

Wildcat Inside Story

Disaffection, 1797 to 1974

Contents

1797	3
1912	3
1915	3
1916	4
1918	5
1924	5
1925	5
1931	5
1934	6
1945	6
1972	6
1974	6

1797

Mutinies at Spithead and the Nore caused by poor pay and appalling conditions (e.g. death by beating for drunkenness). But mutineers did not threaten to desert: 'We are not actuated by any spirit of sedition or disaffection whatsoever: on the contrary, it is indigence and extreme penury alone that is the cause of our complaint.' At the Nore they demanded democratisation of the navy and threatened London. Their leader, Parker, was hanged. This led to: the Incitement to Mutiny Act, passed opposed by Whig minority: 'Any person who shall maliciously and advisedly endeavour to seduce any person or persons serving in His Majesty's Forces by sea or land from his duty and allegiance to His Majesty, or to incite or stir up any such person or persons to commit any act of mutiny, or to make or endeavour to make any mutinous assembly, or to commit any traitorous or mutinous practice whatsoever, shall, on being legally convicted of such offence, be adjudged guilty of felony.'

1912

The first issue of *The Syndicalist* reprinted a 'Don't Shoot' letter originally published in *The Irish Worker* and written by a Liverpool building worker. Then a railway worker, Fred Crowsley, had it reprinted and personally distributed copies to soldiers at Aldershot. He was arrested, tried and sentenced to four months. The editor of *The Syndicalist*, Guy Bowman, was given nine months and the printers, the Becks, of Walthamstow, got six. Tom Mann, chairman of the Industrial Syndicalist Education League which published *The Syndicalist*, was charged, like the others, under the 1797 Act. He wrote: 'February 1912, all of the miners had downed tools. In Manchester, where I then was, the authorities were having premises prepared as temporary barracks, and were concentrating military forces a few miles out of the city. At public meetings, I drew attention to this, . . . I also directed attention to the imprisonment of my comrades, read the "Don't Shoot" letter and declared I believed in every sentence of it. Thereupon, I was arrested and sentenced to six months!

Tom Mann was released after seven weeks of public pressure.

1915

John Maclean, the Glasgow socialist leader, had begun open-air meetings against the war in 1914. In September 1915 he was arrested for using language

likely to cause a breach of the peace, by describing the war as 'this murder business'. The charge was dropped but in the following month he was summoned under the Defence of the Realm Act for saying: 'I have been enlisted in the Socialist Army for fifteen years, the only army worth fighting for — God damn all other armies!' He was fined £5, refused to pay and went to prison for five days.

1916

In January, following the introduction of conscription, Maclean's paper Vanguard was banned for opposing it. In February he was arrested as a prisoner of war and held in Edinburgh Castle. He was tried in Edinburgh High Court, found guilty and sentenced to three years' penal servitude. In June 1917 he was released in response to public pressure.

Alexander Shapiro, the Russian immigrant editor of the Jewish anarchist paper Arbeter Frant, was arrested in 1916, together with the publisher and printer of the paper, for opposing conscription: they were imprisoned and the paper closed.

An anarchist Anti-Conscription League had been formed in 1915 to organise militant opposition: when conscription came in the campaign was increased. In April 1916 the anarcho-syndicalist paper, Voice of Labour, printed an article about militants who had evaded the call-up by taking refuge in the Highlands. A leaflet reprinting the article was produced by Thomas Keell, the editor, printer and publisher of Freedom, and distributed by Lilian Wolfe, the acting editor of the Voice of Labour (all the men being in prison or hiding). The Freedom Press was raided, they were both arrested, and in June 1916 they were fined for conduct 'prejudicial to recruiting and discipline'; they refused to pay and were both imprisoned. The Voice of Labour was forced to cease publication, but Freedom managed to continue throughout the war.

Guy Aldred, the eccentric and quarrelsome 'anti-parliamentarian communist' who edited the Spur in Glasgow from 1914 to 1921, had opposed the war from the beginning, and not only opposed but personally resisted conscription from beginning to end and beyond. He was repeatedly arrested when conscription came in 1916 and imprisoned on and off until 1919, continuing his work inside prison, still editing the Spur even from solitary confinement and hunger strike, and spreading propaganda among his fellow-prisoners at every possible opportunity. He was released after most of his comrades, but went right on struggling for forty years, adopting the same stand against conscription in 1939.

1918

In January John Maclean was elected Honorary President of the Soviet Congress in Petrograd and Russian Consul in Glasgow by the new Bolshevik government. In April he was arrested for sedition by calling for an immediate end to the war through strikes and mutinies.

This time he defended himself. Asked whether he was guilty or not guilty, he replied: 'I refuse to plead!' Asked whether he wished to object to any members of the jury, he replied: 'I object to the whole lot of them!' He addressed the jury for 75 minutes: 'I am not here as the accused; I am here as the accuser of capitalism dripping with blood from head to foot.' He was sentenced to five years' penal servitude.

In July he went on hunger strike, was forcibly fed, and his health was permanently broken. With the end of the war and the approach of the general election, the authorities decided to release him – in December.

1924

In July, the Worker's Weekly published an 'Open Letter to the Fighting Forces' which suggested:

'Form committees in every barracks, aerodrome and ship. Refuse to shoot down your fellow workers. Refuse to fight for profit. Turn your weapons against your oppressors.'

The editor, J. R. Campbell, was charged under the 1797 Act but after a storm of protest from the Labour movement the case against him was dropped.

1925

On October 12 prominent Communists were charged under the 1797 Act and found guilty. At their trial the judge observed: 'It is not uninteresting to find the Revolution in Russia began with the army.'

1931

At the height of the economic crisis of the 1930s the Atlantic fleet mutinied at Invergordon over pay cuts of 25 per cent. Although the mutineers used militant

language, their grievance was essentially economic – and their revolt was self-managed. Able Seaman Len Wincott, leading light of the mutiny and official scapegoat, was forced out of the navy and later went to Moscow where he still lives. (See his recently published book *Invergordon Mutineer*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, £2.95.)

This led to . . .

1934

Incitement to Disaffection Act:

‘If any person, with intent to commit or to aid, abet, counsel or procure the commission of an offence under section one of this Act, has in his possession or under his control any document of such a nature that the dissemination of copies thereof among members of His Majesty’s forces would constitute such an offence, he shall be guilty of an offence under this Act.’

1945

Freedom Press Trial: see this page.

1972

J. C. Durkin of Southport, who had written two letters to the troops, ‘A Letter from a Soldier of the IRA to the Soldiers of the Royal Green Jackets’ and ‘A Letter from a Ballymurphy Mother’, and admitted distributing copies in Northern Ireland, was found not guilty at Liverpool of charges under the 1934 Act. But Michael Tobin, charged with possessing the leaflets, was found guilty and given the maximum sentence of two years.

1974

On 20 May Pat Arrowsmith was sentenced to 18 months’ jail on two charges under the Incitement to Disaffection Act 1934. She had been arrested for distributing copies of the British Withdrawal from Northern Ireland Campaign leaflet ‘Some Information for British Soldiers’ at Warminster, Wiltshire, on 22 September 1973.

A week earlier she had been acquitted by Colchester magistrates on a charge of insulting words and behaviour – for distributing the same leaflet.

Before being sentenced Pat told the court that her trial had been about free speech, the soldier's right to disobey inhuman orders and British repression in Ireland. 'My colleagues will continue to distribute this and other leaflets and, if free, I shall consider it my duty to join them.' (See Peace News, 24 May and 7 June, for reports of the trial.)

Afterwards Pat wrote to Peace News: 'Despite objections from the judge and prosecuting counsel, I repeatedly pointed out that the present terrible situation was the direct result of oppressive British policy through the centuries towards Ireland. . . .

I referred to the fact that British soldiers were at present being arraigned before the European Court for their actions in Northern Ireland and Rock Tansey [Pat's counsel] succeeded in producing the Compton Report and commenting on its findings (that British troops had "ill-treated" Irish people in the course of arresting and interning them). And I produced a news item about falling recruitment figures as evidence that British soldiers were already "disaffected" by the tasks they were required to carry out in Northern Ireland.'

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1974

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