

Ireland and Scotland in the First World War: from the Dublin Rising to Red Clydeside

Dave Sherry

The history of the British labour movement between 1910 and the early 1920's has a special claim to our attention. These years mark a climax of class-conscious self-activity among the workers, which in Britain, has not yet been surpassed...there is good reason to re-examine the last great revolutionary period in British history.

The First World War precipitated an international revolutionary crisis. That the climax had already occurred in the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917 was far from apparent during the immediate post-war years. October was widely seen, both on the right and the left, as a beginning, not an end. Reasonable men could anticipate the Hungarian, Austrian, German, Italian, French and even British revolutions. It is an experience that deserves to be rescued from oblivion.¹ - James Hinton, 1973.

James Hinton is the acknowledged historian of the first shop stewards movement. His statement about the significance of the period between 1910 and the early 1920's applies to Ireland as much as mainland Britain and he could well have added Ireland to his list of anticipated revolutions.

In 1910 Ireland was still part of Britain. By the early 1920's that and many other iniquities had been overturned. The Dublin Lockout, the Red Clyde, the Easter Rising and Ireland's War of Independence were all part of a great tidal wave of revolt that engulfed the whole of Europe and much of

what was then called 'the colonial world'.

This revolt had started in the previous decade but ruling class propaganda and a wave of enthusiasm for a war that was supposed to be 'over by Christmas' suddenly broke its momentum. In August 1914 the European workers' movement was seemingly derailed, by the sudden capitulation of its leaders.

Writing in the August 15 issue of *Forward*, the Glasgow socialist weekly that he had contributed to regularly since 1910, James Connolly directed his anger and sarcasm at those 'internationalists' who claimed to have done all they could to stop the war but who - now it was underway - were for defending their own countries;

What then becomes of all our resolutions, all our protests of fraternisation, all our threats of general strikes...all our hopes for the future? Were they all as sound and fury, signifying nothing? Even an unsuccessful attempt at social revolution by force of arms would be less disastrous to the socialist cause than the act of socialists allowing themselves to be used in the slaughter of their brothers in the cause. A great continental uprising of the working class would stop the war: a universal protest at public meetings will not save a single life from being wantonly slaughtered.²

Connolly's frustration and pessimism were understandable. 1914 had been an appalling year. The outbreak of war had come on the back of two other great setbacks; the betrayal of the Dublin Lockout by the

¹James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards Movement*, (George Allen & Unwin Ltd. London, 1973), pages 13 and 17.

²*Forward*, 15 August 1914, quoted in Walter Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain*, (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London 1969), p88.

British TUC; and the sudden threat of partition in the wake of the Home Rule crisis.

Yet within a year, resistance to the war was spreading. The shock and horror of trench warfare combined with the terrible privations imposed on home fronts everywhere, meant class-consciousness and struggle from below came back with a vengeance.

Although the Dublin rising of 1916 was crushed, it was a portent. By 1917 mass strikes, food riots, desertions and mutinies were driving a Europe wide revolt and pulling in wider layers behind working class resistance. So powerful was this movement that it dissolved armies, pulled empires apart, toppled monarchies and ended four years of imperialist slaughter.

October 1917 saw the working class take power in a major country for the first time. The German revolution brought the slaughter to an end and the world working class moved closer to its own emancipation than at any time before or since. Colonial rebellion that had begun in Ireland inspired others and spread across the globe. For a brief few years the prospect of world socialism was real.

The outcome of these momentous events shaped our present, whether you live in Dublin or Damascus. With the forthcoming centenary of the Easter Rising, the relationship between Red Clydeside and Ireland during this period merits attention. But first we need to look back at the differences between the position of Scotland in the United Kingdom and that of Ireland.

England, Ireland and Scotland

For centuries Scotland and Ireland were subject to England's imperatives. Both were treated as strategic bulwarks against foreign invasion and as captive markets whose commerce and industry were bound by restrictions protecting English exports from competition.

But Scotland was never an imperial dependency like Ireland. While the Scottish ruling class benefited from union with England in 1707, Ireland was driven backwards. Scots were at the forefront of British imperialism, not least in Ireland. It could be

argued Ulster was a Scottish colony during the seventeenth century. In 1603 James 1 recruited Scots Presbyterian settlers to establish loyal 'plantations' in Ulster. His aim was to crush its catholic population and use it as a protestant bridgehead for the subjugation of the whole island.

At the start of the nineteenth century Ireland's population was eight million. During the 1840's it fell by three million -two million dying of starvation and one million emigrating. Not only did Scottish troops help police this genocide but Scottish capital played a big role in developing Ireland's one area of industrial development around Belfast. When Glasgow's Victorian entrepreneurs were building tenements to house and exploit shipyard workers and their families in the Govan and Kinning Park districts of the city, they chose to re-name part of this new community 'Plantation' in commemoration of Scotland's role in colonising Ulster.

Throughout the nineteenth century, thousands of Irish men, women and children were driven into the industrial revolution that was gathering pace in lowland Scotland. Along with the victims of the Highland clearances, much of the unskilled labour that transformed Glasgow from a small trading port into the 'Second City of Empire' came from this source. It built the roads, canals and railways and laboured in the mines, mills and factories that made Clydeside such a powerhouse of capital accumulation.

With Manchester in mind, Engels claimed the industrial revolution would have been a more gradual affair but for the human raw material provided by Irish immigration. This was even more valid for Scotland; by 1851, 7.2 percent of its population was Irish compared to 2.9 percent in England and Wales. In Glasgow the Irish immigrant population had grown to 19 percent and would increase as the city tripled in size between 1851 and 1911.

In the 1840's average life expectancy in Glasgow was 30 and the Irish had the worst of it; 'The Irish constituted the most abject part of the population, prepared to tolerate a lower standard of life than all but the very

poorest of the workforce.³

Marx had already drawn attention to the division between British workers and Irish immigrants in the great industrial cities. He was struck by the extent to which the 'native' workers were encouraged by their bosses to see their fellow Irish workers not just as an economic threat liable to undercut wages and conditions, but also as racially 'inferior'. Marx argued this was 'the secret of the impotence of the English working class' and the only remedy was to win the British labour movement to supporting the struggle for Irish self-determination.

Sectarianism: divide and rule or unite and fight

Because of the fear of Jacobitism in lowland Scotland during the eighteenth century, anti-Catholicism was prevalent *long before* the arrival of the Irish and despite the fact that the Catholic population was then tiny.

Ever since the reformation Scotland had been a Calvinist country with pockets of Catholicism in the Highlands and Islands. One historian with a grim sense of humour claimed that in the 1790's, when Glasgow had no more than thirty-nine Catholics, there were forty-three anti-Catholic societies.⁴

The arrival of a significant Irish population after 1840 was the driving force behind the growth of the Orange Order. By the latter half of the nineteenth century more than a quarter of Glasgow's population was catholic and a quarter of the Irish in Glasgow were Protestants from Ulster.

Until then Glasgow had no Orange Lodge but, by 1880, there were more than a hundred. Lodges were established in the mining communities of the Lanarkshire coalfield on the southeast of the city and in the shipbuilding towns of Greenock and Clydebank located further down the Clyde.

The Liberal Party dominated Scottish politics in the second half of the nineteenth century and Glasgow was a Liberal

stronghold. Between 1832 and 1886, its voters only once returned a Tory MP. Liberal support for Irish Home Rule led Glasgow shipyard tycoon William Pearce and ironmaster Sir James Bain to stand for Parliament in 1880 as Tory unionists, enlisting the support of the Orange Lodge. In the 1892 election the Tory candidate for Bridgeton was an Orangeman.

Many big employers set out to use immigration and the threat of Irish home rule to weaken and divide the working class. 'No Irish need apply' was a common phrase in the employment columns of the newspapers and in the windows of businesses looking to hire workers. But the Lanarkshire mine owners and ironmasters attempted to cut wages and break strikes by hiring Irish immigrants. Often the bosses sponsored sectarian infighting by recruiting an Irish workforce comprised of rival Protestant and Catholic sections.

This terrible division was eventually overcome. According to the historian of the Lanarkshire miners; 'The Irish actually took a prominent part in the labour disturbances'.⁵ Scottish and immigrant Irish workers shared a common experience of exploitation and as the Irish came more into the workforce they helped to build the union - providing some of its best fighters, its most able organisers and- as far as the bosses were concerned-the biggest troublemakers.

In the 1880's the coal and iron masters began recruiting Lithuanian workers with the promise of work and homes. About 8,000 came with some 3,000 working in the mines by 1911. At first the 'Poles' as they were called, were treated with hostility by workmates, who suspected, sometimes accurately, that they were being hired to reduce wages.

Most had fled political persecution from the Czar's Empire. They established their credibility as good trade unionists by playing a central role in the picketing during the 1912 miners' strike. Out of this strike, John Maclean built solid links with both the

³Tom Gallagher, *Glasgow The Uneasy Peace; religious tension in modern Scotland*, (Manchester University Press, 1987), p12.

⁴Colm Brogan, *The Glasgow Story*, (Muller, London, 1954), p183.

⁵Tom Gallagher, p15.

Lithuanian and Irish mining communities.

MacLean was a primary school teacher. When he was dismissed from his post at the end of 1915 because of his anti-war activities and his prominent role in the Glasgow rent strike, Lithuanian and Irish miners were instrumental in organising protest strikes for his re-instatement in some Lanarkshire pits.

Historian Tom Gallagher, in his book, *Glasgow, The Uneasy Peace*, explains why the rivalry and sectarianism that disfigured the mining areas surrounding Glasgow did not exist in the city to anything like the same extent;

In Glasgow with its exceptionally high ratio of skilled jobs, there was considerably less friction since the unskilled Irish immigrants could not compete for them. Instead they dominated the city's unskilled labour market, finding work as casual construction or dock labourers, coal heavers, and as sweated labour in textiles and in the chemical and dyeing works. Here men, and especially women, toiled in appalling conditions. Where the Irish left behind casual, open-air labour and became part of the factory workforce, they were affected by the class consciousness, which developed in the enclosed world of the factory.⁶

To a much greater extent than in Belfast and much earlier than in Liverpool, the Irish Catholic population was able to integrate itself into the working class movement:

Nineteenth century Glasgow was second only to Liverpool as a reception centre for Irish immigrants and, to this day, the communal tensions which unite the two in many minds, are seen as taking identical forms. But Liverpool was a mercantile and commercial port rather than an

industrial centre. The occupational structure of the city included a far higher percentage of unskilled manual and part-time jobs for which the Irish were in a position to compete. So to a greater degree than in Glasgow, sectarian friction stemmed from economic competition and was of a more intense and unpleasant kind.⁷

As Joan Smith shows in her study of the labour movements in Liverpool and Glasgow before the First World War, there were also political forces at play that shaped these important differences:

Glasgow was a town with strong, radical, Liberal politics. The radical liberalism of many of the Glasgow workers was not just an ideology that had to be defeated if socialism was to lead the Glasgow working class movement - it was also a rock like foundation for the development of that socialism. Many attitudes were shared with Liberalism, which made it possible, in a town of high Irish immigration, for the Protestant-Catholic divide to be contained.

The Labour movement in Glasgow became the strongest in Britain. By 1909 30,000 marched together on the May Day parade. The enormous strength and potential of the Glasgow labour movement was partly based on the depth of feeling for a previous Liberal understanding of the world- an understanding that could also evolve into labourism and then revolutionary socialism, as well as being opposed to those beliefs.

In Liverpool Liberal beliefs had no purchase. Any emergent labour and socialist movement

⁶Tom Gallagher, p15 & p16.

⁷Tom Gallagher, p14 & p15.

had to battle against nationalism and sectarianism. The ruling Orange-Tory bloc dominated Liverpool politics.

The first issue of *Forward* took up the slogan 'Home Rule for Scotland' and turned it into the slogan 'Home Rule All Round'. It was through this slogan that the Glasgow ILP also defended the demand for Irish Home Rule. The strong Liberal tradition in Glasgow kept in check the rise of sectarianism, contributing greatly to the process through which a Liberal working class became a Labour working class. . . With no socialist current established in the 'common-sense' thought of Liverpool, it was possible for Tory Democracy and Irish Nationalism to assert their leadership of the Liverpool working class.⁸

The consequences were shown during the Irish Home Rule crisis. In October 1912 Sir Edward Carson came to Liverpool to raise support for the Ulster Covenant and the promise of volunteers, should the Liberal government attempt to impose Home Rule. 150,000 attended the demonstration, organised by the Liverpool Conservative Working Men's' Association and pledged support for Protestant Ulster. 20,000 went on a torchlight demonstration afterwards.

A few days later only 8,000 turned out for Carson when he came to Glasgow. There were as many Orangemen in the West of Scotland as in Liverpool but in Glasgow it was possible to contain extreme anti-Catholic Protestantism until the end of the 1920's.

The wave of revolt before the First World War

The years leading up to the First World War saw a rise in nationalist feeling in many areas across the globe but also a wave of strug-

gle and revolutionary upheaval that brought hope and confidence.

In 1905 the Russian empire was rocked by mass strikes, the first emergence of workers' councils and the first workers' revolution. Although defeated, it inspired workers across the continent and prompted new developments in Marxist theory - not least Rosa Luxemburg's pamphlet, *The Mass Strike*, which analysed how mass workers' movements could fuse economics and politics into revolutionary struggle.

In 1907 there was revolutionary upheaval in Turkey and in the same year the mass strike resurfaced on the Belfast waterfront. Unskilled and previously unorganised protestant and catholic dock labourers fought side by side against their unionist bosses and the state. Thousands flocked to Jim Larkin's new dockworkers' union. Battleships were sent to Belfast Lough and troops attacked the picket lines, killing three strikers. The strain of protecting the company scabs provoked a police strike and the city was in chaos.

Clydeside socialist, John Maclean was a friend of Larkin. In keeping with orthodox social democracy and his membership of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), Maclean had been, until then, pessimistic about the role of trade unions and the value of strikes. His view had been jaundiced by his experiences on Clydeside, where unions had made little impact on the unskilled.

This led Maclean to stress the limitation of strikes and trade unionism, which he saw as necessary but essentially defensive in character. His involvement in the Belfast dock strike led to a dramatic change in his politics.

Maclean was fine orator and Larkin asked him to address the mass strike meetings. He was transformed by the dramatic events and left Belfast exhilarated, having witnessed for the first time the politicising effect of a major industrial struggle on masses of workers. His diary of the speaking tour was printed in the SDF newspaper *Justice* and it recorded how much the strike had changed his outlook; 'Strikes reveal the

⁸Joan Smith, *Labour Tradition in Glasgow and Liverpool*, (History Workshop Journal 1983, Number 17), pages 33, 34, 41 & 42.

underlying reality of capitalism and the class war in ways that are more effective than all the theory we might fire at our benighted class from now till doomsday. Fighting leads to new facts, to new theory thence to revolution'.⁹



John Maclean

From here on Maclean was always alive to the revolutionary potential of trade union struggle whenever it raised its head. Hence his involvement in what would become *The Great Unrest*, his prominence in the subsequent wartime struggles on the Clyde and his support for Bolshevism.

Bitter battles like the Belfast dock strike swept North America. In 1909 saw mass strikes by women sweatshop workers throughout Manhattan's Lower East Side for union rights and the right to vote. These events inspired German socialist Clara Zetkin to found International Working Women's Day.

In 1911 there was the Mexican Revolution and mass strikes throughout Spain. Between 1910 and 1912 strikes swept Germany and 1912 saw the 'Bread and Roses' textile strike in Lawrence, Massachusetts where 20,000 immigrant women workers took on their bosses and won.

The years between 1911 and 1914 saw big struggles in Italy. In June 1914 agitation against Italy's participation in the coming war led to a massive revolt. It took 100,000

troops to suppress the resistance and isolate the Turin general strike. For this reason the Italian ruling class were unable to join in the First World War until 1915.

By 1912 the Russian workers' movement had recovered from its defeat in 1905 and the class struggle continued to escalate until the summer of 1914.

Britain and the Great Unrest

The years before the First World War are usually depicted as Britain's golden age. Her empire spanned the globe, her economy seemed strong and with Asquith's Liberal Party winning re-election in 1910, political stability seemed assured.

But something dramatic was about to happen; 'Between 1910 and 1914 and against the wishes of their own leaders, British workers plunged into a series of furious strikes which, but for the declaration of war, would have culminated in September 1914, in a general strike of extraordinary violence'¹⁰.

The causes of the Great Unrest are easy to identify. Trade union membership had trebled since 1889 but wages had fallen by ten per cent. Over the next four years a tidal wave of strikes engulfed the whole of mainland Britain and colonial Ireland. It coincided with the resurgence of the suffrage movement and the Irish Home Rule crisis, which threatened civil war.

The Great Unrest centred on huge strikes- first in the ports, then the railways and the mines. It involved unskilled and often non-unionised workers. And it directly involved large numbers of women workers.

Singers, an American company, opened the biggest sewing machine factory in the world at Clydebank. It employed over 12,000 workers in assembly line mass production. Most were unskilled and a third were women. In 1911 a strike began when the women downed tools against speed-up. Within days the whole factory was out. Elsewhere the movement was on the up. Old sectarian differences between workers, soured by centuries of prejudice, were swept aside. In Liverpool and Dublin orange and

⁹BJ Ripley & J McHugh, *John Maclean*, (Manchester University Press, 1989), p51.

¹⁰George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England*, (Serif, London, 1977), p213.

green banners joined the demonstrations. Trade union membership in that single year grew by over 600,000 and the unions themselves were transformed. Helping to organise strikes among young women millworkers on Clydeside, Glasgow socialist John Maclean wrote at the end of 1911; 'The times we are living in are so stirring and full of change that it is not impossible to believe that we are living in the rapids of revolution'¹¹.

In 1912 over 40 million working days were 'lost' due to strikes and Maclean wrote; 'Never were the masses so pugnacious...never were they so class conscious.'¹². Unlike Maclean, most commentators assumed the storm would pass but it raged on through 1913. The biggest, longest and most bitter battle was In Dublin - the five-month lockout in 1913.

In 1910 Larkin had formed the Irish Transport & General Workers Union and from then until the outbreak of war in 1914 a succession of strikes swept the country. The bitter Dublin Lockout won massive solidarity and sympathy action from British workers. There were street collections in towns and cities throughout the UK but the British TUC sold out the struggle. Their refusal to call solidarity strike action came at a time when ordinary British workers had never been so militant. As a consequence the strikers were starved back to work.

The Great Unrest rolled on into 1914. Between 1911 and 1914 trade union membership had doubled. But the declaration of war in August brought it to a juddering halt. Between January and July 1914, nine million days had been lost to strikes but from August to December 1914 only a million days were lost.

Red Clydeside

In recent years there's been a major assault on Red Clydeside from those who either want to belittle its existence or incorporate into the tradition of Labour reformism. Red Clydeside was a crucial moment in Scottish history and one of the high points of European class struggle.

Some on the left think that Scotland was and is naturally more radical and more left than England and that the Red Clyde is explained by the fact that Glasgow was always a hotbed of socialism and trade union militancy. This is a myth.

At the start of the 20th century Scotland was one of the most advanced capitalist economies in the world yet independent working class trade union and political organisation lagged behind other parts of Britain.

When the great wave of New Unionism exploded in the 1880's, Clydeside largely missed out. The growth of union membership among the unskilled had less impact on Glasgow than on other centres in Britain. As a result trade union membership was largely confined to its large number of skilled workers.

In 1902 when John Maclean joined the Glasgow branch of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), the first British Marxist organisation, its Scottish membership numbered less than 200. The Marxist movement in Scotland was smaller and weaker than its counterpart in England and this was no accident; it reflected the relative backwardness of the Scottish working class movement at the time.

In the 1910 general election Labour's percentage share of the vote in Scotland was half its overall percentage share throughout Britain. Labour returned three Labour MP's compared to 42 MP's for Britain as a whole.

Average wages in Scotland were much lower than England and trade union membership was lower too- a big factor in convincing the American Singer Sewing Machine Company to build a major new factory employing 12,000 men and women at Clydebank in 1900.

All of this gave Scottish industrialists an advantage and they planned to keep it by holding the unions in check. But things were about to change on Clydeside as the growth of US and German competition led to rationalization and the mechanization of production.

¹¹Nan Milton editor, *John Maclean: In the Rapids of Revolution*, (Alison & Busby, London, 1978) p62.

¹² John Maclean, *Justice*, 24 February, 1912.

The changing mood in the Clydeside working class had already been shown by the 30,000 who turned out on the 1909 Glasgow May Day demonstration and by the big strikes in 1911 involving women workers at the textile dye plants in the Vale of Leven and 12,000 workers at the nearby Singers Sewing Machine factory in Clydebank.

In 1913 Glasgow led the way in supporting the Dublin Lockout;

From September 1913 to January 1914 the Glasgow Labour movement devoted its energy to organising the largest collection for the Dublin Lockout outside of Dublin. Forward, the ILP paper was the centre for collection, raising £3,000 when unskilled men earned 21 shillings a week. Collections were taken at socialist branches, workshop meetings, cinemas, football matches and in the streets, quite apart from trade union branches. The ILP organised demonstrations on behalf of the Dublin strikers, putting up speakers from the trades council and had Jim Larkin speak at their large Sunday night meetings. The Govan Trades Council efforts included collections inside every local shipyard and factory and in the area's tenements and at Ibrox, the ground of the Protestant football club.¹³

The turning point came when engineering and shipbuilding expanded as the British ruling class prepared for war. It was the changes wrought by the war economy in the workplace and on the overcrowded tenement housing that made Clydeside fertile soil for militant trade unionism and socialist agitation.

In these conditions politics and economics fused together, creating opportunities for anti-war socialists like Maclean. The Clyde became the vanguard of what was a British-wide movement that included

Dublin, Sheffield & Belfast but it was not unique. Across Europe all the big munitions centres- Petrograd, Turin, Berlin, and Budapest, - saw revolutionary upheaval on a bigger scale.

If the war transformed Clydeside it also transformed Maclean. Here in Britain and across Europe most Labour, Socialist and trade union leaders backed their own governments. Maclean took the same position as Lenin and James Connolly; for revolutionary defeatism and workers' power.

Maclean was a key figure on Clydeside, involved with the Clyde Workers' Committee, the rank and file revolt against the dismantling of trade union defences during wartime. Yet he refused to subordinate his socialist politics to trade unionism. That's why he consistently argued for strike action to stop the war; why he was a key figure in the Glasgow rent strikes of 1915; and why he was one of the few on the British left to support the Easter Rising in 1916.

His significance was acknowledged by both the British and Russian governments and for quite different reasons. The war cabinet saw him as a dangerous revolutionary and jailed him 3 times during the war. In Russia the workers' government elected him their honorary president alongside Lenin and Trotsky and appointed him Soviet Consul in Glasgow.

Glasgow was a key munitions centre and its engineering workers were in a powerful position. The attempt to destroy their conditions, hold down wages and ban strikes for the duration of the war drove them into struggle.

Glasgow also had a small, active grouping of young anti-war socialists. They were rooted in the key munitions plants and were influenced by the new syndicalism and by Maclean's Marxist economic classes. Willy Gallagher, shop stewards convenor at the Albion Works and chair of the Clyde Workers' Committee recalled the importance of Maclean's factory gate meetings and his economics classes;

Maclean applied his knowledge to the events around him. He

¹³J Smith, 'Taking the Leadership of the Movement', in A McKinlay and RJ Morris, *The ILP on Clydeside 1893-1932* (Manchester, 1991), p 78.

demonstrated in the clearest manner that the war was a war for trade and brought out into full relief the sinister robber forces behind it. He gave example after example of the financiers and big employers pointing a gun at the head of the Government and demanding increased profits. These examples were carried day after day into the munitions factories.¹⁴

The first big strike of the war came in February 1915 at Weirs - a key munitions plant where shop stewards organisation already existed. Despite being branded as traitors in the press and denounced by their union leaders, the illegal strike spread rapidly to other munitions factories. On the back of further local battles, the Clyde Workers' Committee was launched in November 1915. Based on independent rank and file organisation within the existing unions, it was the first ever shop steward's movement.

At its height 300 delegates from the major munitions plants met every week. It was an embryonic workers' council or soviet and it provided the model, which militant workers across Britain would follow in their opposition to the war economy and eventually to the war itself.

Throughout 1915, the unrest in the factories was accompanied by mass community campaigns led by working class women against rent increases and evictions. Pre war Glasgow was already short of housing. The influx of munitions workers exacerbated the shortage and drove up rents.

By November 1915 over 20,000 Glasgow tenants were on rent strike. Wednesday 17 November is one the highpoints in British working class history. Agitation by the local housewives, local ILP activists, Maclean & other socialists culminated in walkouts at 5 shipyards and a mass protest at Glasgow Sheriff court to halt fines, evictions and wage arrestments. Threatened with a wild-cat strike in munitions the Sherriff dismissed the cases before him and the government was

forced to impose a rents freeze for the duration of the war.

In the spring of 1916 splits in the Clyde Workers' Committee (CWC) and its failure to link up with other munitions centres allowed the British state to launch an offensive over the question of dilution and arms production. The socialist press was seized and McLean & the leaders of the CWC were rounded up and jailed or deported for sedition. Maclean, who'd fought against the syndicalism of the leading shop stewards, got the heaviest sentence - 3 years penal servitude.

A few weeks after Maclean was imprisoned by the British state, it crushed the Easter Rising in Dublin. On 12 May, the badly wounded James Connolly was taken to the prison yard of Kilmainham Jail, strapped to a chair and executed by a British firing squad, despite the fact he was already dying from his wounds.

Before leaving Edinburgh for Dublin in 1896, Connolly had been a prominent figure on the Scottish and British left and had been a founder member of the Socialist Labour Party (SLP). In the build up to 1916 the SLP printed Connolly's newspaper in Glasgow. One of its members, Arthur McManus, was a leading member of the CWC who would later become a founder member and first Chair of the British Communist Party. He smuggled copies of Connolly's paper into Ireland on a number of occasions, after the British had suppressed it.

After Connolly's execution, few on the Scottish left defended him. *Forward*, the ILP paper that often published Connolly's articles stated clearly that it didn't. Arthur McManus defended Connolly and so too did John Maclean. Like Lenin, Maclean saw the Easter Rising as the first blow against the war and British imperialism.

After his release from prison McLean went on to endorse the Irish struggle against British rule at street meetings and public meetings, which he dared to hold in strong Orange areas like Port Glasgow and Motherwell.

The assault on the CWC in the spring of 1916 meant the momentum on the Clyde was

¹⁴Willie Gallagher, *Revolt on the Clyde*, (Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1936), p37

temporarily halted but mass resistance to conscription saw the struggle spread to other munitions centres across the UK - most notably Sheffield. Soon the Clyde was moving again too.

In May 1917, 90,000 workers marched to Glasgow Green in support of the February Revolution in Russia. McLean was released from jail by mass protest and soon his weekly Marxist economics classes were attracting over 1,000 workers across Clydeside.

McLean toured Britain speaking to mass rallies, arguing the best defence of workers' Russia was revolution in Britain. He spoke at a monster rally in the Albert Hall but in April 1918 the government had him arrested again for sedition.

Prior to his arrest McLean had been arguing that since May Day, was being held on a working day, workers in Glasgow should strike against the war. His call was answered when 100,000 stopped work and marched to Duke St jail, where he was being held pending trial. At the Edinburgh High court he was sentenced to five years penal servitude after his famous speech from the dock. He went on hunger strike & was adopted by the Gorbals Constituency Labour Party as their candidate in the 1918 election, defying the Labour Party executive. Mass pressure forced his release just before Christmas 1918.

The German revolution ended the war at and Britain saw an explosion of strikes and mass mutinies in the army, navy and police. The ruling class was terrified and in 1919, Britain, like most of Europe was on the brink of revolution. The two key battles were the forty hours strike in engineering for a shorter working week to absorb the unemployed and a threatened all out strike by one million miners for a wage rise, a reduction in hours and workers' control of the industry.

McLean argued to link these battles into an all-out attack on the ruling class but the impatient local leadership in Glasgow decided to go ahead on their own. The 40 hours strike was a strike from below. The leaders of the Engineering union, the Scottish TUC and the TUC, opposed it at first.

Yet their attempts to prevent it failed and they had to go along with it in order to regain control. Within days mass pickets brought the whole Clyde Valley to a standstill.

Local strike committees met daily and it soon spread to the coalfields, the North of England, London and Belfast. The strike in Belfast was even more solid than Glasgow. The flashpoint came on Friday 31 January when 40,000 workers and unemployed marched on Glasgow's George Sq. *Bloody Friday*, as it became known, was the key moment for the developing revolutionary movement in Britain. Under Winston Churchill's pre-arranged orders the police baton charged the demonstration but the strikers fought back and routed their attackers.

That night the key leaders were arrested. Trainloads of troops & tanks held on standby, flooded into Glasgow from England because the government could not depend on the local troops. The strike committees in Glasgow, London & Belfast were suspended by the union leaders, who then announced the end of the strike via the press. Strike pay was withheld & the mass picketing called off. The strike petered out with Glasgow like an armed camp. MacLean pointed out; 'The strike was defeated more by lack of working class preparation than by tanks & machine guns'.

In his book, *Revolt on the Clyde*, strike leader Willie Gallagher claimed; 'We were leading a strike when we should have been leading a revolution. A rising was expected - a rising should have taken place'¹⁵.

Gallagher was wrong; it was not a revolution. But had the local leaders led the strike as revolutionaries and not simply as trade union militants they could have won a decisive battle and raised the stakes against a worried ruling class.

If the strike committees had maintained the mass pickets when the army appeared; if they had marched to the barracks to fraternise with the local troops; if they had sent delegations out into the coalfields, to Belfast and into England to link up with the other engineering centres - then they could have

¹⁵Willie Gallagher, p234.

turned over a frightened ruling class.

Three months later on May Day, 150,000 marched through Glasgow with the Irish anthem, 'The Soldier's Song', being sung along with 'The Red Flag' and that evening McLean shared a platform with John Wheatley and the Irish Republican, Constance Markievicz.

In 1919 most of Europe, Ireland and large parts of the British Empire were in revolt. Victory in the 40 hours strike would have opened up a political crisis. Britain was facing a strike wave, there were mutinies in the army and the British state faced a liberation struggle in Ireland. The troops it could still rely on were spread out across the globe - occupying Germany, Turkey, Iraq and Palestine.

At the time the Italian revolutionary Gramsci, put it like this;

We say that the present period is revolutionary because we can see that the working class in all countries is tending to generate from within its own ranks and with the utmost energy, proletarian institutions of a new type -representative in basis and industrial in arena. We say the present period is revolutionary because the working class tends with all its energy and all its willpower to found its own state.¹⁶

There is no doubt the Clyde was part of what Gramsci described. But the missing link was independent, revolutionary organisation. When the CPGB was belatedly launched in late 1920, the tide had turned. 1919 was a missed opportunity. The Trade Union leaders got the British ruling class off the hook and by 1920 the boot was on the other foot. The post war boom collapsed, unemployment rocketed and the ruling class launched a vicious counter offensive that broke the back of what had been a powerful movement.

McLean became increasingly pre-occupied with the struggle in Ireland. De-

spite his political differences, he made it clear that he supported the Irish Republicans in their fight against the British; 'The Irish Sinn Feiners, who make no profession of socialism or communism and who are at best non-socialists, are doing more to help Russia and the revolution than all we professed Marxian Bolsheviks in Britain'.¹⁷

Later in 1920, after a visit to Dublin where he spoke at a big public meeting, he launched a 'Hands Off Ireland' Campaign and wrote the pamphlet, *Ireland's Tragedy, Scotland's Disgrace*. It sold over 20,000 copies in a few months.

The failure of the revolutionary movement in 1919, the successful ruling class counter - offensive and his own isolation led him to call for a Scottish workers Republic. He saw how the fight for independence in Ireland had spread to the British Empire and believed a similar fight in Glasgow would tear it apart.

Maclean's position was light years away from Nationalism. He was for a Glasgow Soviet - a workers council, not a bourgeois parliament in Edinburgh. He knew the working class would have to smash the British state and by 1917 saw himself as a Bolshevik. Lenin had wanted him to lead the newly formed Communist Party but in the negotiations Maclean was sidelined then refused to join because of his political differences with those who came to lead it.

Maclean died of pneumonia in 1923 when he was only 44. His death was the result of poverty, physical exhaustion and the hunger strikes he'd endured in prison. He remained a revolutionary until the end but sadly for the last 2 years of his life he was operating more and more as an individual. Like his great contemporary, James Connolly, he left nothing behind in the way of solid political organisation. His Scottish Workers' Republican Party, founded in the last year of his life, numbered its membership in dozens and its electoral support in mere hundreds.

None of this diminishes his great significance for us today. At the same time as Lenin, he broke with the rotten politics of the Second International and did so with-

¹⁶James Hinton, p17.

¹⁷John Maclean

out ever falling into the trap of syndicalism. A consistent anti imperialist, he argued the war was an imperialist war.

The beneficiaries of the defeat of Red Clyde were the Labour Party. By the time the war ended in November 1918 the ILP, which was the Labour Party in Scotland, had seen its membership triple compared with 1914. It had grown to 9,000 members, a third of the total British membership. Elsewhere in Britain Labour Party membership had fallen. In 1920 Labour took a third of the seats in Glasgow's municipal election. At the Scottish conference of the ILP in 1920, the 'illegal' Irish Republic was recognised.

The real breakthrough came in the 1922 Westminster election when Labour increased its vote to 32 percent and twenty -nine seats on Clydeside - half in Glasgow, half in the surrounding area. The Irish vote had swung behind Labour as Lloyd George's policy of repression in Ireland had broken the back of its traditional support for the Liberals. The breakthrough was made in nearly all the industrial areas, which had working class communities of Irish descent.

Events in Ireland were having a big impact on Clydeside. By September 1920 the Procurator Fiscal reported that the IRA had 3,000 volunteers in the City and by 1922 the number of Sinn Fein clubs had risen to 88. A high point for Scottish Republicans was the visit in 1920 of the Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, an outspoken critic of British policy in Ireland.

His planned meeting in Glasgow was banned but in defiance of the state authorities the Archbishop addressed a rally of over 50,000 in Coatbridge, just a few miles outside the city. Mannix told the crowd; 'the British government prevented me from going to Glasgow; obviously it was unable to

prevent Glasgow coming to me'¹⁸ The IRA was of real significance, with almost every town in Scotland home to an IRA battalion when the guerilla war was at its height.

In July 1921 the Lloyd George government agreed a truce with the leadership of Sinn Fein and the IRA. In December a treaty was agreed between the two sides in London. The exclusion of six Ulster counties from the new Irish Free State provoked a split in the Republican movement, which led to civil war that lasted for a year. A majority of the Republicans in Scotland opposed the treaty and Glasgow became the centre for arms supply to the anti -treaty IRA and their propaganda centre after they were forced out of Dublin.

At the time there were a number of young Irish revolutionary socialists, followers of James Connolly, who came on speaking tours to Glasgow.

The eventual defeat of the anti-treaty forces in 1923 led to the virtual end of IRA activity in Scotland. In the aftermath the Irish vote transferred to Labour.

Eamonn De Valera later revealed; 'The financial contribution to the Irish struggle from the Scottish communities was in excess of funds from any other country, including Ireland'¹⁹.

This great period of working class struggle produced in James Connolly and John McLean, arguably the two finest revolutionaries of the British and Irish labour movements. The fact that both of them had to act and survive without a revolutionary organisation and were sent to an early grave, meant they were unable to leave much behind in the way of solid political organisation. What they did leave us is a great legacy of anti-imperialism that is as relevant today as it was then.

¹⁸Niall Brennan, *Dr. Mannix*, (Angus & Robertson, London, 1965), p 200.

¹⁹Quoted by Stephen McGinty, 'Scottish Support for Irish Independence in the 1920s' *The Scotsman*, 29th June 2014.