

HOMEWORK HELPSHEET / REVISION FILE

BACKGROUND

At the start of the twentieth century the Scottish economy was thriving and the traditional heavy industries were making healthy profits. Scotland was a rich country but the wealth was not fairly distributed. The living and working conditions in Scotland's industrial areas were among the worst in Europe. Many families still lived in overcrowded slums and struggled to get by on very low wages. In the years before the Great War trade unionism and socialism became deep rooted in Scotland. Ordinary working people recognized that the only way to improve their lives was by collective action and solidarity. By 1914 Socialist political parties such as the Labour Party, the Independent Labour Party (ILP) and the more extreme British Socialist Party were well organised and had gained a lot of support in Scotland. Trade Union membership had also increased and there were frequent strikes. When war broke out the problems which faced working people became worse and this led to strikes, protest action and political opposition to the government and to the war itself.

RENT STRIKES

- By 1915 there was a housing shortage in Glasgow as thousands of workers came to work in the war industries. Landlords tried to increase rents and threatened evictions. The Glasgow Women's Housing Association was formed to resist evictions and organize rent strikes.
- Mobs of women blocked closes to prevent evictions. Sherriff's Officers and police were often assaulted. John Wheatley and the Independent Labour Party supported the rent strikes. People thought it unfair and unpatriotic for landlords to profit from the war. The government was forced to intervene and imposed a freeze on rents until the war ended.

INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES

- In 1915 skilled engineers Weir's Engineering went on strike for an extra 2 pennies an hour. The strike spread and soon 40,000 engineers were on strike. William Weir the Managing Director called them unpatriotic. Eventually the workers won a pay rise of one penny.
- The Unions were also angry because unskilled workers were employed to do skilled work. The government made a law which said skilled workers could not change jobs without an employer's permission and had to do compulsory overtime.
- The Clyde Workers Committee led by Davie Kirkwood and Willie Gallagher was set up to oppose these regulations. They accused employers of taking advantage of the war to increase profits. The government ordered Gallagher, Kirkwood and other leaders to be arrested and exiled to Edinburgh under police supervision.

OPPOSITION TO THE WAR

- Many people were opposed to the war and organised opposition. Helen Crawford led the women's Peace Crusade which had branches all over Scotland and held an anti war protest in Glasgow attended by 14,000 people. Chrystal MacMillan of Edinburgh set up the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom.
- Most Trade Union Leaders and the Independent Labour Party opposed the war and conscription. Davie Kirkwood, Willie Gallagher, John Wheatly, Manny Shinwell and James Maxton were all conscientious objectors opposed to the war.
- The most famous of the anti war leaders was John Maclean of the British Socialist Party. He tried to persuade people not to join the army and said soldiers who shot other soldiers were murderers. Maclean was arrested and tried under the Defence of the Realm Act. MacLean became legendary when he was put in prison where his health suffered and he died within months of his release.
- Although the opponents of the war attracted a lot of publicity a big majority of the Scottish people supported it and were determined to carry on until Germany was defeated.