

## THE PEACE ARSENAL?

### The Post War Campaign for Peace Time Jobs at the Woolwich Arsenal.

Huge numbers worked at the Royal Arsenal in Woolwich during the war; 63,940 were employed just before the Armistice, of which 24,360 or 38 percent were women.<sup>1</sup> Unsurprisingly, after the war the workers at the Arsenal wanted to save their jobs, and a “Peace Arsenal” campaign calling to keep the works open began.

### Clash of Interests

Once the war ended, and the demand for munitions decreased, many workers lost their jobs, especially if they were women. By October 1919, only 19,729 workers remained.<sup>2</sup>

They were concerned about the lack of employment options in the area. Many had bought their own houses and so were unable to move to another area for work.<sup>3</sup> It was argued that “unemployment, and the repair of the infrastructure should be a national responsibility.”<sup>4</sup>

The workers argued that that it made economic sense to keep a skilled workforce and machinery at the Arsenal, rather than both being spread out across the country.<sup>5</sup> They argued that the Arsenal could do work that private companies could not.<sup>6</sup>

While the campaign primarily focused on jobs and economic arguments, it did touch on broader issues of militarism and foreign policy. It raised the possibility that private companies would promote war in order to further their financial interests. In 1919, the *Woolwich Pioneer*, the newspaper of the Woolwich Labour Party, told the tale of H H Mulliner and the war scare he created to sell the government arms.

“He was the managing director of Coventry Ordnance Company and in 1909 he convinced the Cabinet that Krupps was building ships in order to enlarge the German navy and that therefore Britain ought to build more Dreadnoughts.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> “Consideration of Future of National Factories: Costs, Alternative Uses, Labour Position, Capacity for Remobilisation, Etc.,” February 11, 1919, MUN 4/6738, Records of the Ministry of Munitions and successors, including papers of David Lloyd George, National Archives.

<sup>2</sup> “Appendix to Memorandum by Minister of Munitions (Inverforth).,” December 30, 1919, MUN 4/3489, Woolwich Advisory Committee papers: future of Royal Arsenal, organisation, employment. National Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Weinbren, Daniel John. “‘From gun carriage to railway carriage’: the fight for peace work at the Woolwich Arsenal 1919-22” *Labour History Review* 63:3 (Winter 1998), 292; Weinbren, Daniel John. “The ‘Peace Arsenal’ scheme: the campaign for non-munitions work at the Royal Ordnance Factories, Woolwich, after the First World War.” PhD diss., Thames Polytechnic, 1990,241.

<sup>4</sup> Weinbren, Daniel John. “The ‘Peace Arsenal’ scheme: the campaign for non-munitions work at the Royal Ordnance Factories, Woolwich, after the First World War.” PhD diss., Thames Polytechnic, 1990, 37-8.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid

<sup>6</sup>Ibid

<sup>7</sup>Ibid, 108.

The same newspaper also called private manufacture of munitions “the root of militarism”.<sup>8</sup>

Support for the nationalisation of the arms industry grew to great heights during the inter-war period. For example Gilbert Slater wrote a pamphlet in which he argued that the experience of the war showed that national production of war material was the most efficient.<sup>9</sup> More importantly than this, he argues, the private manufacture of arms makes war more likely:

“To a private firm the actual manufacture is only one of its functions, its other obligations being to *find a market*, and push the sale of its goods”.<sup>10</sup>

The campaign also made a link between foreign policy decisions and unemployment. They believed that the sanctions against sending arms to Russia and Poland meant that the Arsenal missed out on much-needed orders for munitions. The campaign not only criticised these decisions because they impacted upon employment, but also commented on the policies in themselves. Haden Guest, a Labour county councillor in Woolwich, stated that, “we ought not to be fighting Russia: we ought to be helping, sending machinery and things which could be made at Woolwich Arsenal”.<sup>11</sup>

## The Campaign

Workers, including shop stewards, pushed for alternative work to be found for the Arsenal. A deputation on alternative work met with the Prime Minister and outlined what they wanted. They said:

- That the Woolwich Arsenal should be maintained, during peace-time, as an armaments factory.
- That it should be maintained at a size that would make rapid expansion in time of war possible, and that in order to do this civil work would need to be found for the Arsenal.
- That the Arsenal should not compete with the private sector, only producing directly for the State.<sup>12</sup>

The workers organised a number of marches. Munitions workers marched just before the 1918 election and were spoken to by shop stewards from the Arsenal.<sup>13</sup>

Local politics in Woolwich was not characterised by class antagonism. The Labour Party held power in the area and built coalitions with other groups. The skilled minority of male engineering workers at the Arsenal shared the interests of the local Labour Party and aimed for social peace and unity. They tended to choose more conventional campaigning tactics than the direct action

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid, 108-9.

<sup>9</sup> Slater, Gilbert. *War or Peace? The National Control of Armaments*. T. U. Fed., 3 New Road, Woolwich: Pioneer Press, 1922. JX1974 in TUC archives, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Slater, Gilbert. *War or Peace? The National Control of Armaments*. T. U. Fed., 3 New Road, Woolwich: Pioneer Press, 1922. JX1974 in TUC archives, 34 – 5.

<sup>11</sup>Weinbren, “The 'Peace Arsenal'”, 45.

<sup>12</sup> “Appendix to Memorandum by Minister of Munitions (Inverforth).”

<sup>13</sup>Weinbren, “The 'Peace Arsenal'”, 53.

found in places like Glasgow, where arguably the workers had less opportunity for electoral power.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Private Sector Fights Back**

Private arms companies were threatened by the idea that the Arsenal could continue operating in peace time as a state-managed locomotive manufacturer as the very existence of state-run industry threatened their profits.<sup>15</sup> As Gilbert Slater wrote in 1922:

“Woolwich Arsenal saved the country enormous sums by checking the prices demanded by the Armament Ring and other private manufacturers”.<sup>16</sup>

The private sector fought back against proposals for state owned production:

“Deputations from private companies and manufacturers' associations told the Ministry that state production was unfair competition, was injurious to national interests and was a repudiation of the decision not to allow the state to compete with the private sector.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Government response**

There was a mixed response from the government to the Arsenal workers' demands. Their calls for alternative work were taken seriously by the government, as they were afraid of industrial unrest, and wanted to be ready to produce arms for future emergencies. They therefore set out to provide the Arsenal with “alternative work on a considerable scale in order to maintain efficiently an establishment capable of immediate adaptation for future emergencies”.<sup>18</sup>

A range of options were looked into by the government and lists were prepared of work that might be given to the Arsenal.<sup>19</sup> A resolution passed by the Woolwich Advisory Committee on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1920 stated that “all suitable orders for Government Service requirements should in the first instance be scrutinised with a view to determining what could be economically manufactured at Woolwich and other permanent Government factories”.<sup>20</sup>

The Committee became frustrated as government inaction and failure to provide work for the Arsenal became clear. MP William Adamson even threatened to resign from the Committee if nothing more was done for Woolwich.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>14</sup>Weinbren, “Gun carriage to railway carriage”, 287, 292.

<sup>15</sup>Weinbren, “Gun carriage to railway carriage”, 288-9.

<sup>16</sup>Slater, *War or Peace?*, 27.

<sup>17</sup>Weinbren, “Gun carriage to railway carriage”, 290.

<sup>18</sup>“Appendix to Memorandum by Minister of Munitions (Inverforth).”

<sup>19</sup>“List of Commodities Required by the Government Which Are Capable of Being Manufactured in National Factories, Memorandum from the Minister of Munitions.,” February 22, 1919, Records of the Ministry of Munitions and successors, including papers of David Lloyd George, National Archives.

<sup>20</sup>“Resolution Passed by Woolwich Advisory Committee Meeting,” January 8, 1920, Records of the Ministry of Munitions and successors, including papers of David Lloyd George, National Archives.

<sup>21</sup>“Letter Dated 8th January 1920, Addressed to ‘Secretary,’” n.d., Records of the Ministry of Munitions and successors, including papers of David Lloyd George, National Archives.

That said, some alternative work was found and the Arsenal did make products for the Post Office, the Indian Postal Service, Trinity House, the Anatolian railways, the Board of Trade and the Ministry of Food.<sup>22</sup>

## Conclusions

Ultimately, there were massive job losses at Woolwich, and the women were the first to go. Within the first year of peace 48 percent of men had lost their jobs and 90 percent of women. By 1923 the Arsenal had only 6,000 workers left. This was still better than the other state owned factories, most of which had been sold off, as for example was Queensferry explosives factory in North Wales.<sup>23</sup>

The government did not want the provision of work for the Arsenal to compete with the private sector, which made it difficult to find work for them to do.<sup>24</sup> This combined with pressure from the arms industry may have prevented the government from prioritising work for the national factories.

Workers had initially used arguments about efficiency to save jobs at the Arsenal. However, as the political climate changed and the practicality of manufacturing locomotives for the railways at the Arsenal started to look less clear, arguments of efficiency started to be used *against* them.<sup>25</sup>

Historian Dan Weinbren thinks that perhaps the conventional tactics, and conservatism of the campaign was its downfall:

“[The Peace Arsenal] campaign was based on the desire for regular employment at the Arsenal, supported by a temporary enthusiasm for wartime collectivism and by a widespread opposition to profiteering. It sought to use conventional channels in order to convince Parliament that alternative work would aid economic and social stability. Once the threat to profits was greater than that of social instability there was, within the logic of the campaign, no justification for diversification.”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Weinbren, “The 'Peace Arsenal'”, 42.

<sup>23</sup> Weinbren, “Gun carriage to railway carriage”, 282 - 285.

<sup>24</sup> “List of Commodities Required by the Government Which Are Capable of Being Manufactured in National Factories, Memorandum from the Minister of Munitions.”

<sup>25</sup> Weinbren, “Gun carriage to railway carriage”, 291.

<sup>26</sup> Weinbren, “Gun carriage to railway carriage”, 292. (No secondary)