

## Heroes

## John Maclean: accuser of capitalism

By Mike Fenwick

AT THE outbreak of World War One, a huge wave of nationalism swamped the socialist movement of Europe. Previously committed to oppose the war through strikes and agitation, most of socialism's leaders soon converted to jingoism.

They came to support the wholesale slaughter of millions in terms of the national interest. As its members literally took up arms against each other, the Second International's promises crumbled into dust. To speak of the class war became a crime across Europe. Only tiny handfuls of socialists remained true to the idea of internationalism.

Amongst those who resisted the pressure of opinion and threat of imprisonment were Lenin, Trotsky and the Bolsheviks and Liebknecht and Luxemburg in Germany.

Karl Liebknecht had challenged the German war machine from the heart of the German parliament. For having the audacity to speak the truth he was jailed. In Britain if there was one voice comparable to these it was John Maclean.

Repeatedly sent to jail for sedition, Maclean gained an international reputation for his outspokenness and bravery. Jail eventually broke the man, but his martyrdom at the hands of capitalism is no less real than that of Liebknecht, save that a bullet was a swifter and cleaner ending.

This courageous stand and the reputation he gained from it are the central reasons why he should be honoured and respected. But his legacy and authority inside the British labour movement, sometimes presented at the level of myth, must be something we seriously and critically assess. In recent issues of *Workers' Liberty* Bob Pitt has detailed the decline of the man into paranoia and finally isolation from the class and movement he at one time inspired.

By what route did he become such a force that his mental stability or otherwise is an important question worthy of such discussion?

Maclean had been born in Pollokshaws, outside Glasgow in 1879, the son of dispossessed highlanders. Like the majority of Clydeside's growing population his parents had moved south after the Highland Clearances, in which huge tracts of land were seized for large scale agriculture and the native clans and crofters driven off. It was this great flood of Scottish and in time Irish workers, providing a steady supply of cheap labour, into the Clyde valley that contributed to its rapid industrialisation. It became a huge workshop for the British Empire in the same way that the Ruhr valley developed as the furnace of German capitalism.

In great part these origins also contributed to the making of a powerful and disciplined working class movement which, as Red Clydeside, would prove such a powerful opponent to the British ruling class in the war years and beyond.

Able to gain a university education through the sacrifice of his mother and family, Maclean never forgot where he came from. Much of his early activity was dedicated to educating the workers of his home town. Formally qualified as a teacher, his gift for explaining the iniquities of capitalism and the hopes that socialism held out for ordinary people would remain his enduring strength.

Reputedly rather humourless, he made up for this by his passion and commitment. This was enough to stir in the hearts of his listeners the desires and zeal for socialism that his actions would epitomise.

He joined the "Marxist" Social Democratic Federation in 1903, and for the remaining twenty years of his short life he was completely dedicated to the socialist movement.

From 1908 to 1915, when he was first imprisoned, he taught a weekly evening class on labour movement and industrial history for which the main text book was Marx's *Capital*. Occasionally he was assisted by another young teacher, James Maxton, who would go on to be an MP and the most famous of the Red Clydesiders.

Through their classrooms came some of those militants who in a few short years would be the backbone of the revolutionary shop-stewards' movement that brought Britain to the brink of revolution after World War 1.

The importance and breadth of such classes cannot be easily understood today. The idea of hundreds of ordinary workers attending weekly classes on Marxism seems fantastic. But for Maclean and his comrades it was a central task of socialists to educate their class. "Rise with your class, not out of your class", was a popular slogan of the day that reflected the egalitarian ethic of the socialist educational movement.

Maclean, a Marxist, saw such education as not just a case of creating intelligent workers. It was a central part of the ideological struggle against capitalism. Where the capitalists have state education, the



Contemporary cartoon depicting Red Clydeside's struggle against capitalism

churches and the mass media, the need for independent working-class education is paramount.

In time Maclean would help form a Scottish Labour College to help contribute to this task.

After each bout of the imprisonments that were to follow, Maclean always returned to his classes. Eventually this movement died out, but it remains a central and important legacy of these early British socialists.

Education, street meetings and propaganda were the main activities of socialists in this period.

But the real test of the man was the outbreak of war. In his defiance Maclean stepped above his peers who slipped away into nationalism or pacifism. He became a leader of the left opposition in the British Socialist Party (the successor to the SDF), as its leader Hyndman steered the party towards jingoism.

The first big political battle of the war was over conscription in 1914, and in this fight Maclean and his comrades in Glasgow took the lead. The penalty for Maclean was prison, the cost to capitalism the truth. Maclean preached the class war from the dock and thousands of workers came to hear it.

"The only enemy to Kaiserism and Prussian militarism was and is German social democracy. Our first business is to hate the British capitalist system," was how he summed up his attitude.

The capitalists replied with their own

class hatred and vilification. Maclean was "a representative of a poisonous set of parasites who talk treason instead of working", said the press.

But his uncompromising stand and defiance of state victimisation won support not just for his cause but his release. Thousands of workers on Clydeside struck to welcome him back to Glasgow. Although weak and disorientated following a hunger strike, Maclean rose to the occasion. A contemporary paper describes the scene.

"The slowly moving carriage being dragged through the thronged streets by a score of muscular workers who had taken the place of the horses, the surging exultant mass of people, the incessant cheering and singing... and standing upright in the carriage, the challenging figure of John Maclean waving a red flag with an air of defiance and triumph."

Internationally he was recognised by his peers. Elected alongside Lenin, Trotsky and Liebknecht, he became an Honorary President of the first Congress of Soviets in revolutionary Russia. He returned this gesture of solidarity with outright support for the Bolsheviks.

Becoming the Bolshevik Consul for Scotland, he again put himself in the firing line of reaction and bigotry. In total he was arrested six times and imprisoned five. Three years of imprisonment, most with hard labour, was the sum of capitalism's punishment for one of its most outspoken critics.

Whether prison broke him has been discussed elsewhere. It certainly weakened him, leading to his early death.

In later years he refused to join the British Communist Party, but he never broke from his commitment to internationalism. "I stand before the Gorbals and before the world as a Bolshevik, alias a Communist, alias a Marxian. My symbol is the Red Flag, and I shall always keep it floating on high." If this great socialist educator had this lesson to teach, it was not just for the workers of Glasgow, or for his time, but for workers of all time and everywhere. ■



John Maclean

## This is the real Lenin

**IN LIFE** Lenin led the Russian working class to the greatest act of human liberation in history, the October Revolution of 1917. In death "Lenin" became the patron saint of the Stalinist ruling class which overthrew all his work and slaughtered his surviving comrades, including Trotsky.

After Trotsky's death most of the Trotskyist groups claiming to base themselves on "Lenin" adopted authoritarian models of organisation more akin to Stalinism than to Leninism, models in which the only word was that of the dominant faction and minorities were suppressed. It is one of the reasons for the proliferation of "Trotskyist" groups.

In the history of Bolshevism there was no single organisational formula; there were continual changes according to changing circumstances. *Constant* was the drive to mobilise and consolidate the Marxists so that they could fight in varying circumstances the class-struggle on the levels of ideas, trade unionism and politics. The following article by Lenin outlines his real conception of the unity of centralism in action with *continuing*, ongoing freedom of criticism. The sectarian groups organised around prophets and popes and colleges of cardinals are a long way from Leninism: they are *pre-bourgeois*; they point backwards to the past, not forwards to the liberation of humankind from class society.

THE EDITORS have received the following communication signed by the Central Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party.

"In view of the fact that several Party organisations have raised the question of *the limits within which the decisions of Party congresses may be criticised*, the Central Committee, bearing in mind that the interests of the Russian proletariat have always demanded the greatest possible unity in the tactics of the RSDLP, and that *this unity in the political activities* of the various sections of our Party is now more necessary than ever, is of the opinion:

"(1) that in the Party press and at Party meetings, everybody must be allowed *full freedom* to express his personal opinions and to advocate his personal views;

"(2) that at public political meetings members of the Party should refrain from conducting *agitation* that runs counter to congress decisions;

"(3) that no Party member should at *such meetings call for action that runs counter to congress decisions*, or propose resolutions that are out of harmony with congress decisions". (All italics ours).

In examining the substance of this resolution, we see a number of queer points. The resolution says that "at Party meetings" "full freedom" is to be allowed for the expression of personal opinions and for criticism (§1), but at "public meetings" (§2) "no Party member

should call for action that runs counter to congress decisions". But see what comes of this: at Party meetings, members of the Party *have the right* to call for action that runs counter to congress decisions; but at public meetings they are *not* "allowed" full freedom to "express personal opinions"!

Those who drafted the resolution have a totally wrong conception of the relationship between *freedom to criticise* within the Party and the Party's *unity of action*. Criticism within the limits of the *principles* of the Party Programme must be quite free (we remind the reader of what Plekhanov said on this subject at the Second Congress of the RSDLP), not only at Party meetings, but also at public meetings. Such criticism, or such "agitation" (for criticism is inseparable from agitation) cannot be prohibited. The Party's political action must be united. No "calls" that violate the unity of definite actions can be tolerated either at public meetings, or at Party members, or in the Party press.

Obviously, the Central Committee has defined freedom to criticise inaccurately and too narrowly, and unity of action inaccurately and too broadly.

Let us take an example. The Congress decided that the Party should take part in the Duma elections. Taking part in elections is a very definite action. During the elections (as in Baku today, for example), no member of the Party *anywhere* has any right whatever to call upon the people to *abstain from voting*; nor can "criticism" of the decision to take part in the elections be tolerated during this period, for it would in fact jeopardise success in the election campaign. *Before* elections have been announced, however, Party members *everywhere* have a perfect right to *criticise* the decision to take part in elections. Of course, the application of this principle will sometimes give rise to disputes and misunderstandings; but *only* on the basis of *this* principle can *all* disputes and all misunderstandings be settled honourably for the Party. The resolution of the Central Committee, however, creates an impossible situation.

The Central Committee's resolution is essentially wrong and *runs counter to the Party rules*. The principle of democratic centralism and autonomy for local Party organisations implies universal and full *freedom to criticise*, so long as this does not disturb the *unity of a definite action*; it rules out *all* criticism which disrupts or makes difficult the *unity* of an action decided on by the Party.

We think that the Central Committee has made a big mistake by publishing a resolution on this important question without first having it discussed in the Party press and by Party organisations; such discussion would have helped it to avoid the mistakes we have indicated.

We call upon all Party organisations to discuss this resolution of the Central Committee now, and to express a definite opinion on it. The text, "Freedom to Criticise and Unity of Action", can be found in the *Collected Works*, Vol.10. p.442