

The Press, Propaganda and War Resisters in Scotland at the time of the Great War -

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From the commencement of hostilities on 4 August 1914, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in Scotland dismissed the claim that Britain's war was a 'just cause' and they consistently held to that political line from 1914 through to armistice on 11 November 1918. In the Scottish ILP propaganda organ *Forward* it was reported that the war was being fought to satisfy the lust for industrial profit on the one hand and the desire to promote the rise of the British Military state on the other: 'The Alliance between "Holy Russia", Cut Throat Serbia, Protestant Britain, "Heathen Japan", and "Catholic" France', was evidence enough, it was argued, to demonstrate the 'duplicitous and self-serving actions of British diplomacy' in the run-up to the crisis.

As war hysteria quickly reached fever pitch the British government was urged to take every necessary action to ensure a British victory and rapidly took control of the railways and docks, impounded enemy ships, interned aliens and mobilised the British Territorial Army. Against this background, many in the ILP feared the inevitable growth in state power the longer the war continued as political propaganda and social and economic coercion followed in the wake of the government's war recruitment campaign. This was also accompanied by the demand to introduce conscription. It was on this last issue that the ILP were to remain resolute, for if compulsory military service were introduced it would lead inexorably to the militarisation of civil and industrial society. And should the state procure such powers, they argued, the result would be 'the negation of all law', the denial of the right of conscience and the curtailment of the individual freedoms.

The No-Conscription Fellowship (NCF), formed in November 1914, was also prominent in the Scottish anti-war campaign and bore the brunt of the struggle against

conscription. After conscription was introduced in January 1916 the NCF members became Conscientious Objectors (COs); three-quarter of that number were political objectors who 'owed their primary allegiance to the ILP'. In the long-term the NCF was to win the argument against British militarism for International Socialism clearly failed on the outbreak of war, and it was 'Scottish war resisters' who were to provide 'a stirring tradition for the second and third generations of Socialists to follow'.

The Military Service Acts of January and May 1916, provided for the full exemption of COs on moral, religious and political grounds, but many still found themselves in prison over the exercise of conscience. Indeed, five months after the war had ended *Forward* was campaigning for the release of the COs who were still in prison. It seemed certain that the ILP would suffer in taking an anti-war position but by the armistice the number of Scottish ILP branches had more than doubled and membership was three-times its pre-war level. In contrast, elsewhere in Britain the ILP never fully recovered from the loss of members and the collapse of branches sustained during the war years.

Why were the ILP in Scotland so successful and what part did the NCF play in this political phenomenon? This paper examines in detail the role of war resisters and the attitude of the press and the public toward the anti-militarist ILP in Scotland. Despite the clamour for war, and vitriolic attacks on the ILP and its membership by the press and public, the party held true to its anti-militarist line and through the columns of the *Forward* gave the people of Scotland the opportunity to consider a critique of the war at a time when few dissenting voices were heard.