Unit 14: Anarcho-syndicalism in Britain, 1914-30

This Unit aims to

- Study the development of anarcho-syndicalism during and after the First World War.
- Provide an in-depth case study of one industrial sector - that of engineering.
- Trace the rise of the Shop Stewards and Works Committee Movement and the part anarcho-syndicalism played within it.
- Look at the reasons behind the decline of anarcho-syndicalist influence in the British labour movement.

Terms and abbreviations

Guild Socialism: A form of socialism developed in Britain that advocated a system of industrial self-government through national worker-controlled guilds. Aspects of Marxism and syndicalism were adopted and Guild socialists held that workers should work for control of industry rather than for political reform. The function of the state in a guild-organized society was to be that of an administrative unit and owner of the means of production; to it the guilds would pay rent, while remaining independent.
ASE: Amalgamated Society of Engineers
CLWC: Central Labour Withholding Committees, an unofficial organisation of shop stewards in the Glasgow engineering industry.
CWC: Clyde Workers' Committee, a permanent committee to resist the Munitions Act based in Glasgow.
SLP: Socialist Labour Party, 'dual unionists' who were strong in Glasgow.
SWC: Sheffield Works Committee, a syndicalist influenced organisation set up in 1916.
SSWCM: Shop Stewards and Works Committee Movement, changed its name to the
NWCM: National Workers' Committee Movement in 1921.
CP: Communist Party.

Introduction

In the Britain of 1914, the huge membership of militant, active workers' organisations had become a major threat to the privileges of the ruling class. There can be little doubt that the outbreak of the First World War proved a massive blow to the development of syndicalism. In the first few months of wartime, the syndicalist movement became rapidly isolated, as it adamantly clung to its anti-militarist principles, while patriotic fever gripped the nation. Syndicalist newspapers collapsed, membership dwindled, and many employers took advantage of the situation to rid themselves of isolated troublesome militants. Many active syndicalists were left with little choice other than to emigrate or face unemployment. However, unlike mining, the railways and the building industry (the centres of pre-war syndicalist activity), the engineering sector experienced major rapid change due to the war. It was this that led to growing unrest within the industry as the war progressed. From the outset, workers within engineering turned to syndicalist ideas and methods to help them in facing up to the management demands.

The engineering industry was crucial to the British government. It was the key source of weaponry in what was the world's first industrialised war. Development, reorganisation, and automation of the production system were brought about at accelerated pace by massive state-driven expansion and investment in the industry. The result was a revolution in economic relations, and major changes in the structure of the industry and the role of the workers within it.

Prior to the war, British engineering had been relatively outdated and generally unspecialised, with production often scattered amongst numerous small-scale workshops. The craft unions were able to impose restrictive working practices and maintain their status against the threat of advancing technology. However, their influence was waning and, as early as 1898, the employers had organised a national lockout, imposing a settlement on the workers, which both exposed and undermined the divisive craft unionist system. Under the influence of syndicalism, many militants then accepted the demise of the craft unions and began organising within the amalgamation movement for a single industrial union. By 1914, the most powerful engineering union, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE), was forced to accept some semi-skilled workers as amalgamation took hold.

The war economy

As the war began, the craft unions still represented a formidable force, despite a number of defeats at the hands of the employers' federation. Now, British capitalists and the government had the problem of how to break the power of craft unionism, while still retaining the loyalty of craft workers. These craft (skilled) workers were critical to the rapid expansion of output. Even though unskilled workers could operate new machinery, the craft workers were needed to set them up and to supervise the quality of the work. The divide between unskilled and craft workers was to dominate industrial relations throughout the war.

Before looking at the struggle within engineering, it is worth pausing to place the industry in the wider "war economy". Within months of the war starting, it was clear that the free market was unable to meet the demands of the war machine and that state intervention would be necessary to sustain production. Massive state control of the industry was immediately implemented and, within four years, the government controlled 90% of total imports, and the domestic production of food, coal, most other raw materials, shipping and railways. Food distribution was controlled through rationing and raw materials through allocation. Rents, wages and capital markets were also government-controlled. Engineering was at the centre of this state intervention and, by 1918, 3.5 million munitions workers in the industry were under state control.

For the Marxists, this exercise proved that the state could assume full control of the economy, and it assisted those who argued for nationalisation of industry. Even some syndicalists who, before the war, had argued for direct workers' control, now supported state control of industry prior to it being run by workers through a system of local committees (an idea influenced by guild socialism). However, since the First International, the anarchists had held that the state, by its very nature, was oppressive and that an all-powerful state could prove more oppressive than capitalism. This belief was soon proved right, as the state used its power to crush workers' unrest, especially among engineering workers. It was this reality that was to assist in the development of anarcho-syndicalism across British engineering.

The arms industry was not brought under direct state control, rather, it came under overall state direction with individual companies operating within it. While allowing private firms to operate, the government also drafted 90 directors from British companies into the

Ministry of Munitions, to ensure that capitalist expertise was used on the state's behalf.

These directors were clear about what this new partnership meant; the government would control the workforce, allowing the companies to reap massive profits from the unlimited demand for arms. William Weir, a leading Glasgow munitions employer who later became Director of Munitions for Scotland, called for engineering workers to be conscripted in the same way as soldiers, with a wage freeze and the ending of all trade union restrictive practices and bargaining rights. As he put it;

"the existing skilled men, organised as trade unionists, are uncontrollable by employers, and the state should therefore take on the employers' disciplinary functions itself."

For its part, the government was wary of what became a national campaign by the employers' federation, backed by the press, for engineering workers to be subject to virtual military dictatorship. It was in a weak position; by 1915, the shortage of shells at the front was desperate. Confrontation with workers would at the very least result in yet further shortages in the short term. Also, the expanding arms industry was already resulting in labour shortages, as an internal government memo stated early in 1915;

"workmen of any pretensions to skill at the engineering and ship building industry have little difficulty finding work ....the result is that to a very considerable extent men are out of control of both their employers and their own leaders".

The Munitions Act

Rather than opting for coercion, the government decided to enlist the help of the reformist trade unions. Within weeks of the outbreak of the war, the Labour Party and trade union leaders, who had up to recently strenuously opposed all capitalist wars, were falling over themselves to demonstrate their patriotism. The government's plan was now to introduce masses of unskilled engineering workers to overcome the labour shortage (a process which became known as dilution), and Lloyd George wasted no time in inviting trade union and Labour Party leaders to the Treasury to enlist their support for a proposed Munitions Act. The Act would make strikes in war-related industries illegal and introduce compulsory arbitration in all disputes. It would also allow any workplace to be designated a "controlled" establishment, in which all restrictive practices were illegal and wages and workshop discipline were under direct control of the Ministry. Joint employer/union tribunals could impose fines on such "controlled" workers who were deemed to have broken workshop rules or encouraged others "to restrict the rate of production." Workers in munitions would also need a "leaving certificate" to leave employment, which noted the reason for leaving, while workers without leaving certificates could not be taken on until a six week period of unemployment had passed. This draconian law would totally change power relations within the workplace. Employers could introduce measures to raise production while cutting wages and conditions. Any worker who resisted would face fines and the threat of being sacked, with the reason for dismissal placed on a leaving certificate, ensuring they would never work again.

At the meeting, the labour leaders accepted the proposals in what became known as the "Treasury Agreement". The Munitions Bill was duly rushed through Parliament with little opposition. A Labour Party Conference report at the time stated;

"while the unions by the Munitions Act have relinquished for the time being many of the liberties and rights that have taken a generation to build up, on the other hand they have come forward and occupied a place in the affairs of the country which will do much to consolidate and strengthen them in the future".

The "affairs of the country" refers to the National Labour Advisory Committee, which was established under the Act, and

through which representatives of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC and the Labour Party leadership were consulted widely. Joint union/management production committees were established, and unions became part of the local Munitions Tribunals set up to administer the Act. Attempts to absorb and co-opt the Labour and union movement had started before the war (see Unit 6), but this move enabled the average trade union official to mingle with polite society like never before. Union officialism was now fast becoming a profession and its members a social caste, growing curiously apart from the general interest of the rank and file and shop floor workers. It was this growing division between union leaders and the rank and file which was to put at risk the government's strategy - they had bought the leadership, but the workers were soon to embark on mass strike action aimed at ending the war.

After holding out for a few minor concessions, the ASE signed up to the Treasury Agreement, on the understanding that they would agree to dilution taking place in the short term, but their skilled status would be returned immediately to craft unions once the war had ended. They even brought an agreement with the National Federation of Women Workers, that those women recruited to engineering would hand back their jobs to skilled workers once the war was over.

The seeds of revolt

Of all the major industries, engineering had the most potential for a revolt by rank and file workers against the union leadership. Because of the decentralised nature of the industry, the engineering unions had little workplace organisation, instead, they had a local branch system. The union organisation itself was therefore divorced from the workplace. To maintain contact with workplaces, a shop stewards system unique to engineering had evolved. The shop stewards collected dues, checked union cards and reported grievances to the branch or district committee.

As the unions were increasingly co-opted by the state, divisions had begun to occur and, as early as the turn of the century, shop stewards were going beyond their basic administrative duties and organising unofficially within the workplace to force concessions directly from management. This brought them into direct conflict with full-time branch officials. Management therefore increasingly looked to the latter to discipline unruly shop stewards.

Even before the war, shop steward activity had led directly to disputes, most notably in the North East, where "vigilance committees" made up of shop stewards, had attempted to force the local employers federation to agree to district-wide wage-rates. The ASE stepped in to denounce the strike action and full-time branch officials joined forces with management against the shop stewards and rank and file workers.

In Glasgow, in December 1914, local engineering workers demanded a two-penny an hour rise. The ASE was horrified, and the employers' federation dismissed the claim out of hand. However, the Glasgow district Associated Engineering Union reacted by calling for an overtime ban, which quickly spread throughout Glasgow. The shop stewards then called successfully for more decisive action and, by February 1915, 10,000 engineers were on all-out strike from 26 factories across Clydeside.

The local district committee of the ASE supported moves by the ASE leadership to cut off strike pay in order to force the strikers back to work. An unofficial organisation, the Central Labour Withholding Committees (CLWC) was then established, made up of shop stewards from the various striking factories. This bore a remarkable resemblance to the early soviet system (see Unit 11). A delegate to the CLWC described how it worked:

"Every morning, mass meetings were held in all areas, and discussion and decisions of the previous day's committee meeting were reported and discussed. Every afternoon, the committee was in session, taking reports from the areas and considering ways and means of ending the strike. The organisation and contacts between the factories and the areas, and between the areas and the centre, were almost perfect".

Though the strike ended in defeat, the CLWC provided a model through which the shop stewards' movement in engineering developed. With the Munitions Act in full force, employers were quick to use their new powers, and the implications of the Act began to dawn on the workers. On 26th August, at a factory in Glasgow, a dispute arose over a decision to sack two workers for "slacking", the reason being marked on their leaving certificate. The resultant strike led to 17 shop stewards being fined under the conditions of the Act. Failure to pay the fine resulted in imprisonment and this lead to widespread protest, with demands to scrap the "slave act". Former members of the CLWC organised a meeting of rank and file engineers, which threatened to organise strike action, and the prisoners were promptly released. With this victory, it was decided to form a permanent committee to resist the Munitions Act. The Clyde Workers' Committee (CWC) was to be run on the same democratic basis as the CLWC, with 250-300 delegates elected directly from the workplace meeting every week. It survived until April 1916 when the government smashed it.

The Syndicalist Influence

The Socialist Labour Party (SLP), which supported the dual unionist approach (see Unit 5), only numbered a few hundred nationally, but was well organised on Clydeside. Many members were also delegates of the CWC, and were able to convince workers that the government would never keep its promise to bring back the status of craft workers after the war. They argued that, in the long term, de-skilling was inevitable due to technological change, and the Munitions Act was an attack on collective workers' organisation in engineering. The logic was therefore that workers should unite regardless of skill or sex into the CLC, as the first stage in creating a new industrial union. Rather than opposing dilution, they should be ensuring that unskilled labourers were paid the same rates as the skilled workers they replaced.

The CWC was not an SLP "front"; its sheer size was too great. However, the limit to syndicalist influence was demonstrated by the policy it adopted on dilution, which was that the munitions industry be nationalised, with local control being passed to works committees. Rather than wait for the election of a Labour government, the CWC proposed refusing to allow dilution to take place until their demand for nationalisation was met. Though state control was strongly opposed by the syndicalists, there was more agreement on the eventual goal. The CWC made it clear that nationalisation was a temporary measure, prior to the building of industrial unions. As CWC member James Gallacher wrote in 1916;

"the ultimate aim of the Clyde Workers' Committee is to weld these unions into one powerful organisation that will place the workers in complete control of industry".

The CWC needed to influence both unskilled and skilled (craft) workers in engineering in the short term, and the wider workers' movement in the long term. This was a tall order, firstly, because unskilled workers in Scotland were largely unorganised. To help overcome this, the CWC approached women workers, many of whom had been politicised through the suffragette movement. The most successful outcome of this was the 100% union membership of women workers at the massive Parkhead munitions factory in Glasgow.

The second problem, that of extending the works committee movement beyond the engineering industry was made more difficult

by the fact that the war (and dilution, the Munitions Act, etc.) had not affected other industries in the same way. However, there was some early success, when a massive rent strike broke out across Glasgow against government proposals to raise rents. The strike was primarily organised by women's committees in the community, who co-ordinated various direct actions, including occupations and pickets. Engineering workers soon joined in, and eventually the government was forced to give in. The links remained after the strike, and the CWC was subsequently involved in a number of community actions.

Turning up the heat

After the CWC had successfully opposed several attempts at dilution by employers, the latter, fearful that strike action might disrupt the massive profits being reaped from the war, called on the government to intervene directly. Seeing that the ASE had no control here, the government approached the CWC directly. Lloyd George, who had sworn never to meet with the CWC, duly arrived in Glasgow, where he was publicly humiliated by the CWC delegation, adamant that they would not allow dilution until nationalisation of munitions had been agreed. Lloyd George conceded that nationalisation would be a possibility at a future date, but such a course was not open due to the conditions caused by the war.

With negotiation getting nowhere, the government turned to the usual final recourse of the state - brute force. In March 1916, large parts of Glasgow were declared under Martial Law. Meetings were banned, CWC members harassed, arrested, and refused bail, and the government smashed the BSL print press and suppressed the CWC paper *"The Worker"*. Widespread strike action spread immediately in response, during which no reporting of the dispute was allowed in the press, and a number of CWC delegates were arrested and sentenced to internal deportation. The strike was eventually smashed and two editors of "The Worker" were sentenced to a year's imprisonment. Thereafter, dilution was forced onto the munitions industry at bayonet-point. Though the CWC was completely destroyed, it was to re-emerge within 18 months.

Before, the CWC had a chance to resurrect itself, unrest broke out in England. This dated back to the attempt to revive the syndicalist movement by Tom Mann and a number of pre-war syndicalists, through the launching of "The Trade Unionist", a syndicalist paper, in early 1915. The syndicalist amalgamation movement was then re-launched as unrest in engineering grew, and the pressure was on to form a single industrial union of the working class (see Unit 6).

Delegates from 70 newly formed amalgamation committees met and decided to launch a national amalgamation organisation for the engineering industry. A conference in Leeds in November 1915, adopted a set of principles which argued for the setting up of an industrial union for all engineering workers, "regardless of craft grade or sex". They also stressed the need for the new structures to be based on workplace organisation, with all union polices being

determined in mass meetings held in the workplace. Regarding long-term goals, they stated that;

"the definite object of the union shall be to secure the complete control of industry and the abolition of the wage system".

This was a significant step in the development of British syndicalism. While anarcho-syndicalists in other countries had already recognised the need for decisions to be made by mass assemblies as a basic tenant of anarcho-syndicalist democracy, pre-war British syndicalism had often considered the union branch, rather than the workplace, as the basic building block of workplace organisation. The move to workplace based democracy brought British syndicalism in line with the international movement.

Closely associated with the Amalgamation movement was an emerging Shop Stewards and Works Committee movement, the impetus for which came from events in Clydeside. Across England, Works Committees were set up, mostly modelled on the CWC. Some tentative attempts were made to network these into a national Works Committee organisation in August 1916, by deported members of the CWC. However, it was not until the biggest wartime strikes broke out in May 1917, that a national organisation became a reality.

The strike was centred on the issue of dilution. Engineering plants not directly involved in munitions, so exempt from the Munitions Act, were attempting to deskill too. Also, conscription of skilled engineers became possible (it had hitherto been a reserved occupation). The strike started in Manchester, the centre of non-munitions engineering industry, based mainly on textile production. The Manchester Works Committee organised a walkout, which quickly spread to the munitions industry. Almost overnight, 100,000 skilled engineering workers were on strike.

On May 9th, the government threatened strike organisers with life imprisonment. Police were drafted into the affected areas and a virtual state of martial law was declared. The government blatantly used the national press, and daily reports branded engineers as cowards who refused to fight. War veterans were also put into action in demonstrations against the striking workers. Despite this the strike stayed solid and there were signs that it would spread to Scotland. A national committee of delegates from the various Works Committees was set up, and demanded direct negotiations, rather than through

the ASE leaders. However, the brutal action of the state was once again brought to bear, and the strike was eventually mercilessly crushed.

Despite this sad end, the action was significant in a number of ways. Firstly Lloyd George had recently (December 1916) formed a new coalition government in which Labour Party and union leaders were given government posts, including in the all-powerful War Cabinet. The brutal government action in crushing the strike exposed Labour Party and union leaders playing a prominent role, and this turned many workers against the Labour Party, while greatly boosting the support for the Works Committees and syndicalism. The strike also highlighted the dangers of organising only skilled workers, which left unskilled and semi-skilled workers alienated. The reformist unions, who had built up strong membership among these workers, not only refused to join the strike but, partially influenced by the press, they were openly hostile.

Syndicalism in Sheffield

The hostility was particularly felt by the Sheffield Works Committee (SWC), one of the best organised. It was strongly influenced by syndicalism being set up by syndicalists who had been involved in the pre-war amalgamation movement. From the outset, the SWC attempted to extend beyond the narrow craft (skilled) base and had started to break down the barriers between the workers, to become a broad based workers organisation. However, the May strike re-opened the divisions. To counter the problem, the SWC launched a pamphlet written by the syndicalist engineer JT Murphy, which laid out the basic principles of the emerging Shop Stewards and Works Committee Movement (SSWCM). In it, he attacked the narrow 'craftist' views that divided workers, as well as the sexist attitudes of the ASE and many skilled workers. He argued that attitudes to women who were doing jobs previously undertaken by men were due to bigotry and male dominance, "which have existed for centuries". Further, he pointed out that women workers within engineering were being treated "with amassed contempt as passengers of war". He completely rejected the idea that women could or should be expected to leave their jobs after the war so men could take them back. Instead of divisions based on "craft, trade and sex prejudice", Murphy called for unity in one Great Industrial Union, which would "invigorate the labour movement with the real democratic spirit". In this, he argued against leadership, official or otherwise, which results in others "doing the thinking for us", leading to passive acceptance and people being treated as "pliable goods, to be moulded and formed according to the desires and judgement" of others.

Real democracy, in Murphy's eyes, would encourage participation;

"the more responsibility rests upon every member... the greater the tendency for thought …(and)…thought is revolutionary, it breaks down barriers, transforms institutions, and leads onwards to a larger life. To be afraid of thought is to be afraid of life, and to become an instrument of darkness and oppression".

Therefore, the key to democracy is participation. This ensures individual development, which, in turn, ensures wider human development. This emphasis on individual development and democratic structures clearly fits closely with some of the basic anarchist principles established in the First International (making it doubly sad that Murphy was to later become one of the founders of the Communist Party). Elsewhere in the pamphlet, branch organisation outside the workplace was rejected. In the place of branches, workplace organisations were needed, where people "working together every day become familiar with each other and easily associate with each other", working in the same workplace they have common grievances, "making for common expression". Beyond the department or workplace, Murphy envisaged elections of delegates onto committees to co-ordinate activity in the immediate locality, regionally and nationally, for both specific industries and all industries.

Murphy's stress on democracy, accountable delegates elected in the workplace and the need for active membership participation constitutes important steps forward for British syndicalism. Crucially, the latter was now seen not only as a way to achieve democratic control, but also as a means through which workers can come together, developing their ideas. From this can spring a new working class culture on which a new society will be founded; this is the essence of the idea of building the new world within the shell of the old. Importantly, it also presented an alternative to both the dual unionist and the amalgamation (reforming) approaches. Now, through workplace organisation, the SSWCM would unite workers into the workplace, regardless of their union affiliation, as the first stage in building an industrial union for all workers. The plan was that the SSWCM would eventually supersede the existing unions and transform itself into a new industrial union.

The main weaknesses within the pamphlet surrounded how the move to workers' control of society could be achieved. Many within the SSWCM still envisaged a peaceful transition from capitalism. The naivety of this was soon to be dispelled by events in Russia, when invasion by the capitalist powers opened workers eyes as to how far capitalism was prepared to go to defend its interests.

Works Committee Movement

The SWC pamphlet sold some 150,000 copies and provided the foundation for the national Shop Stewards & Works Committee Movement, which was formally established at a national conference in August 1917, following the May strikes. Delegates attended the conference from 23 Works Committees and the problems of democratic control dominated much of the discussion. To ensure that control remained with the rank & file, a non-decision-making National Administrative Council (NAC) was set up. This was purely administrative, and was there to carry out decisions, all of which would be made at regular national delegate meetings.

The stress on democratic control immediately changed the SSWCM's attitude towards existing unions. The SSWCM reasoned that standing for union positions not elected directly from the workplace would be undemocratic, so it decided not to stand for such positions. It also now recognised that current union structures were not based on accountable delegates, where officers carried out specific tasks set by the organisation, but on representation, where leaders were elected to act on workers' behalf. This could only lead to union officials becoming detached from the workplace, compromising with employers, and selling out the workers. For similar reasons, the SSWCM also opposed joint workers/management bodies. It was also similarly uncompromising towards political parties, and rejected the need for either parliamentary parties or revolutionary parties. Workers emancipation could not come about through political representatives acting (or not) on workers' behalf, but only by the workers themselves through self-organisation.

The SSWCM position brought it into direct conflict with pre-war militants, including Tom Mann, who was soon to be elected leader of the ASE on a platform of workers' control. It was also at odds with the Amalgamation movement, which had itself rapidly moved to a position of dual unionism. Following SSWCM concerns over democracy in the Amalgamation movement, but also over a split between the two organisations, talks led to the two organisations merging in January 1918. This move towards greater unity coincided with the SSWCMs growing influence. Since the May 1917 strike, war weariness had begun to set in. Events like a quarter of a million men dying at Passchendale over a few yards of swamp, led to a growing peace movement, much of it centred on the women's movement. Profiteering, rising food prices and chronic overcrowding, especially in

munitions centres, where labour shortages had attracted workers, all added to the growing unrest.

The SSWCM was at the centre of much of the growing opposition to the war. During the summer of 1917, it became heavily involved in the campaign against food shortages. At Barrow, the Works Committee decided to focus its campaigning against rising prices. In Manchester, the Works Committee organised a mass meeting of all shop stewards to discuss the food shortages. In Woolwich, Coventry and Sheffield the SSWCM was close to calling strike action. By January 1918, strike action was called within the munitions industry, in support of equal distribution of food. The action was only defused after the introduction of rationing to ensure equal distribution and regulate food prices.

In addition to the food shortage campaigns, the SSWCM initiated a pay campaign that did much to unite both skilled and unskilled workers within the organisation. In a crude attempt to divide workers, the Government announced a 12% bonus for skilled workers within engineering, and the SSWCM immediately launched a national campaign to extend it to all workers across the sector. The skilled workers backed the claim for the bonus to be extended, for example, in Sheffield, a mass meeting of all engineering workers voted by 35:1 for strike action. The strike only ended when the government gave in and agreed to the extension of the bonus.

In Scotland, in November 1917, the CWC threatened national strike action over the victimisation of striking women workers at the Parkhead factory in Glasgow. After the National Federation of Women Workers had disowned the strikers, the CWC called on skilled workers not to set up the machines of scabs working in the factory. A general meeting of shop stewards from all grades of workers across Clydeside was called. The size of the meeting alone was enough to persuade the employers' federation to back down and reinstate the sacked women at Parkhead.

The success was quickly followed by a CWC campaign in Scotland over the 12% bonus. If anything, the struggle was more militant than that in England. The CWC was the focal point for strike action that involved not only engineering workers, but also 10,000 shipyard workers, plus bricklayers employed in engineering and steel workers. The militancy was such that the local employers' federation defied the government and extended the 12% bonus to all

engineering workers prior to the official climb-down by the government!

By early 1918, the SSWCM was a national movement, which had successfully united all grades of workers. It now produced two national papers "The Worker" in Scotland, and "Solidarity" in England. Now, it used its growing power by calling for strike action to try to end the war. In January 1918, the government introduced the Military Service Bill, which allowed further war recruitment of engineering workers in formerly reserved occupations. In introducing the bill, the government made clear that it would use this to crush rank and file organisations who "were attempting to stir up strikes in the munitions factories". Learning the lesson of May 1917, the SSWCM decided to ensure that the campaign would not be seen as a defence of narrow craft interest, and promptly called for strike action against the "taking away of men to the army", demanding that the government consider peace terms.

At first, the call for action to end the war was encouraging. A massive demonstration in Glasgow supported the Russian revolution and called for a negotiated peace. A ballot of all engineering workers on Clydeside was taken, which showed a clear majority in favour of "peace without annexation". On January 27th, 10,000 engineers rallied in the Albert Hall and demanded peace negotiations. As the Daily Herald noted at the time, the struggle now taking place in engineering "centres far more round ...the possibility of a democratic peace rather than around any question of preferential treatment". The Glasgow Herald called for "strong action" to be taken against the political activists on Clydeside, while "Solidarity" headlined "The Great Revolt. Awakening of the Engineers. Strike Movement to Stop the War".

A week later, ballots for strike action were passed in Barrow, Coventry, Erith, London and Woolwich. The Labour Party leadership was now really scared that, as it put it;

"the spirit of revolt among the rank and file, which openly declares its sympathy with the lurid doings in Petersburg...could result in an epidemic of "down-tools".

In an attempt to head off unrest, the Labour leadership declared that diplomacy had begun aimed at a negotiated peace, which could be fatally undermined if strike action went ahead. At the same time, it fought the SSWCM by setting up counter-propaganda committees in the munitions factories, such as the "War Aims Committee" which suddenly appeared in February in Glasgow. The aim was to counter the anti-war material being distributed by the SSWCM, and to create

divisions between skilled and unskilled workers. It was accompanied by a massive propaganda campaign against the SS & WCM in the press. However, by late February, the SSWCM had countered the government propaganda offensive, and massive unrest across the whole engineering industry ensued.

On March 21st, the Germans launched their last great offensive of the war. The resulting carnage was seized upon by the government and the press to attack the SSWCM and the anti-war movement. A delegate meeting of SSWCM in April reported that the workers were no longer ready to support the anti-war movement. Though there were still some areas in favour of action, notably London, the majority feeling was that the offensive had changed the popular view. It was recognised that skilled workers would probably be prepared to strike. There was concern that this would divide workers, and the conference voted to call off its anti-war campaign and resume workplace struggle, "as before long there might be a better chance for a more advanced programme". The failure to organise strike action was a bitter blow to the SSWCM, and the calling off of the anti-war campaign was seen as a major climb-down by all concerned. In some areas, works committees collapsed and militants were victimised.

After the War

By September, the SSWCM began to regain its strength but, in some ways, the end of the war proved a further setback in organisational terms. The mass unrest many had hoped for did not happen. As soldiers returned from the front, many women found themselves evicted from the workplace, and employers benefited from the sudden plentiful supply of labour by cutting wages and conditions and sacking SSWCM activists. Still, there were successes and, with unrest growing in the railways and mining industries, workers were joining the SSWCM from outside engineering for the first time in large numbers. Expansion occurred in Merseyside and London, while the Scottish Works Committee movement launched a big recruitment drive. Important theoretical changes were also taking place. Under the influence of the Russian revolution, the SSWCM now increasingly called for the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. A SSWCM pamphlet entitled "Direct Action" in 1918 noted that workers control would only be established by;

"a revolutionary struggle for power. We do not believe it possible to any great extent to win control by wringing step by step concessions from capitalists…(also social committees are needed to ensure that the)…workers must be fully organised both in the place of work and in the place of residence…we do not mean that the social committees would represent a different body of people, but merely that both the social and industrial aspects of the worker life should have adequate expression".

The social committees were seen as the nucleus of the organisation, which would co-ordinate such activities as food and raw material distribution after the revolution. It would also take on the "educational role of the movement", through provision of educational centres and spreading the ideas of revolution. Thus, the British syndicalist movement came nearer to the position reached by anarcho-syndicalists in other countries, which saw the revolutionary union as central to all aspects of working class life, assisting in creating the new society within the old. The idea was still flawed, in viewing the social committees as appendages to the workplace committees. Indeed, those increasingly influenced by Marxism saw them as political organisations, which would give political leadership to the economic organisations in the workplace. Nevertheless, the general concept of a culture of resistance was an important one.

The 1920s: Decline

The SSWCM 1920 Conference passed a motion calling for society's social machinery to be taken over in the interests of the exploited masses. It also reaffirmed its opposition to the nationalisation of industry, in favour of workers' direct control. However, the 1920 conference was also significant in that events in Russia were making themselves felt. A motion was passed calling for the affiliation to the newly established Third International (Comintern), and delegates were elected to its 2nd Congress due to take place in Russia (see Unit 13). In many ways, this Congress proved a turning point for the SSWCM, as the delegation split, with Murphy and others converted to the idea of the need for the formation of a Communist Party (CP) to lead workers. Conversion was the operative word. One delegate spoke in almost religious tones of how, after meeting Lenin, he was converted from syndicalism to communism. Nevertheless, a number of SSWCM delegates, including Tanner, resisted the evangelising.

On the delegation's return to Britain, the debate ensued, with Murphy calling for close relations with the communist movement, and Tanner arguing for the SSWCM to remain independent of all political parties, including the CP. Unfortunately, the supporters of the Bolsheviks slowly gained increasing control. In this, they were assisted by the economic recession of late 1920, which caused mass unemployment. The employers were quick to exploit the situation, unleashing a wave of victimisation. Within engineering, the stronghold of the SSWCM, they unleashed an offensive that was to end in lockout and defeat. As a result, the local Works Committees were wiped out in many areas. This weakening of the SSWCM within the workplace assisted the Communists in arguing that the focal point of the organisation should be switched from the workplace to the structures of the wider unions and labour organisations. In line with the policy of the Red International, the argument was made that the SSWCM should seek to win control of the unions, principally through working in the branch and capturing union positions.

At the 1921 SSWCM Conference, the name was changed to National Workers' Committee Movement (NWCM), distancing itself from the idea of shop stewards and workplace action. A motion was carried which stated; "the time has arrived when the rebel elements in the unions must consciously and scientifically organise to work within their unions for a defiantly formulated policy". A new constitution was

passed establishing branch committees, which, among other things, would conduct "systematic propaganda and attempt to capture all elective positions within the unions". This signalled the final defeat of those within the SSWCM who were still committed to syndicalist principles. The Communist take-over was quickly consolidated and, within weeks, it was announced (without recourse to the wider organisation) that the movement could no longer support two weekly newspapers, and that the syndicalist paper "Solidarity" would be dropped immediately. Tanner, its editor, immediately stated that he and his associates would start a new paper "The Liberator", which would be devoted to *"class struggle...working for the industrial revolution...unhampered by connection with any official or unofficial political party".*

After 1921, the NWCM came under increasing control of the newly formed CP, and therefore Moscow. Much of the NWCM activity now concentrated on attacking the "yellow international" and working within the trade unions to get them to join the Red International of Trade Unions, according to the Bolshevik leadership strategy. Not surprisingly, workers facing mass unemployment caused by the recession did not see the campaign to get the trade unions to affiliate to the Red International as their number one priority and membership soon collapsed. In 1922, what was left of the NWCM was merged with the British Bureau of the Red International of Labour Unions, an organisation whose sole concern was to get trade unions to join the Red International.

The collapse of the SSWCM was a tragedy. As a result, the CP increasingly dominated the British revolutionary movement, and it became increasingly pushed towards reformism. Much of the energy now went towards building support for the CP, and attempting to get Communist MP's elected to Parliament and local councils. The remainder mainly went into working within the Labour Party in an attempt to move it to the left.

After 1922, workplace organisation was seen by the increasingly Marxist-dominated left as merely an economic arm, subordinate to the more advanced political organisation - the CP. This bankrupt idea had brief 'success' in the shape of the "minority movement", which grew rapidly as militancy revived on the back of disillusionment with the first Labour Government in 1923. At its peak, the movement claimed a million members, though it was dominated by the CP.

1926 General Strike

The "leadership" of the CP was seriously tested in 1926. Under massive pressure from ordinary workers, the Trades Union Congress (TUC, umbrella organisation of the reformist unions) was forced to call a general strike. Even with syndicalism at a low ebb, they were fearful that the strike might turn into a revolutionary upheaval, so they refused to use the term 'general strike', with its association with syndicalism. Instead, they called the action a 'national strike'. On the eve of the action, in a blind panic, the TUC general council met with the Prime Minister pleading for a solution to be found. As J.H. Thomas, the rail union leader, later recalled himself; "I never begged like I begged and pleaded all that day" for the government to find a solution to the strike.

The TUC leadership was on its knees to the government, because it was scared to carry out the wishes of its members. Surely, this was the time for the political leadership and forthrightness of the CP, guardians of the working class, to take charge. Well, in fact, numerous Communists were active during the strike, and many were arrested. However, the CP leadership was capable of no more than mealy-mouthed slogans. During the first few days they called for "all power to the General Council". This referred to the TUC General Council, that is, R. J. Thomas and company - those who were scared to carry out the wishes of their members. As strikers became increasingly bitter towards the TUC Leadership, the CP changed its slogan to one calling for the "formation of a Labour Government" to nationalise the mines.

Meanwhile, away from the leadership, workers were rapidly organising themselves, creating alternative structures under their direct control, such as transport permit committees and hastily formed councils of action. Had there still been a mass-syndicalist organisation in the working class able to aid and direct this spontaneous action, perhaps British history would have been different. As it was, the 1926 strike ended in bitter defeat, and was followed by victimisation on such a scale that the National Union of Railwaymen, under the leadership of Thomas himself, threatened to resume strike action. The defeat put the British labour movement back 20 years, and militancy of any sizeable force would not resurface until after the Second World War.

Postscript

The syndicalist movement was primarily an organisation of workers, whose ideas and practices were developed by the working class within the working class. This gradually changed as outside experts in the form of Marxist intellectuals increasingly came to dominate the revolutionary workers movement.

Once it had control, the Communist Party accomplished the destruction of an independent revolutionary organisation rooted in the working class more quickly than the capitalists would have dreamed possible. Thereafter, the workers were increasingly seen as voting fodder for the Labour Party, or subservient to the political leadership of the CP.

When we next return to Britain, we shall look at the rise of the next period of militancy within the British labour movement, after 1945. Sadly, syndicalism was not to play a prominent role within those struggles. Nevertheless, it had already left a legacy of workplace organisation and action, often in the face of severe hostility, that was to be a major feature of the revival of the Shop Stewards' movement from the 1950's onwards (see Unit 19).

Key points

- The British economy was brought under greater state-control with the onset of the First World War. This was done with the compliance of the trade union leadership.
- As union officials became more isolated from the workers a worker-based shop-stewards movement developed, especially in the engineering industry.
- The engineering industry, initially on Clydeside and later in Sheffield, became a centre of wartime industrial unrest.
- After the War the shop stewards movement became influenced by events in Russia and the newly established Communist Party.

Checklist

1. What were the main features of the “war economy”?

2. What were the main points of the Munitions Act and what part did the trade unions and the Labour Party play its implementation?

3. What were the factors in the growth of workers’ resistance in the engineering industry?

4. What were the main points of the pamphlet published by the Sheffield Works Committee?

5. The SSWCM declined after the war, what was the main reason for this?

Answer suggestions

1. *What were the main features of the “war economy”?*

Within months of the war starting massive state control of the industry was immediately implemented and, within four years, the government controlled 90% of total imports, and the domestic production of food, coal, most other raw materials, shipping and railways. Food distribution was controlled through rationing and raw materials through allocation. Rents, wages and capital markets were also government-controlled. The arms industry was not brought under direct state control, rather, it came under overall state direction with individual companies operating within it. While allowing private firms to operate, the government also drafted 90 directors from British companies into the Ministry of Munitions, to ensure that capitalist expertise was used on the state’s behalf.

2. *What were the main points of the Munitions Act and what part did the trade unions and the Labour Party play its implementation?*

The Munitions Act made strikes in war-related industries illegal and introduced compulsory arbitration in all disputes. It also allowed any workplace to be designated a “controlled” establishment, in which all restrictive practices were illegal and wages and workshop discipline were under direct control of the Ministry of Labour. Joint employer/union tribunals imposed fines on “controlled” workers who were deemed to have broken workshop rules or encouraged others to restrict the rate of production. To leave employment workers in munitions also needed a “leaving certificate” which noted the reason for leaving. Workers without leaving certificates could not be taken on until a six-week period of unemployment had passed.

Lloyd George invited the leaders of the TUC and the Labour Party to a meeting at the treasury to discuss the main points of the Act. At the meeting, the labour leaders accepted the proposals in what became known as the “Treasury Agreement”. The Munitions Bill was passed in Parliament with little opposition. A National Labour Advisory Committee was established under the Act through which representatives of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC and the Labour Party leadership were consulted widely. Joint union/ management production committees were established, and unions became part of the local Munitions Tribunals set up to administer the Act.

3. *What were the factors in the growth of workers' resistance in the engineering industry?*

Because of the decentralised nature of the industry, the engineering unions had a local branch system and little workplace organisation. The union organisation itself was therefore divorced from the workplace. To maintain contact with workplaces, a shop stewards system unique to engineering had evolved. The shop stewards collected dues, checked union cards and reported grievances to the branch or district committee.

As early as the turn of the century divisions had begun to occur as the unions were increasingly co-opted by the state. Shop stewards were going beyond their basic administrative duties and organising unofficially within the workplace to force concessions directly from management. This brought them into direct conflict with full-time branch officials. Management therefore increasingly looked to the latter to discipline unruly shop stewards.

4. *What were the main points of the pamphlet published by the Sheffield Works Committee?*

The pamphlet attacked the narrow 'craftist' views that divided workers, as well as the sexist attitudes of the ASE and many skilled workers. It argued that attitudes to women who were doing jobs previously undertaken by men were due to bigotry and male dominance. It rejected the idea that women could or should be expected to leave their jobs after the war so men could take them back. Instead of divisions based on "craft, trade and sex prejudice", it called for unity in one Great Industrial Union, to revitalise the labour movement with democratic spirit. It argued against leadership, official or otherwise that led to passive. Branch organisation outside the workplace was rejected and, beyond the workplace, it envisaged elections of delegates onto committees to co-ordinate activity in the immediate locality, regionally and nationally, for both specific industries and all industries.

5. *The SSWCM declined after the war, what was the main reason for this?*

After the war the mass unrest many had hoped for did not happen. As soldiers returned from the front, many women found themselves evicted from the workplace, and employers benefited from

the sudden plentiful supply of labour by cutting wages and conditions and sacking SSWCM activists. Events in Russia were making themselves felt and a motion was passed at the 1920 conference calling for the affiliation to the newly established Third International (Comintern), and delegates were elected to its 2nd Congress due to take place in Russia. In many ways, this Congress proved a turning point for the SSWCM, as the delegation split, with some converted to the idea of the need for the formation of a Communist Party (CP) to lead workers.

In the economic recession of late 1920, which caused mass unemployment the employers were quick to exploit the situation, unleashing a wave of victimisation. Within engineering, the stronghold of the SSWCM, they unleashed an offensive that was to end in lockout and defeat. As a result, the local Works Committees were wiped out in many areas. This weakening of the SSWCM within the workplace assisted the Communists in arguing that the focal point of the organisation should be switched from the workplace to the structures of the wider unions and labour organisations. After 1921 it came under increasing control of the newly formed CP and, in line with the policy of the Red International, the argument was made that the SSWCM should seek to win control of the unions, principally through working in the branch and capturing union positions.

Suggested discussion points

- How relevant are the ideas of the Shop Stewards Movement to anarcho-syndicalist organisation today?
- What impact did the Russian Revolution have on the British labour movement?

Further Reading

Tom Brown's Syndicalism. Tom Brown. Phoenix Press, 1990. ISBN 0948 984163. £3.95 -AK- -BS-

Written by a prominent British syndicalist, in the 1940s and 1950s, this collection of six essays include good sections on the activities and agenda of the Communist Party in the 1920s. Includes coverage of the 1926 General Strike.

Lenin and Workers' Control. Tom Brown. Monty Miller Press. £1.50. -AK-

Excellent short history and critique of Bolshevism.

The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists. John Quail. Paladin, ISBN 0586 082255. -LI- -BS-

The only book of it's kind-British Anarchism from an Anarchist point of view-now sadly out of print. If you can find a copy, see especially chapters 13 'Anarchism and the Origins of the Syndicalist Revolt,1889- 1910', and 14 'The Insurgent Virus'.

Workers' Control. Ken Coates and Tony Topham. Panther Books, 1970. -LI-

Consists of direct reproductions of a whole range of material from the early 1920s to the 1970s on matters related to workers' control. Includes syndicalism, guild socialism and the later shop stewards movement.

The Works Committees: An Outline of their Principles and Structure. J Murphy, Pluto Press. ISBN 0902 818805. -LI-

Excellent example of syndicalist principles in practice (ignoring the SWP introduction). Deals with the problems between workplace and branch-based (separate from the workplace) union organisation. Still relevant today.

'Don't Be a Soldier!' Ken Weller. Journeyman/LHWC. ISBN 0904 526569. -LI-On the radical anti-war movement in North London, 1914-1918.

Demonstrates that anti-war movement had its roots in a 'rebel milieu' of syndicalists and the radical wing of the women's movement.

British Syndicalism 1900-1914. Bob Holton. Pluto Press. ISBN 0904 383229. -LI-

Now sadly out of print, a detailed exposition of the early period of British syndicalism.

First Flight: The Origins of Anarcho-Syndicalism in Britain. Albert Meltzer. KSL, pamphlet. £1. -AK-

A brief sketch of British anarcho-syndicalist history, from Chartism to the DAM.

Dare To Be A Daniel: A History Of One Of Britains Earliest Syndicalist Unions. Wilf McCartney. KSL, pamphlet. £1. -AK-

Memoirs of an activist in the Cooks Syndicate. 38 strikes fought, 38 won!

Anti-Parliamentary Communism: The Movement for Workers' Councils in Britain, 1917-45. Mark Shipway. Macmillan Press. ISBN 0333 43613X. -LI- -BS-

Written from a 'councillist' point of view so not Syndicalist, but full of fascinating detail to be found nowhere else.

Personal Recollections of the Anarchist Past. George Cores. KSL. ISBN 1873 605056. £1. -AK-

Cores was a shoemaker, and anarchist activist from the 1880s until 1939. Includes brief mentions of the Syndicalist Revolt and of Rocker's 'Workers' Friend' group.

Notes:

The Further Reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. In addition to the above, it is always worth consulting your local library for general history texts which do cover the period, although they invariably understate the level of working class organisation and activity. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK-available from AK Distribution (Course Member discount scheme applies if you order through SelfEd, PO Box 29, SW PDO, Manchester M15 5HW), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).