labourers in Edinburgh, 4,000 jute workers in Dundee, 1,500 stevedores in London, and 4,000 carpenters and labourers working on army huts on Salisbury Plain.

In London 5,000 dockers were on strike for a week and 2,000 dockers at Birkenhead made four weekend stoppages against the imposition of new terms of employment. At Merthyr Tydfil 2,000 miners stopped work for two days against the employment of non-union labour, and 500 engineers at Sandbach, Cheshire, struck for better wages and union recognition.

## Clydeside

On Clydeside a successful pay strike by engineers in February 1915 lasted 18 days. It was organised by the Clyde Labour Withholding Committee, the forerunner of the Clyde Workers' Committee.

Alarmed at this growing militancy, the government considered legally banning strikes. But in fear of provoking more serious unrest, it decided to gain the consent of the union executives, who in March 1915 readily entered into a binding no-strike agreement on all workers in the war industries.

This Treasury Agreement also included allowing unskilled workers to do skilled work, the speeding up of production, ending enhanced pay on overtime, night-work and Sunday work, and giving up many of the Factory Act provisions relating to health and safety.



Rent strikes on Clydeside

With the notable exception of the Miners Federation of Great Britain, all the union leaders endorsed these measures without any membership consultation.

One of the few pledges the unions extracted from the government was that the employers should not take advantage of the agreement to increase their profits. This was not honoured. Only when public anger at the profiteering became palpable did the government introduce the 'Munitions Levy' in 1916, limiting profits to 20% above pre-war levels. But the employers persuaded the government to abolish the levy a year later.

The Herald commented that in signing the Treasury Agreement: "The trade union lamb has lain down with the capitalist lion." However, this did not deter union members from making pay claims, or prevent the rank and file from organising unofficial action.

In April 1915 the Miners Federation put in a claim for a 20% national wage increase, to partially compensate for the 26% rise in the cost of living. Backed by the government, the employers offered just 10%. Municipal workers, textile workers, and 7,000 tramway workers also threatened action over pay.

These disputes convinced the government that their tactic of embroiling the unions in a voluntary no-strike agreement had not dampened down workers' militancy. In June 1915, in collusion with the union leaders, the government introduced the Munitions Act. Framed in patriotic language, its aim was to enact industrial conscription.

The Act not only made the provisions of the Treasury Agreement legally enforceable, it laid down severe penalties for any infringement. In addition, any action in the workshop which

the employer deemed restricted production was a criminal offence. It also became illegal for any worker in key production posts to switch jobs without a leaving certificate from their employer.

Lloyd George made clear that the real agenda behind the introduction of the Munitions Act was to bring about "the greater subordination of labour to the direction and control of the state", and to redress the industrial balance of power in favour of the employers.

## Amazing profits

Lord Buckmaster boasted in a debate in the House of Lords after the armistice, that the war "produced as an objective lesson for all industrial classes to see, the most amazing profits that this country has ever witnessed."

Not only were workers fighting and dying in the bosses' war, but the political establishment, under the cover of patriotism, used the war to go on the offensive against the working class.

However, the Munitions Act was barely on the statute book before five days of strike action by the South Wales miners smashed through its provisions. Two days before, the government had issued a proclamation making every miner liable to penalties if they proceeded with their strike.

This attempted intimidation failed and the miners struck solidly on 15 July. Wary of attempting to fine or imprison 200,000 workers, the government relented and compelled the mine owners to concede to most of the miners' demands.

The South Wales miners had shown the whole working class that reactionary laws could be broken with impunity, even in the harsh conditions of wartime, and that militant action was the only way to compel the employers and the government to accede to workers' demands.

The threat of further strike action secured major gains for miners in future years.

On the railways, a rank-and-file movement of Vigilance Committees played a major part in pushing the rail union NUR executive into pursuing wage claims. But it was in the munitions trades, particularly engineering, that rank-and-file movements found their highest expression, with the formation of workplace and area shop stewards' committees.

Prior to 1914, the functions of shop stewards had generally been limited to card checks, collecting union dues, and reports of work conditions to district committees. But during the war, shop stewards took up the grievances the union officials refused to deal with, permanently changing their standing and role.

## Building the first shop stewards committee

Engineering workers on Clydeside had already given a lead with their successful pay strike in February 1915. Eight months later under the Munitions Act, two shop stewards were charged with "slacking, and causing others to slack", and subsequently dismissed. One was sentenced to three months imprisonment.

In response Clyde shipwrights walked out on strike. This resulted in 17 stewards being fined £10 each under the Act. Three refused to pay and were jailed in October 1915.

The Clyde Workers Committee (CWC), led by John Maclean and William Gallacher, emerged out of the successful campaign to free them. It was the first shop stewards' committee established in Britain.

A strike of 15,000 Clyde shipyard workers in November 1915, in support of rent-striking tenants threatened with deduction of arrears from their wages, gave further momentum to the CWC. For six months 250-300 delegates met every weekend. The day to day work was conducted by a small elected committee, all of whom were socialists, which met two nights a week.

## Dilution

The key issue facing the CWC was dilution, the replacement of skilled labour with unskilled labour, which posed a dilemma for the CWC leadership. As Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) shop stewards they represented the interests of a craft union membership, but as socialists they stood for industrial unionism and the creation of an all-grades rank and file movement.

Opposition to dilution would be perceived as a sectional defence of craft privileges.

During war conditions, dilution was difficult to prevent. The CWC limited itself to a correct position of not opposing dilution on the condition that all the

industries and national resources were nationalised under workers' control, but had no concrete policy on those dilutees already taken on.

The CWC refused to negotiate on dilution when the government rejected nationalisation; and it didn't call for strike action to enforce the upgrading of those workers onto the skilled rate, despite the employers disregarding an agreement that dilutees must be paid the standard rate for the job. This allowed the government to go on the offensive.

Cautious that precipitous action against the CWC could trigger widespread strikes, the government adopted a piecemeal approach.

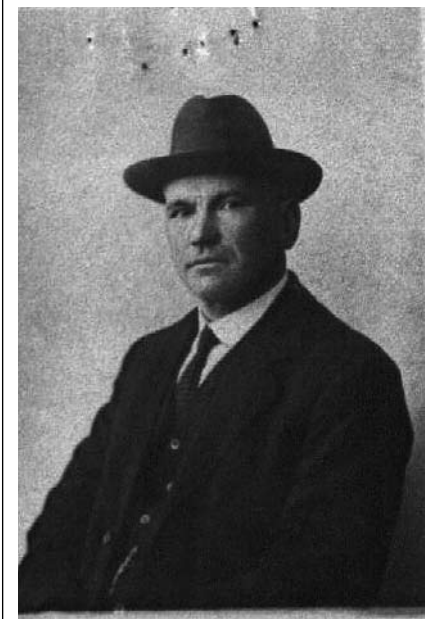
Commissioners were sent first to the least organised factories to 'convince' them of dilution, with the threat of imprisonment for those inciting strikes, and military protection for any strike breakers. Without a clear practical approach to counter government tactics the CWC's policy collapsed.

## Parkhead Forge

But unrest continued on the Clyde over the refusal of employers to negotiate with shop stewards. The biggest of these occurred at Parkhead Forge in March 1916. Five stewards were arrested and deported to Edinburgh and Aberdeen under the threat of imprisonment if they returned to Glasgow.

The strike spread to three more of the biggest engineering firms on Clydeside, which resulted in further arrests and deportations. The strike lasted 18 days, but under extreme pressure from the union executives, members were forced back to work.

The government then proceeded to smash the CWC. Its leaders were arrested and deported from Clydeside, and its newspapers closed down. Fines and uncontrolled dilution followed. But the CWC had laid the basis for the spread of the shop stewards' movement.



John Maclean



William Gallacher

90 years later workers are once again confronted with the dual tasks of creating fighting unions and a new mass workers' party

## Militancy spreads nationwide

After the battles in Clydeside, the focus shifted to Sheffield where in November 1916 a strike by engineers over the military conscription of a time-served fitter inflicted a severe defeat on the government. Strong organisation and cooperation between skilled and semi-skilled workers was crucial. Militant shop stewards had control of the ASE union district committee, but knowing that the ASE executive would order the district committee to call off an illegal strike it handed over the leadership to the unofficial shop stewards' committee.

This led to the establishment of work-shop committees representing all grades and sections and the formation of the Sheffield Workers' Committee, led by JT Murphy. This gave impetus to creating a national movement.

The Sheffield strike compelled the government to introduce a trade card scheme which exempted craft union members from military service. This caused resentment among semi-skilled and unskilled workers, and threatened the developing unity between grades.

In April 1917 the government went on the offensive, abruptly cancelling the trade card scheme and extending dilution from government to commercial contracts. In response the biggest strike wave in wartime took place in May 1917.

Starting in Manchester, and led by the newly created shop stewards' committees, the strike spread across the engineering sector, involving 200,000 workers in 48 towns. One hundred shop steward delegates from 34 districts met in permanent session for three days, laying the ground for a national movement.

## Concessions and repression

Some ministers wanted to declare martial law, but the government adopted a dual tactic of concessions and repression. Under orders from the government to crush the shop stewards' movement, police arrested eight of its leaders. Although the strike was unofficial, the government opened up negotiations with the ASE executive, which had become alarmed at the scale of the strike. The extension of dilution was dropped but the trade card scheme was not regained. However, the deal included the eventual release of the arrested stewards.

In August 1917 the National Administrative Council of the Shop Stewards' and Workers' Committees was formed. During the autumn a series of wage battles brought skilled and unskilled workers together, cutting across the craft sectionalism of the shop stewards' movement. The government conceded substantial wage increases, and abandoned the hated 'leaving certificates'.

Further industrial action erupted in November 1917 when 50,000 workers in Coventry successfully struck on the issue of recognition of stewards for plant negotiations, which, despite opposition from the ASE executive, led to a national recognition agreement.

Meanwhile, the Russian Revolution of February 1917 gave impetus to the anti-war movement in Britain. In June 1917 a national rank and file convention had called for an early 'people's peace'. The government responded aggressively

to any attempt to implement the convention's call for workers' and soldiers' councils.

But it was the struggles of the organised working class that brought Britain close to producing a mass revolutionary anti-war movement. Faced with stalemate on the Western Front and acute food shortages at home during the winter of 1917-18, war weariness grew among the working class.

Successful wage struggles on the Clyde strengthened the revived CWC. Elsewhere the rank and file movement embraced unskilled workers as militancy extended from the engineering vanguard.

In December 1917 the government warned that "the early months of 1918 may reveal industrial action with a view to the achievement of political ends in the termination of war conditions". Two months earlier the war cabinet had called for a special report on the danger of revolution.

In January 1918 there was the prospect of a political strike against wider conscription, which had the potential to unite the industrial unrest with anti-war demands. A national meeting of the shop stewards' movement rejected a narrow craft response to the new Military Service Bill.

However, the ideology of the shop stewards' movement, with its antipathy to centralised leadership, meant that instead of making a clear call for national strike action, they restricted themselves to mere recommendations. This allowed the engineering craftsmen to revert to sectional demands for their continued exemption from conscription, which the revolutionary leaders of the shop stewards' movement refused to support.

Strikes over pay, and terms and conditions continued throughout 1918, but by this time the shop stewards' movement had passed its peak. In the absence of a lead from the union leadership it had played a vital role representing its members' interests, but the influence of syndicalism on the movement acted as a barrier to realising its full potential.

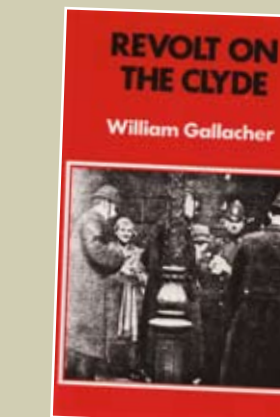
The Shop Stewards Movement did not seek to create alternative unions, instead it adopted the position of supporting the union officials provided they properly represented the workers, but acting independently immediately the union leaders misrepresented their members. However, by not contesting national union positions, it left the unions under the control of the old leaders, while its emphasis on industrial unionism left it politically disarmed.

After the war the best shop stewards did draw the conclusion that workers needed a new mass party, and became key players in the formation of the Communist Party in 1921.

90 years later workers are once again confronted with the dual tasks of creating fighting unions and a new mass workers' party. Today, the National Shop Stewards Network plays a crucial role in pushing for industrial action against public sector cuts.

There are obvious differences between events today and the world war of 1914-1918, but activists can learn from the experience of the first shop stewards' movement as workers then resisted paying the bill for a crisis not of their making.

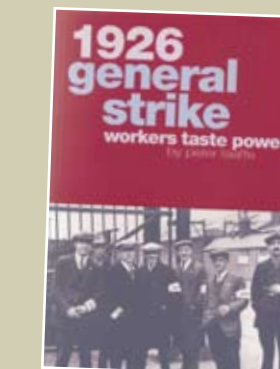
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