

INDEPENDENT LABOUR PARTY REBELS ON RED CLYDESIDE

Spotlight on Helen Crawford & James Maxton

In 1910, Keir Hardie, Scottish leader of the Independent Labour Party (established in 1893) urged a general strike, and especially strikes in the arms and transport industries, should war be declared.¹

Outbreak of War

When war broke out the Independent Labour Party (ILP) refused to vote in favour of war credits, unlike many of their Parliamentary Labour counterparts.² Some of the leading campaigners against arms trade profiteering, such as Helen Crawford, James Maxton and Philip Snowden, were ILP members. In the second week of war, the ILP published a long resolution unequivocally condemning the belligerent government. It expressed friendship and compassion to workers of all nations: 'GERMAN WORKERS OUR COMRADES.' Yet there was no call for protest strikes in the early days of war, despite Hardie's 1910 resolution.³

Of all the parties represented in Parliament, the ILP took the most anti-militarist stance, yet even it was ambivalent at times. The ILP's news organ *Forward*, printed much opposition material under the heading 'Socialist War Points', but it also ran a regular pro-war column by a Clydebanks doctor calling himself 'Rob Roy.' With few exceptions, the focus was mostly on capitalist profiteering rather than opposition to the killing industry as such. An example is an article in *Forward* accusing the government of deliberately starving the state-owned Woolwich Arsenal of work while giving contracts to private firms at higher cost: 'Great Government Arsenal at Woolwich on Short Time. Profit Plums must be kept for Armament Ring. Capitalist Greed a National Danger.'⁴ (Workers fought to save jobs in the state sector at Woolwich and Queensferry after the war.)

The ILP's strongholds were Scotland, which tripled its membership during the war, and the North of England. There were tensions between the Party north and south of the river Tweed. Fenner Brockway, the editor of the second ILP newspaper, *Labour Leader*, visited Scotland and summed up the differences thus: 'They were speaking a different language from the English ILP-ers. **Whilst we were exposing the duplicity of the foreign policy, which had led to the war and advocating a peace of no conquests and no indemnities, they were denouncing rent increases and profiteering and the speed-up and long hours of the munition workers. We concentrated on peace. They concentrated on the class struggle.**'⁵ In fact, Scottish activists such as Helen Crawford and James Maxton were fighting for *both* peace and class equality.

Red Clydeside

Glasgow's Govan district became one of the most important munitions centres in the UK. It was a crucible of anti-war and anti-arms trade agitation for much of the war: true to its sobriquet 'Red Clydeside.' A huge protest on the 15th August 1914 uniting the *Independent Labour Party*, the *British Socialist Party*, and the *Peace Society*, made direct links between the struggles for workers' rights and limiting the profits of the arms traders.⁶

In February 1915, thousands of workmen organised by the Clyde Workers' Committee downed tools, blocking production of armaments. (Many of these skilled engineers were disgruntled at the erosion of craft privileges rather than anti-militarist revolutionaries.⁷) Though often obscured in histories of Clyde workers, women (dubbed 'munitionettes') were active; agitating over low wages or unfair dismissal and collaborating with male shop stewards such as David Kirkwood. 'Issues such as leaving certificates, food queues, and profiteering incensed many workmen to a greater degree than the presence of women in their workshops.'⁸ The ILP newspaper *Forward* pushed critique beyond shop floor concerns to civil liberties and social justice. The offices were raided for reporting 'wild scenes' of munitions workers' heckling Lloyd George in December 1915,⁹ rather than the official propaganda line.¹⁰

Helen Crawford - Rent Strikes and Peace Crusade

Industrial unrest in munitions industries, anti-war and social justice campaigns were deeply entwined, as the activism of Helen Crawford (1877-1954) attests. Daughter of a deeply religious Tory master baker,¹¹ Crawford

was an unlikely revolutionary. She first rebelled against Church theology, which she felt diminished women. She then earned her stripes in the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) between 1910 and 1914, with four spells of imprisonment and three hunger strikes. Emmeline Pankhurst's volte-face concerning the Liberal government spurred her to join the Independent Labour Party.¹² Her shift from militant suffragette to socialist in 1914 was in part inspired by the plays of Ibsen, Shaw, Galsworthy and Gorky and by her friendship with a radical bookshop proprietor. Out in the streets, infant mortality and sheer deprivation pressed on her conscience. In spite of the loss of both her husband and her mother in 1914, Helen Crawford's energies never dimmed during the war years.¹³

Crawford, who used to defend Emmeline Pankhurst from chauvinist assailants, rebuked her. **'Has [Emmeline's] voice ever been raised since this war started on behalf of the workers of this country against the profiteers and exploiters who have taken advantage of the great crisis to rob and plunder people.'**¹⁴ The profiteering issue created divisions within the suffrage movement nationally, but strengthened bonds between the suffragettes and socialists in Glasgow. (The Glasgow WSPU published 'Our Suffrage Columns' in the ILP newspaper *Forward*).¹⁵

Helen Crawford, along with friends Agnes Dollan and Mary Barbour, made connections between the profiteering of arms manufacturers and landlords.¹⁶ Migrations to Glasgow's burgeoning munitions industry led to acute shortages of (often dilapidated) tenements in Govan, Patrick, Shettleston, Ibrox and Parkhead.¹⁷ In 1915, landlords raised rents and took advantage of laws allowing eviction of tenants in arrears. At a time of soaring living costs, Glasgow brought the issue of fair rents into the national spotlight. Crawford, Dollan and Barbour organised tenants defence associations, who pelted bailiffs with flour missiles and refused collectively to pay rent. Workers in factories and shipyards formed emergency committees to support the campaign, and threatened a wave of sympathy strikes in opposition to the imposition of higher rent.¹⁸ Finally, 20,000 people demonstrated, forcing the government to pass the Rent Restriction Act, which froze rents for the duration of the war.

Keen to involve women in the fight against the war, Crawford and Dollan organised large and regular meetings on Glasgow Green (which brought her into contact with revolutionary **John Maclean**). In 1915, they founded the Glasgow branch of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, but Crawford was vexed by what she saw as **WILPF's** bourgeois liberalism and gentile lobbying strategies.¹⁹ In an attempt to lure more working-class women, Crawford Barbour and around 200 women activists organised a peace conference on 10th June 1916. This gave birth to the Glasgow Women's Peace Crusade, which spread like wildfire across other ILP strongholds and launched as an informal nationwide group in June 1917 with Helen Crawford as its Honorary Secretary.²⁰ On 13th December 1917, women assembled peacefully in George Square. When the Patriot League tried to douse their leaflets and tear their banners, the Women's Peace Crusade defended themselves by brandishing their umbrellas. In the heat of 'the Brolly Battle,' Crawford and Dollan snuck into the City Chambers and showered the City Corporation delegates with leaflets.²¹ By the desperate winter of 1918, Crawford and Dollan were agitating outside shipyards and scuffling in the Council chamber.²²

The increase in female ILP members is testament to the inclusive measures of the *Women's Peace Crusade* leaders, tried and tested during the rent strikes, when Crawford, Barbour and Dollan held 'we are not removing' meetings in the back court of tenements so women could hear them from their windows while doing their chores. Similar strategies helped mobilise working class women into the Peace Crusade,²³ with 'women-only' gatherings at 3pm and street corner meetings for convenience.²⁴

By the end of the First World War, Crawford was a national political figure within the ILP. But, by 1920 she had taken a sharp left turn away from reformist socialism and joined the fledgling Communist Party of Great Britain.

James Maxton & The Deportations

In the ten years since joining the ILP in 1904, James Maxton became a leading figure in the Scottish labour movement. Maxton (1885 -1946) was an outstanding orator, later to become the most charismatic leader, after Kier Hardie himself, of the national ILP.²⁵ He was closely associated with the leading members of the Clyde Workers' Committee, many of whom were members of the ILP. He addressed meetings at Montrose, Forfar, Brechin, Arbroath, Carnoustie, Manchester, Edinburgh and Glasgow.²⁶ At a war workers conference in February 1915, sponsored by Scottish miners, he condemned the Labour Party for supporting a war that had given 'the speculators a unique opportunity of plundering the workers.'²⁷

When conscription was introduced, Maxton (a teacher by trade) applied for exemption as a conscientious

objector, and faced a tribunal at Barrhead in March 1916.²⁸ Before a formal verdict was confirmed, a new development diverted his course. The Clyde Workers' Committee had organised a number of strikes in support of their claim for increased wages and other issues. On 25th March, the government reacted by using the Munitions Act to arrest and deport a number of Committee members, including David Kirkwood, who was sent to Edinburgh where he remained for fourteen months. The day after the deportations, a great protest demonstration assembled at Glasgow Green, addressed by Maxton, James MacDougall and anarchist Jack Smith, who all called for strike action against the arrests and deportations. Maxton cried,

'It is now for the workers to take action and that action is to strike and down tools at once. Not a rivet should be struck on the Clyde until the deported engineers are restored to their families. In case there are any plainclothes detectives in the audience I shall repeat that statement for their benefit. The men should strike and down tools.'²⁹

There were indeed police in the audience, and on 29th March Maxton was arrested and charged with attempting 'to impede, delay and restrict the production of munitions or war material, contrary to the Defence of the Realm Consolidation Act 1914.'³⁰ He was refused bail and committed for trial in the High Court of Justiciary at Edinburgh on 11th May, together with James MacDougall. Maxton had originally pleaded not guilty, and it had been expected that he would make a great speech attacking capitalism and its product, war. In the event, the accused pleaded guilty. Apart from the prospect of shorter sentences, it is not clear what motivated this reversal. Their defence lawyer, Rosslyn Mitchell, pleaded for leniency: 'these men are men of unimpeachable character... They are both prepared, should the court think it sufficient, to be bound over to refrain from taking part in any political activity during the period of the war.'³¹ They were sentenced to one year's imprisonment, to run from the date of their arrest. By contrast, Maxton's revolutionary friend **John MacLean**, who had earlier been charged with sedition, remained defiant to the end and received a three-year sentence.³²

Maxton's fiancé Sissie McCallum corresponded with him regularly; 'the brightest spot' in each imprisoned morning. On 4th April 1916 he wrote, **'My dearest Sis, ... I'm growing a beard. It doesn't make me look like Ecce Homo, more like Mephisto. I don't know how long I'm going to be here - I suppose I deserve about 20 years for talking about 'Peace on Earth and Goodwill among men' - but don't you worry.'**³³

When they were released on 3rd February 1917, Maxton and other ex-prisoners had a period of convalescence at the Moffat Hydropathic, where they enjoyed Turkish baths and other luxuries never before experienced.³⁴ The Military Service Tribunal granted him an exemption from active service as long as he undertook work at home of national importance. He refused to do any work to aid the war effort, and became unemployed for a time. In July 1917 he obtained work in a shipyard that was not engaged in war work, and did a number of manual jobs. He was thus able to participate in the manual workers' struggles as one of themselves.³⁵

In January 1918, the desperate government raised the age of conscription to 50, via the Manpower Bill, dubbed the Manslaughter Bill by Maxton.³⁶ A government Minister, Sir Auckland Geddes, was sent to Clydeside to persuade the workers to support the Bill. A mass meeting on 28th January, after first shouting Geddes down and then giving him a hearing, resolved that Clydeside would do nothing to support continuation of war and do everything to end it.³⁷ Maxton had seconded the motion. The shop stewards' committee had envisaged a national strike against the war, but that was still a step too far. They recognised this and concentrated on preparing for peace.

On May Day 1918 there was a mass strike and demonstration in George Square, one of the biggest ever, with an attendance of between 70,000 and 110,000. Maxton addressed the rally and declared: 'the workers of all lands want to live in peace, peace and brotherhood. The people of Glasgow want peace; they have demonstrated their desire today in a manner that will shake the war-makers. Peace, yes, peace is our insistent cry, the people want peace and the world wants Socialism.'³⁸

Researchers: Frank Jackson and Pauline Donald

¹ Ralph Miliband, *Parliamentary Socialism: A Study in the Politics of Labour* (London: Merlin Press, 1973), 39–40.

-
- ² Adrian Gregory, *A War of Peoples* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 24.
- ³ John McNair, *James Maxton - the Beloved Rebel* (George Allen and Unwin, 1955), 46–7.
- ⁴ *Forward*, May 19, 1915, 5.
- ⁵ Fenner Brockway, *Inside the Left. Thirty Years of Platform, Press, Prison and Parliament*. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1942), 53.
- ⁶ ‘Glasgow’s Peace Demonstration Boycotted by the Press,’ *Forward*, May 19, 1915, 5, Glasgow Digital Library, <http://sites.scran.ac.uk/redclyde/redclyde/rc187.htm>.
- ⁷ See James Hinton, *The First Shop Stewards’ Movement* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1977) for an account emphasising the revolutionary potential of Red Clydeside and Iain McLean, *The Legend of Red Clydeside* (Edinburgh: [Chester Springs, PA: J. Donald ; Dufour Editions, U.S. distributor], 1999) for an interpretation that privileges craft conservatism.
- ⁸ Myra Baillie, ‘The Women of Red Clydeside: Women Munitions Workers in the West of Scotland during the First World War’ (McMaster University, 2002), 170, Open Access Dissertations and Theses. Paper 1504., <http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/opendissertations/1504>.
- ⁹ ‘The Dilution of Labour - Mr. Lloyd George in Glasgow,’ *Forward*, January 1, 1916.
- ¹⁰ Baillie, ‘The Women of Red Clydeside: Women Munitions Workers in the West of Scotland during the First World War,’ 9.
- ¹¹ Michael Byers, ‘Helen Crawford (1877-1954),’ *Glasgow Digital Library: Red Clydeside*, May 15, 2014, <http://gdl.cdlr.strath.ac.uk/redclyde/redclydebyeocra.htm>.
- ¹² Jill Liddington, *The Road to Greenham Common: Feminism and Anti-Militarism in Britain since 1820* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 1991), 113.
- ¹³ John Simkin, “Helen Crawford,” *Spartacus International*, accessed May 3, 2014, <http://spartacus-educational.com/CRIcrawfordH.htm>.
- ¹⁴ J. J. Smyth, *Labour in Glasgow, 1896-1936: Socialism, Suffrage, Sectarianism*, Scottish Historical Review Monographs Series, no. 11 (East Linton, East Lothian, Scotland: Tuckwell Press, 2000), 181.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 163–181.
- ¹⁶ John Simkin, ‘Helen Crawford,’ *Spartacus International*, accessed May 3, 2014, <http://spartacus-educational.com/CRIcrawfordH.htm>.
- ¹⁷ “The Rent Strike 1915 and ‘Mrs Barbour’s Army,’” accessed June 1, 2014, <http://remembermarybarbour.wordpress.com/mary-barbour-rent-strike-1915/>.
- ¹⁸ Byers, “Helen Crawford (1877-1954).”
- ¹⁹ Liddington, *The Road to Greenham Common*, 115.
- ²⁰ Byers, “Helen Crawford (1877-1954).”
- ²¹ *Peace and Justice News*, November 2013, 12, <http://peaceandjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Remembrance-and-War-November-13.pdf>.
- ²² Liddington, *The Road to Greenham Common*, 128.
- ²³ James J. Smyth, ‘Rents, Peace, Votes: Working-Class Women and Political Activity in the First World War,’ in *Out of Bounds: Women in Scottish Society 1800-1945*, ed. Esther Breitenbach and Eleanor Gordon, Edinburgh Education and Society Series (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992), 174–96.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*
- ²⁵ McNair, *James Maxton - the Beloved Rebel*, 46–7.
- ²⁶ Mathew Brown, “ILP @120: James Maxton – Glasgow’s Red Rebel,” *Independent Labour Party Publications*, September 26, 2013, <http://www.independentlabour.org.uk/main/2013/09/26/ilp120-james-maxton---glasgow's-red-rebel/>.
- ²⁷ William Knox, *James Maxton* (Manchester University Press, 1987) 17-19
- ²⁸ Brown, 63-65
- ²⁹ Gordon Brown, *Maxton* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 2002), 65.
- ³⁰ R. Shiels, “The Prosecution of James Maxton,” *The Scottish Law Gazette* 73, no. 3 (2005): 92.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*, 94.
- ³² William Knox, *Scottish Labour Leaders 1918-39: A Biographical Dictionary* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1984), 190–191.
- ³³ R. Shiels, “The Prosecution of James Maxton,” *The Scottish Law Gazette* 73, no. 3 (2005): 92.
- ³⁴ Brown, *Maxton*, 75–7.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 80.
- ³⁶ Knox, *Scottish Labour Leaders 1918-39*, 27.
- ³⁷ Brown, *Maxton*, 83.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*