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## The general strike as a weapon of peace: British socialists, the labour movement and debating the means to avoid war before 1914

From its founding congress in 1889, the supra-national socialist collective of the Second International had spread an anti-war and antimilitarism message. Undoubtedly a propaganda tactic to signal their distance from established governments, it also reflected the genuine internationalism of many in the movement.<sup>1</sup> This message would become more pertinent and more forceful from the start of the twentieth century when tensions between European powers were rapidly growing and a wider discussion ensued about how war could be avoided. The supposed, and seemingly surprising, 'collapse' of the International in 1914 when war finally did break out has thus triggered much debate.<sup>2</sup> The International had never spoken with one voice on the subject, and there was little agreement over how European socialists could combat militarism, over questions on war, and how impending conflict could be prevented.<sup>3</sup> The possible courses of action open to the national groupings within the International were varied: including propaganda; parliamentary action; protest meetings and demonstrations, mobilizing the workers; economic boycott; and the general strike. All were debated within and without the International by socialists and non-socialists, but it is the

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of this message and its propaganda effects see Kevin J. Callahan, "Performing internationalism" in Stuttgart in 1907: French and German socialist nationalism and the political culture of an International Socialist Congress', *International Review of Social History*, 45 (2000), 51-87; Kevin J. Callahan, 'The international socialist peace movement on the eve of World War 1 revisited: the campaign of "War Against War!" and the Basle International Socialist Congress in 1912', *Peace & Change*, 29 (2004), 147-76.

<sup>2</sup> The classic remains Georges Haupt, *Socialism and the Great War: the Collapse of the Second International* (Oxford, 1972); see also, James Joll, *The Second International 1889-1914* (London, 1968); David Kirby, *War, Peace and Revolution: International Socialism at the Crossroads 1914-1918* (Aldershot, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Marc Mulholland, "Marxists of strict observance? The Second International, national defence, and the question of war", *The Historical Journal*, 58 (2015), 615-40.

seemingly most radical of the options, the general strike as a weapon of peace, that forms the focus here.

The avocation of the general strike as a means of avoiding war had been on the agenda at all congresses of the International since 1891. The congresses held in Stuttgart in 1907 and Copenhagen in 1910 saw particularly heated debates on this contentious proposal. At Stuttgart, Gustave Hervé, the vocal anti-militarist and leading French socialist, proposed the International should pass a resolution stipulating that all socialist parties must announce a general strike, or an armed insurrection if necessary, if war broke out. This contrasted with a German resolution on how socialists should combat the threat of war, which carefully avoided mentioning the means by which they could. These two resolutions highlighted real differences between the French and Germans, especially over the general strike, which the Germans rejected outright. They also suggested an interesting paradox: with reformist groupings supporting the most radical measure, while revolutionary Marxists took a cautionary approach. The final resolution decided on was a compromise that declared it was the duty of socialist parties 'to coordinate and increase to the utmost the efforts of the working class against war', while offering no specifics as to how this would be achieved, only that they were to use the 'means which seem to them most appropriate'. Such a compromise unsurprisingly failed to satisfy and this issue was again up for debate at Copenhagen. This time another Frenchman, Édouard Valliant, and the moderate Keir Hardie, endorsed by the Labour Party, would propose the strike. A similar debate ensued, with the German delegates eventually coming out victorious, for, as one member of the committee on militarism remarked, 'the

Austrians and Germans come from the countries where militarism is strongest and therefore have the sad advantage of being experts on the question'.<sup>4</sup>

In the main, these debates at the International have dominated historians' discussions of socialism, antimilitarism and the question of war. However, as Kevin Callahan has noted, the International was not a purely internationalist organization, but combined patriotism and international solidarity in what he has labelled 'inter-nationalism'.<sup>5</sup> Though conditioned by what was being said at these congresses, a debate, conditioned by national contexts, was also held away from them by the national groupings of the International and the wider movements they represented. These national responses, however, have featured much less in the literature on European socialists' response to war and in the wider literature on responses to the growing nationalism and militarism of the Edwardian years. This is especially the case with the British socialist and labour movements, traditionally seen as a reformist and parochial section, with little to add to the debate and little to say on foreign policy more generally.<sup>6</sup> More recently, some work has sought to challenge some aspects of this interpretation. Important reinterpretations of Labour's (including the Independent Labour Party's) foreign policy, relationship to the International and their attitude to war more generally have been produced.<sup>7</sup> Others, meanwhile, have offered reassessments of the views of some elements

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<sup>4</sup> Joll, *Second*, 142.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin Callahan, *Demonstration Culture: European Socialism and the Second International, 1889-1914* (Leicester, 2010), viii.

<sup>6</sup> David Martin, 'Ideology and composition' and A.J.A. Morris, 'Labour and foreign affairs: a search for identity and policy', in K.D. Brown (ed.), *The First Labour Party, 1906-1914* (London, 1985), 17-37; 268-91; Ross McKibbin, *Evolution of the Labour Party, 1910-1924* (London, 1974); Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?', *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), 297-331.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Bridgen, *The Labour Party and the Politics of War and Peace 1900-1924* (Woodbridge, 2009); John Callaghan, *The Labour Party and Foreign Policy: A History* (London, 2007); Edward McNeilly, 'Labour and the politics of internationalism, 1906-1914', *Twentieth Century British History*, 20 (2009), 431-53; Rhiannon Vickers, *The Labour Party and the World: Volume 1: The Evolution of Labour's Foreign Policy 1900-51* (Manchester, 2003).

within the socialist movement.<sup>8</sup> Yet, the general strike as a weapon of peace has invariably featured as little more than a footnote in such reassessments, despite the widespread contemporary discussion that it evoked. In part, this is because the strike has been traditionally seen as the particular policy of one man, Keir Hardie, and at best one party, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), rather than the wider movement or the broader Labour Party. It also reflects the tendency to abstract the discussion of labour and socialist foreign policy from the wider domestic context that profoundly influenced the movement's responses.

We must remember that this debate did not take place within a vacuum and this wider context adds to its significance. The 'great labour unrest' in the years before 1914, which saw an unprecedented number of strikes, yet also highlighted inter-union opposition and suggested organized labour ineffectiveness, and the growth of syndicalism, undoubtedly conditioned both support for and opposition to the general strike.<sup>9</sup> It challenged the relationship between trade unions and Labour, itself riven by ideological differences, with the more radical socialist element remaining a minority, and limited by organizational weaknesses. Labour, while appeasing its broad membership, was also trying to establish itself as a parliamentary force. It thus needed to satisfy its socialist core with radical policies such as the strike, while allowing for internal opposition, especially from MPs who may have lost their seat if they advocated such a policy. The tensions of the Edwardian years also invoked broader discussion across the political spectrum, which socialists and the labour movement

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<sup>8</sup> Graham Johnson, *Social Democratic Politics in Britain, 1881-1911* (Lampeter, 2002); Marcus Morris, 'From anti-colonialism to anti-imperialism: the evolution of H. M. Hyndman's critique of empire, c.1875-1905', *Historical Research*, 87 (2014), 294-314.

<sup>9</sup> For an excellent recent overview of the widespread debate on the period see Lewis Mates, *Great Labour Unrest: Rank-and-file Movements and Political Change in the Durham Coalfield* (Manchester, 2016); see also James Thompson, 'The Great Labour Unrest and Political Thought in Britain, 1911-1914', *Labour History Review*, 79 (2014), 37-54.

both took from and informed. This was a complex picture, with militarism not simply the preserve of the right and pacifism or opposition to war not manifesting purely on the left.<sup>10</sup> Britain also had a relatively strong tradition of pacifism, especially within the Liberal Party and through religious non-conformism, which influenced many in their response to the tensions.<sup>11</sup> The debate on the general strike thus brought together disparate views that reflected wider reactions to the threat of war.

This article, then, will examine more thoroughly the domestic response to the general strike, looking beyond just Hardie and the ILP and considering the advocates and critics in their domestic dialogue, illustrating how many in the movement responded to the threat of war. This dialogue is also instructive in a number of other ways. It highlights the necessary negotiation of Labour policy, through diverse interest groups, that has marked a key struggle for the party since its formation. It also demonstrates that this was further complicated by contemporary context. Indeed, this debate surrounding direct action came at a particularly contentious moment, which had ramifications in the post-war period. In this, continuity can be seen between pre-war and post-war Labour policy. A closer examination of the debate, moreover, challenges the central argument about Hardie's motivation for pursuing the policy put forward by Douglas Newton in the one study that has discussed the general strike in detail.<sup>12</sup> Though an immensely detailed study of British socialism and the struggle for peace, Newton tends to focus on the debate through the lens of the international discussions, concluding that the movement was generally indifferent to international affairs.<sup>13</sup> For Newton

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew Johnson has examined the existence of both within the broad spectrum of Liberalism: *Militarism and the British Left, 1911-1914* (London, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> See Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain, 1914-45* (Oxford, 1980).

<sup>12</sup> Douglas Newton, *British Labour, European Socialism and the Struggle for Peace 1889-1914* (Oxford, 1985).

<sup>13</sup> For a critique see Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats, 1900-1931* (Oxford, 1994).

the pursuit of this policy was purely for its propaganda benefits: 'there is some doubt ... whether the advocates of an anti-war general strike within the ILP genuinely believed in the measure as a practical weapon'. Instead, they 'believed in the strike as a spectre worth summoning forth in order to scare the ruling elites into the paths of peace'.<sup>14</sup> This article, though, will highlight how many genuinely believed in the possibilities of the strike, doing so up until the moment war broke out and returning to it after war had ended.

### **Calling for the strike**

British socialists, or at least those who kept abreast of the discussions at congresses of the International, were clearly aware from the 1890s that some continental socialists were promoting the general strike as a means to avoid war. Indeed, it is suggested that Hardie had first endorsed the concept as early as 1896 in the aftermath of the Jameson Raid.<sup>15</sup> Yet, it would not be until the first Moroccan crisis in 1905 and 1906 that individuals from within the movement would publicly advocate the general strike as a weapon of peace. In response to the crisis, the *Labour Leader*, the newspaper of the ILP, called for 'an international general strike which would speedily change the war-like tone of the aggressors. The workers can speedily stop war. Their means of defence lie not in lifting the sword, but in laying down the hammer and shovel'.<sup>16</sup> Though initially this call was not taken up extensively within the party or the wider movement, given its radical nature, it evidently struck a chord with a sufficient number and the idea gradually gained more support. By January 1908, ILP support was

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<sup>14</sup> Newton, *British*, 258. In *Demonstration Culture*, Callahan argues something similar about the discussions within the International.

<sup>15</sup> Newton, *British*, 251-2.

<sup>16</sup> *Labour Leader*, 9 March 1906.

adequately widespread for them to move a resolution at the Labour Party conference that attacked growing militarism and urged the conference to examine 'the question of formulating a policy of international action in the event of immediate danger or actual occurrence of war'.<sup>17</sup> The resolution was clear evidence that many in the ILP now considered the general strike as an important weapon in the workers' arsenal for avoiding war.

In part, this progression was a response to the escalating Anglo-German rivalry, the pervasive militarism that was casting an ever-larger shadow over European relations and the wider domestic debate. It was also a response to their fellow British socialists, in particular Robert Blatchford and H.M. Hyndman, who were very publicly professing their fears of the so-called 'German menace'. Hyndman accused the Germans of 'making ready for an invasion of this country' and in preparation was 'building a fleet strong enough to cover that critical military operation'. They did not want war but to 'tell the truth because we wish our country to keep clear of war with Germany. Subterfuges and sham peace twaddle are dangerous on both sides of the North Sea'.<sup>18</sup> Thus, Blatchford contended that 'if we do not want war with Germany we must be strong enough to cause Germany to want peace' and so called for increased armaments expenditure to bring about peace.<sup>19</sup> For the *Labour Leader*, these 'extraordinary outbursts' were unforgivable, declaring that 'no more humiliating incident has disfigured the history of our movement'. Instead, they believed that peace 'lies in the growth of the international solidarity of Labour', not in peddling the arguments of arms manufacturers. As such, 'had Mr Blatchford devoted his pen to a splendid appeal for a definite treaty between the Socialist and Labour movements of Britain, Germany, and France,

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<sup>17</sup> Newton, *British*, 253.

<sup>18</sup> *Justice*, 14 March 1908.

<sup>19</sup> *Daily Mail*, 16 December 1909. For a fuller discussion of these claims see Marcus Morris, 'Peace, but not at any price: British socialists' calls for peace on the eve of World War One', in Lucy Bland and Richard Carr (eds.), *Labour, Radicalism and World War One* (Manchester, forthcoming).



pledging them to proclaim a general strike in case of war, he would have done a real service to the cause of Socialism'.<sup>20</sup>

As tensions continued to grow, especially during the naval scare of 1909, so did the numbers calling for the general strike and the force with which they were making their calls. Hardie, therefore, suggested to one ILP branch that 'if the worst comes to the worst' he would advocate a strike in the war industries in order to prevent war.<sup>21</sup> Support for the general strike from within the ILP increased over the next year or so, while those advocates made a determined effort to convince the wider movement of the value of the idea. In part they were reacting to the belief that, in the words of Ramsay MacDonald, 'the Labour Party must make itself the organ of the tendency in the nation which made for peace and internationalism'.<sup>22</sup> As part of those efforts, ILP head office issued a report on 24 May 1910 on militarism and the threat of impending war, which they intended to submit to the upcoming Copenhagen congress of the International. Its significance lay in the resolution that called on the workers of Europe 'to lay down their tools on the first rumour of war'.<sup>23</sup> The report demonstrates two important points. First, that contrary to the traditional assumptions about Labour's limited desire to contribute to debate in the International, the ILP at least were hoping to directly influence it, even in the face of concerted opposition. Second, that the report represented the first definite proposal of the general strike as a weapon against war, while also clarifying the terms of its use. This was calling for the general strike not as a response to a declaration of war, interrupting mobilization, the provision of troops and their movement to the front,

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<sup>20</sup> *Labour Leader*, 14 August 1908.

<sup>21</sup> Newton, *British*, 253.

<sup>22</sup> *Labour Leader*, 3 February 1910.

<sup>23</sup> Newton, *British*, 255.

but for the strike as a response to the rumour of war or any crisis preceding its outbreak. They were thus now starting to think about how to operationalize the strike.

At Copenhagen, the discussion of the steps that could be taken to avoid war was heated, with the same paradoxical response from reformists and revolutionaries. Reacting to the debate on the general strike at the congress, the British section of the International Socialist Bureau (ISB), which effectively acted as the executive of the International, 'decided upon inviting every affiliated organization [in Britain] to give an opinion' on the matter.<sup>24</sup> The reaction was mixed, as it had been over the previous years and would continue to be until the outbreak of war, with varied opinions for and against the strike as a weapon of peace given. Unsurprisingly, then, it remained the subject of debate at Labour Party and Social Democratic Party (SDP) conferences over the next couple of years.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting the division within the movement, the next two Labour Party conferences at Leicester in 1911 and Birmingham in 1912 came to different conclusions on the matter. At Leicester, the delegates voted against the adoption of the general strike, while at Birmingham it was adopted after being carefully steered through by the ILP leadership. A domestic dialogue had thus been ongoing for a number of years and did not die with the adoption of the general strike in 1912 (there would be no proposal at the 1913 conference), with the debate about the viability of the strike as a weapon of peace still ongoing at the outbreak of war.

Support, then, had grown for the strike as a weapon of peace from within the Labour Party. This was neither purely a response to those pointing out the German threat and calling

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<sup>24</sup> London School of Economics Archives (hereafter LSE), ILP 6/12/1 – ISB (British Section), circular to affiliated organisations, n.d., 'A Strike Against War'.

<sup>25</sup> The SDP was the oldest of Britain's socialist organisations, starting life as the Social Democratic Federation in 1884 and changing its name to the SDP in 1906, in turn forming the British Socialist Party in 1911. For its history, see Martin Crick, *The History of the Social Democratic Federation* (Keele, 1994).

for further arms to counter it, nor simply a reaction to the International's discussions, nor was it just seen as a propaganda tool. To be sure, its advocates saw it as weapon of last resort, but that was not because of any question over its efficacy as a response to the current crisis and as a weapon of peace. Thus when the British section of the ISB solicited the opinions of the wider movement, they did so on the premise that 'those who support an Anti-War Strike do not do so as an alternative to political action, but as supplemental to that action'. As such, it was 'to be used as a last resort where political action is not yet sufficiently developed to prevent it'.<sup>26</sup> In many ways, they were consciously playing down the proposal's radicalness to encourage support from a reformist or more moderate membership. They were also painfully aware, as the effects of recent industrial strife had demonstrated, of just how little influence the movement, and especially socialists, actually had. Politically, their influence was limited too, with Labour's third-party status. The general strike therefore gave the workers a direct way in which they could prevent national policy makers from taking Europe to war that overcame their relatively weak position. It thus made it an attractive measure, despite its radicalness, to moderate organisations like Labour, even if it paradoxically remained less attractive for revolutionary groups.

The strategy, as we have seen, has been most closely associated with Keir Hardie and he was certainly its most vocal advocate, but he had support from most of the ILP leadership and from many others outside of the ILP. Hardie's reasoning centred on a number of assumptions about the solidarity of European socialist parties and trades unions, the effectiveness of direct, collective action, and the views of the working classes of Europe. Hardie believed in the power of the International, seeing the fraternal links that bound its

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<sup>26</sup> LSE, ILP 6/12/1 – ISB (British Section), circular to affiliated organisations, n.d., 'A Strike Against War'.

member organisations together as a key bulwark to the war that would be against their interests. This also reflected his sincerely-held internationalism. He thus commented that ‘the meeting together of large numbers of men and women of different nationalities tend to rub off awkward corners and foster the true catholic spirit of International solidarity’.<sup>27</sup> The *Socialist Review* expanded on such an understanding, arguing that the International ‘has now become the voice of the International movement in its struggle to find expression in every land’ and thus ‘the International has become the sole means of European peace now’.<sup>28</sup> Echoing such sentiments, the *Labour Leader* boasted after the Basle congress in 1912 that ‘five hundred delegates were present, representing the organised working class of every country in Europe, but here no feeling of distrust or ill-will separated nation from nation’. Indeed, they went further, claiming that ‘whilst the Governments of Germany and Great-Britain were holding their fleets in readiness for conflict, August Bebel and Keir Hardie were standing side by side to declare that the workers for whom they speak harbour no feeling of enmity towards each other’.<sup>29</sup> Hardie even used the International as a thinly-veiled threat in the House of Commons, reminding the House during a debate on army and naval expenditure that ‘there are certain factors which should not be overlooked, and the Socialist and Labour movement is one of these’. He continued, outlining how ‘there are now 600 Socialist and Labour Members [of Parliament] in the different countries of Europe representing a voting strength of 9,051,000 voters’.<sup>30</sup>

At the heart of Hardie’s and his fellow advocates’ belief in the International was its potential to be the facilitator of European-wide working-class action, which had the power to

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<sup>27</sup> *Labour Leader*, 2 June 1900.

<sup>28</sup> *Socialist Review*, October 1910.

<sup>29</sup> *Labour Leader*, 28 November 1912.

<sup>30</sup> *Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 22, 13 March 1911, 1928-30.

bring nations to their knees. This, of course, was central to the general strike being an effective weapon of peace: 'any joint action of this kind would obviously require that mutual confidence had been established amongst the organized workers of the countries affected'.<sup>31</sup> Hardie evidently presumed that it had, while he also assumed that direct and united working-class action would guarantee peace. He argued that 'if the warmongers in Germany and in this country knew beforehand that the working class of the two countries had come to an understanding, and would stand by it', this would 'compel them to submit to arbitration the points which would otherwise have been submitted to war'.<sup>32</sup> Thus, he told parliament in 1911 that 'in the event of the scaremongers and warmongers embroiling any two nations, the working classes of these nations should make war impossible by declaring a strike the day war is declared'.<sup>33</sup> Hardie also discussed the operational elements of the plan; for instance in a speech given in Dundee in 1910, he maintained that 'if war was threatened the duty was incumbent on the working class to strike, stop work, stop supplies, stop the railways and shipping, and cease making the guns and materials of war'. He continued, 'if they did that they would soon end war; the very threat of the possibility of such a strike would make statesmen pause before sanctioning its outbreak'.<sup>34</sup> As the threat of war got ever closer, moreover, he advocated an earlier strike. Moving from a last resort once war had broken out, to action that must be taken when the rumour of war was abroad.

The final assumptions that underpinned the calls for the general strike as a weapon of peace centred on why war would be in the workers' worst interests and the conviction that the working classes of Europe did not want war. For Hardie, the key was to show that

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<sup>31</sup> LSE, ILP 6/12/1 – ISB (British Section), circular to affiliated organisations, n.d., 'A Strike Against War'.

<sup>32</sup> *Labour Leader*, 28 October 1910.

<sup>33</sup> *Parliamentary Debates (Commons)*, 22, 13 March 1911, 1928-30.

<sup>34</sup> *Labour Leader*, 4 November 1910.

‘militarism strengthens capitalism by perpetuating the fiction that there must be enmity and animosity between nations’. Instead, he argued that ‘international social democracy says no – that the interests of workers of all countries are identical – and demands co-operation and not war, fraternity, not military rivalry’.<sup>35</sup> ‘War is ruinous to the workers’ cause’, he insisted, ‘it stirs international bitterness and hate, mutilates and destroys young life, arrests social reform, and adds millions to taxation’.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, British socialists’ duty was to ‘show the organised workers ... that they have the power, if they have the will, to end it’. Indeed, ‘when the organised workers offer active and passive resistance to war, the world’s peace will be proclaimed’.<sup>37</sup> Supporters of the strike argued that ‘international quarrels are the crimes of financiers and their Governments’ and that ‘in the competition for trade routes, ports, and the new fields of exploitation, the workers have no part’.<sup>38</sup> War only served the interests of armaments firms and their shareholders.<sup>39</sup>

This argument was augmented by a particular conception of the workers and what they would and would not do in the face of war. In many ways, Hardie and his fellow advocates of the general strike as a weapon of peace had a naïve and simple faith in the workers of Europe, their solidarity and the primacy of class over nation. Indeed, this faith seemed particularly naïve given the context of labour unrest that saw division among the workers and the organisations that supposedly represented them. In arguing for the general strike, labour and socialist figures simply did not believe that the exploited workers of Europe would blindly follow their masters into battle against their fellow workers in a fight that was

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<sup>35</sup> Keir Hardie, ‘Foreword’ in Harry Dubery, *A Labour Case Against Conscription* (London, 1913), 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Labour Leader*, 8 December 1911.

<sup>37</sup> *Labour Leader*, 2 February 1912.

<sup>38</sup> *Labour Leader*, 28 November 1912.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Snowden most forcefully argued this in parliament and then in print, see *Dreadnoughts and Dividends: Exposure of the Armaments Ring* (Boston, 1914).

not theirs. This was by no means a new idea in the movement. At the International's 1896 congress held in London it was declared that 'between the workers of different nationalities there is absolutely no quarrel'.<sup>40</sup> Hardie thus built on the traditions of the International when he justified the strike at the Labour Party conference in 1911. He suggested that 'the German worker does not want to fight his English brother, and the English worker does not desire to fight his German brother'. In the face of war 'the workers of the world would pledge their faith to each other that they would stop finding soldiers or producing war material till the war came to an end. Of this I am certain, that the workers of the world will agree to use all their power to prevent that greatest of all crimes – the sending out of a man to shoot his brother'.<sup>41</sup>

Support for the general strike was not limited to just the leading socialists within the ILP, who in many ways were the minority, and voices from across the labour movement supported the idea. At a demonstration in London organised by the French *Confédération générale du travail* in 1911, for instance, Tom Mann, now a leading syndicalist, spoke from the platform to endorse the use of industrial action to avoid war.<sup>42</sup> Support for (and opposition to) the strike could also be found in the non-aligned *Daily Herald*. George Lansbury justifying the paper's establishment of the paper commented that 'we want to have thrashed out in a perfectly friendly manner, those questions connected not only with the theory of the general strike, or the right to strike, but the fundamental utility of the general strike'.<sup>43</sup> An editorial from 1914 summed up its position on the general strike when it declared that Europe's unions 'must strike against war' and that though 'the general strike has been declared over and over again to be as yet a dream ... in the case of war, where the one vital

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<sup>40</sup> BL Add MS 50680 ff.160-63 – 'Authorised Programme: International Socialist Workers and Trade Union Congress, London, 1896'.

<sup>41</sup> *Daily Express*, 1 February 1911.

<sup>42</sup> Tom Mann, *Memoirs* (London, 1923), 280.

<sup>43</sup> *Daily Herald*, 16 April 1912.

necessity is means of communication, it is as simple as it will be efficacious'.<sup>44</sup> Support for the strike also seems to have been particularly strong in certain localities.

In Bradford, for instance, both the local ILP branch, along with its newspaper, the *Bradford Pioneer*, and the trades council approved of this particular weapon of peace. The council confirmed 'the proposal for a general stoppage of work in all countries, and further we urge upon all workers the necessity for making preparations for a simultaneous stoppage of work in those countries where war is threatened'.<sup>45</sup> Douglas Newton has suggested that there was 'sympathy for the idea of an anti-war strike among certain large and important trades councils'.<sup>46</sup> In Derby, the trades council's endorsement was justified in familiar ways: 'the workers were now realising the gravity and importance of the matter because they were recognising that war with all its horrors was always inimical to the interests of the working class'.<sup>47</sup> In Exeter, meanwhile, a contributor to a local newspaper argued that though 'such an idea may be declared to be of the Utopian order', the strike's strength was the feelings it would evoke, for 'an enormous force is exercised by sentiment'.<sup>48</sup> Simply put, there was real propaganda value to the proposal too, in demonstrating the power of the movement and in frightening the ruling elite into caution. Douglas Newton has suggested that most in the movement saw no further value to the proposal, but as illustrated here, many trusted its efficacy too, despite the on-going structural weaknesses of Labour and the wider movement. Nevertheless, the strike as a weapon of peace was certainly not supported by all, with the dialogue that ensued illustrative of the movement's sense of its own weaknesses, the

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<sup>44</sup> *Daily Herald*, 29 July 1914.

<sup>45</sup> Tony Jowitt and Keith Laybourn, 'War and socialism the experience of the Bradford ILP 1914-1918', in David James, Tony Jowitt and Keith Laybourn (eds), *The Centennial History of the Independent Labour Party* (Halifax, 1992), 164.

<sup>46</sup> Newton, *British*, 277.

<sup>47</sup> *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 29 August 1912.

<sup>48</sup> *The Western Times* (Exeter), 29 August 1912.



operational challenges in the wake of recent labour unrest, the division over the direction of Labour policy and negotiation between different elements that it necessitated.

### **Opposition to the strike**

The domestic dialogue was most in evidence at Labour Party conferences where supporters of the general strike, and it was invariably members of the ILP, attempted to get the measure adopted by the wider party. They received immediate and direct criticism from the labour movement, especially trade unions, which mirrored that of other British socialists, and from outside of the movement. In outlining this opposition, this section will highlight the different themes that reflected wider concerns, which united the critics of the general strike as a weapon of peace. A large amount of time was dedicated to the proposal at the Leicester conference in 1911, when the delegates were asked to confirm ‘a recommendation that the opinion of the “organised working-class movement of the world” be taken on the utility of the general strike as a means of preventing war’. However, as the *Manchester Guardian* noted, ‘the discussion really resolved itself into a controversy as to the desirability and practicability of the general strike’.<sup>49</sup> The conference declined to court the opinion of the wider movement, the *Labour Leader* remarking that ‘the defeat by six votes ... was an intense disappointment to Mr Hardie and his supporters’.<sup>50</sup> Perhaps this was unsurprising given the relative radicalness of the proposal, the domestic labour unrest and the moderateness of many of those in attendance. Indeed, given that radicalness, it is testament to the genuine belief in the power of the general strike proposal that it was adopted and that its advocates

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<sup>49</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 1 February 1911.

<sup>50</sup> *Labour Leader*, 10 February 1911.

were able to win over enough of the proposal's detractors. As such, part of its significance lay in the recurrence of the debate post war.<sup>51</sup>

A number of objections were raised to the proposal from the various elements of Labour's broad church. The most common criticism put forward concerned the practicability of the general strike. The MP, G.A. Roberts, contended that it was 'an unpracticable [sic], undesirable, and unworthy thing for organised Labour to take up'. Tom Shaw, a local councillor from Colne, echoed his thoughts: 'if you were well enough organised to call such a strike ... you would never need to use it. While if you do not possess the power, all your talk about it is mere wind'. Such critics were highlighting the movement's weaknesses, which advocates of the strike had seemingly ignored, perhaps not wanting to acknowledge their own minority positions. In short, if labour was sufficiently strong enough to arrange such a strike it could end the war by parliamentary means. Thus, in prioritising the development of the nascent Labour Party, and foreshadowing his reorganisation of the party in 1918, Arthur Henderson concluded that 'to advocate such a policy in this country would divert attention from parliamentary action, in which we shall find the instrument for the social and economic salvation of the workers of this country'.<sup>52</sup> Others questioned whether direct action was an appropriate response. 'Mr Gordon (Bilston) said all strikes were foredoomed to failure by reason of the fact that trade unions were not nationally united' as evident in recent events. It was a revolutionary act and 'the acceptance of this resolution would tend to bring the British movement into discredit'.<sup>53</sup> Others approached the issue from a different angle, Mr Jarvis, a delegate from Bristol, concluding that 'I am not prepared to lay down all arms and to throw

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<sup>51</sup> For the post-war discussions on direct action see Matthew Worley, *Labour Inside the Gate: A History of the British Labour Party between the Wars* (London, 2005), 34-8.

<sup>52</sup> *Daily Express*, 1 February 1911; *Labour Leader*, 3 February 1911.

<sup>53</sup> *Labour Leader*, 28 April 1911.

myself into the arms of any one who may come along. I want some means of resistance. So long as people have arms to use against me I want to arms to use against them'.<sup>54</sup> He thus perceived the strike to be a pacifist measure, an unwanted label. Given the electoral failures of 'pacifist' Labour candidates in the post-war years, this was strategically sensible. Such criticism was not just confined to the conference hall and was repeated at other times within the Labour Party.

J.B. Askew writing to Hardie accepted that 'the general strike would be the most obvious method of avoiding the war danger – were it not that in most cases the government are in a position to make it appear that the war is an aggression on them and an attempt to destroy the independence of the country'. He continued, 'a general strike can only succeed on the assumption that the workers can see through the aims of the government – can understand the hollowness of the *capitalist patriotism* – can see that there is nothing more than swindle and the hunt for profit'. He concluded that 'if they don't see that then I fear they will howl for war rather than the general strike'.<sup>55</sup> Others took up this prescient concern. The *Socialist Review* wrote that 'the call of battle is still the most irresistible and intoxicating of all political appeals, once the beacons of war have been set ablaze'.<sup>56</sup> It concluded that 'we must not rely upon a weapon which will not work at the last moment'.<sup>57</sup> Norman Angell, meanwhile, in a letter to Hardie admitted that though he hoped the strike could work he felt compelled to ask that 'if the General Strike can stop war, why does it not stop armaments, which are as serious in their result for the worker as war itself?'.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> *Daily Express*, 1 February 1911.

<sup>55</sup> LSE, ILP/4/1911/329, J.B. Askew to Keir Hardie, 20 November 1911.

<sup>56</sup> *Socialist Review*, December 1912.

<sup>57</sup> *Socialist Review*, October 1910.

<sup>58</sup> LSE, ILP/4/1913/174, Norman Angell to Keir Hardie, 15 August 1913.

When summarising the discussion at Leicester, the *Manchester Guardian* concluded that generally the opponents of the general strike 'represented the trade unionist element'.<sup>59</sup> The trade unions more generally seemed to be the group within the wider Labour Party most opposed to this weapon of peace, despite their centrality to its success. In this, historians have made comparisons with the European labour movement. Chris Wrigley has thus suggested that in his opposition Arthur Henderson, 'like his German counterparts ... was not willing for the trade union rank-and-file's livelihoods to be put at risk by socialist idealism'.<sup>60</sup> Labour's response to war would thus be a negotiated policy, as so much was in the pre-war years, which incorporated minority socialist views and often-opposed labourist concerns. To emphasise the point, foreign trade unions offered their direct opposition to Hardie. The chairman of the Danish General Federation of Trade Unions suggesting that 'we think it very dubious the propounded remedy will be seen to have any worth'. He believed that the 'result would easy be that a few countries with solid organizations established the strike, while the productions of arms etc. was transferred to countries, where the organizations are weak', namely Russia, and 'the strike thus would be fully, or partially, fruitless'.<sup>61</sup> More generally, though the Trades Union Council would initiate its own inquiry into the viability of the strike as a weapon of peace in 1913, Douglas Newton has highlighted how 'the idea of a general strike had no mass of enthusiastic supporters within the British trade unions' beyond a handful of trades councils. As one British socialist reflected, 'we knew the matter would not interest the trade unionists as a whole and we were right'.<sup>62</sup> The debate thus highlighted the

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<sup>59</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 1 February 1911.

<sup>60</sup> Chris Wrigley, 'The European context: aspects of British labour and continental socialism before 1920', in Matthew Worley (ed.), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1900-1939* (Farnham, 2009), 88.

<sup>61</sup> LSE, ILP/4/1912/153 – C. Madsen to Keir Hardie, 1 November 1912.

<sup>62</sup> Newton, *British*, pp.275-7.

distance between the disparate labour and socialist movements in Britain and perhaps socialists' over-inflated sense of place within those.

There was further criticism from within the wider socialist movement, especially from the rival and Marxist SDP. An article in the party's newspaper, *Justice*, suggested that 'ideally, no doubt, the way to prevent war would be by a general strike in both countries, carried out resolutely and simultaneously at the moment of outbreak'. However, it continued by noting that though 'it is a great idea' it was 'not a great probability'. The article questioned whether 'the British working class is educated enough, organised enough, disciplined enough, or self-sacrificing enough, to execute such a coup?' It concluded that 'every Socialist, in his heart, knows that it would not be so'.<sup>63</sup> Of course, if socialists in the ILP had admitted this, it may have undermined their place within the wider Labour Party. Another article also supported the idea, but stated that 'we do not say that a general strike in the event of war would be practicable at the present moment in any country in Europe'. The author did note the propaganda value of the proposal though, believing 'that there is no reason against affirming the principle; and such an affirmation would in itself be of value in showing the workers the power for peace they might exercise by organised effort'.<sup>64</sup> Other critics simply reiterated the belief that 'a strike or insurrection is not possible', lamenting that the workers were 'unable to prevent war, just as they have not the power to make war'.<sup>65</sup> Perhaps one of the SDP's leading figures, Harry Quelch, put in most pithily, when he remarked that 'I can call spirits from the vasty deep, but will they come when I do call them?'.<sup>66</sup> As well as an apparent paradox at the International, then, there existed one within the British movement too. This

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<sup>63</sup> *Justice*, 22 January 1910.

<sup>64</sup> *Justice*, 10 September 1910.

<sup>65</sup> *Justice*, 20 November 1912.

<sup>66</sup> Johnson, *Social Democratic*, 125.

radical measure was rejected by the radical SDP, despite its adoption by more moderate figures.

Other factions from within the movement also outlined their opposition to the general strike as a weapon of peace. Robert Blatchford, unsurprisingly, did not believe such a policy would be effective. Thus he wrote in an article in the *Daily Mail* that the ‘theory of joint action by British and German Socialists for the prevention of war’ was one ‘of those harmless games with which some Labour statesmen amuse themselves on dull days’. He continued, arguing that ‘the main result of it would be to hamper our Fleet. The Germans would settle their strike in swift and summary fashion – by the arguments of “blood and iron”’.<sup>67</sup> This stance was echoed in the pages of the *Clarion*. Alex Thompson commented that ‘in Britain many unions have condemned the plan and very few have endorsed it: this is in time of peace when heads are cool and pulses calm’ and so he questioned ‘how much support then would the proposal find at a time of Mafeking fever?’ This, Thompson felt, ‘fully justified those of us who have expressed scepticism as to the feasibility of this device’.<sup>68</sup> Criticisms such as these, though, were not limited to labour and socialist movements, with the wider press also examining this weapon of peace.

As recent studies have demonstrated, war enthusiasm in the years leading up to the outbreak of war in 1914 was not as widespread as historians have traditionally suggested.<sup>69</sup> Many in Britain, including the majority of the nation’s media, did not want war, and were looking for ways to avoid what even the *Daily Mail* believed would be the ‘greatest

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<sup>67</sup> *Daily Mail*, 16 December 1909.

<sup>68</sup> *Clarion*, 18 April 1913.

<sup>69</sup> Adrian Gregory, ‘British “war enthusiasm” in 1914: a reassessment’, in Gail Braybon (ed.), *Evidence, History and the Great War: Historians and the Impact of 1914-18* (Oxford, 2003); Adrian Gregory, *The Last Great War: British Society and the First World War* (Cambridge, 2008); Catriona Pennell, *A kingdom united: popular responses to the outbreak of the First World War in Britain and Ireland* (Oxford, 2012).

catastrophe in human history'.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, the *Manchester Guardian* reported that 'evidence grows that public opinion is becoming shocked and alarmed at the thought that this country could be dragged into the horrors of a general European war' and that 'there is no Jingo feeling, no war fever, in the country'.<sup>71</sup> Despite the wider anti-war sentiment that prevailed in the period, especially from a relatively strong pacifist movement, and the campaign for the preservation of Britain's neutrality, those outside of the movement did not see the strike as a viable option. Nevertheless, the fact that they discussed it, suggests that they did see it as a serious proposition, rather than merely a propaganda opportunity.

The starting point for criticism in the *Spectator* was the 'persistence of patriotism' in the International. In recording events at Copenhagen in 1910, the paper commented that 'the project appeals to what at present is an unknown element – the extent to which Socialism is superseding patriotism as a motive of human action'. However, the discussion at the congress suggested to them that 'we do not believe for a moment that patriotism is extinct in any European country' and 'at the outbreak of war it would be strong enough to make short work of such counsels as those of M. Valliant, M. Jaurés and Mr Keir Hardie we have no doubt at all'.<sup>72</sup> A letter to the *Spectator*, meanwhile, focused on the possibility of the strike in Germany. The correspondent argued that 'such a movement could be much more easily crushed in Germany, where most have been through the military mill, by the expedient of calling all the strikers to the colours – a call they could not resist without the most serious consequences – and once embodied the 'roll of the drum' would soon achieve the rest'.<sup>73</sup> This perhaps

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<sup>70</sup> *Daily Mail*, 29 July 1914.

<sup>71</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, 1 August 1914; 3 August 1914. This should not suggest a complete absence of enthusiasm, but it was qualified, as David Silbey demonstrates in *The British Working Class and Enthusiasm for War, 1914-1916* (London, 2005).

<sup>72</sup> *Spectator*, 10 September 1910.

<sup>73</sup> *Spectator*, 31 January 1914.

explains the paradox of German socialists' rejection of the strike, despite its radical nature. The *Daily Express* kept it much more simple, labelling the general strike 'a revolutionary and anti-patriotic proposal'.<sup>74</sup> This was a powerful argument against socialists who had to constantly rebut charges of foreignness made against them.

Such sentiments as these were also offered in the local press, showing how this debate mattered given the contemporary context. In Derby, for instance, it was noted that 'in declaring a general strike they must be satisfied that the workers would respond'. However, instances were cited from the recent unrest where 'the workers had not responded to the call in sectional strikes' and the likelihood that they would in the case of war was questioned.<sup>75</sup> 'Plain Peter' in the *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette* wrote a particularly scathing article. The author condemned the strike as a weapon of peace from a number of angles. It was an 'impracticable proposition', for 'every working-man ... knows that the "strike" as a mean of obtaining redress or better conditions, has failed lamentably, far oftener than not in the past' and in this case would fail too. In attacking Hardie directly, the article continued stating that 'his solution, let me assure him, will not be approved by the working class of this country'. The reasoning behind this was simple, 'we are still patriotic enough to fight for "England, Home and Beauty"', and no amount of Heir-Hardieism can divert a true-born Englishman from doing his duty when the day of duty comes'.<sup>76</sup> Thus in this domestic dialogue, criticism came from disparate voices within and without the movement, yet tended to focus around the same themes.

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<sup>74</sup> *Daily Express*, 1 February 1911.

<sup>75</sup> *Derby Daily Telegraph*, 29 August 1912.

<sup>76</sup> *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 10 February 1911.



The criticism voiced more than any other centred on the practicability of the strike. Many felt that the strike as a weapon of redress was flawed in any situation, which the events of the 'great labour unrest' had merely emphasised. These critics felt that this would certainly be the case with the supra-national strike central to this proposal. Indeed, there was a question over whether the movement had the organizational ability to make this possible and when the strike would need to be called to be effective. As such, the reluctance of British trade unionists, their continental counterparts and European socialists was indicative of this problem and evidence for why it would not work. Could the advocates of the strike guarantee the universal participation of the Europe's workers once war had broken out (or when it seemed only a possibility)? Indeed, many critics agreed that those campaigners would find it an impossible task to persuade the workers that war would not be in their interests. They believed, rightly as it turned out, that once war was declared duty, patriotism and nationalism would win out, and that the workers of Europe would rush to the colours in what would be presented as a defensive war, while the workers' internationalism was rhetorical at best. Finally, many questioned whether the general strike was the best option for a reformist labour movement, suggesting that they would achieve more through parliamentary, rather than direct, action. Largely, it is these criticisms that were dominant in the domestic dialogue, but that did not mean that the strike's supporters gave up in their campaign for its use as a weapon of peace.

### **Continued campaigns**

Douglas Newton, as we have seen, has suggested that the general strike was adopted primarily for its propaganda benefits. To be sure, the adherents of the strike did recognise

this potential and undoubtedly welcomed it. Yet, those who were the keenest champions of the proposal were still calling for its implementation in the last few days of peace in early August 1914. Hardie and his supporters, despite rejection at the International would continue to regularly advocate the strike as a weapon of peace to both their party, the wider socialist movement and the British public more generally. This was most obvious on the pages of *Labour Leader*, which continued to adopt a pro-strike stance. Indeed, they were keen to stress their centrality to the plan, claiming that the ILP ‘has pioneered the proposal that the workers should lay down their tools when conflict is threatened’ and it was because of their work that ‘the International are now taking the opinions of their affiliated organisations upon it’.<sup>77</sup> Though exaggerating their role, it demonstrated the strength of their support for the general strike, which was expressed beyond the movement too.

Some Labour MPs, for instance, raised the possibility of the strike in parliament when arms expenditure was discussed. Though others rejected it for fear that it might alienate their constituents. Many in the movement also continued to demand the use of the weapon from the platform. Thus, Hardie told an audience in Trafalgar Square in 1913 that ‘the working class of the two nations will take the issues of war and peace out of the hands of bankrupt statesmen, and, instead ... will join hands and hearts, and upon a given day make war forever impossible by means ... of the weapon of the general strike’.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, there was debate within Labour as to how best to reinforce this message and effectively publicise the idea. At the 1913 annual conference of the Labour Party, therefore, a resolution was passed that called upon working-class wives and mothers to assist ‘by teaching their children the meaning

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<sup>77</sup> *Labour Leader*, 28 November 1912.

<sup>78</sup> *Labour Leader*, 28 August 1913.

of the international solidarity of the workers'.<sup>79</sup> Norman Angell, meanwhile, wrote to Hardie explaining that 'I believe I could help this campaign ... by making your speaking force *really* familiar with the answers to all the sophisms they are likely to meet'. For, he continued, 'there is a very strong tendency ... to depend upon anti-capitalist declamation, and not really answer those who talk about the needs of 'defence' at all'.<sup>80</sup>

As tensions grew in 1914, the message was presented ever more strongly and with increasing desperation. Moreover, this was not just contained to British shores, Kenneth Morgan illustrating how 'throughout the early summer of 1914 Hardie was actively involved in negotiations with the International Socialist Bureau in pushing the concept of a general strike'.<sup>81</sup> Nowhere was the strength of commitment to the strike more evident than in the *Labour Leader*. An article from 30 July saw their arguments put forward most vehemently, backing them up with grave warnings:

The next few days will be critical for the peace of Europe, and Socialists of all countries should be up and acting ... a very grave responsibility rests upon the Socialist and Labour movement of Europe at this moment. Our movement is the guardian of peace. It is fifty million strong, and if it will only act unitedly it can make war impossible ... if the organised workers will demonstrate with sufficient force, a European war can be made impossible ... We have the power to stop it ... now is the time to strike this blow for peace. The delay of even a few days would be fatal.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Vickers, *Labour*, 56-7.

<sup>80</sup> LSE, ILP/4/1913/174, Norman Angell to Keir Hardie, 15 August 1913.

<sup>81</sup> Kenneth Morgan, *Keir Hardie: Radical and Socialist* (London, 1975), 261.

<sup>82</sup> *Labour Leader*, 30 July 1914.

Such words were highly prophetic, with delay, indifference and inaction indeed proving fatal. Yet, Hardie would still continue to push the general strike. In a letter to the *Daily Citizen* on 1 August, he noted that 'I hold the opinion strongly that organised Labour has the power ... to render war practically impossible. The threat of an international stoppage of work, provided it was backed by proper organisation and by mutual confidence, would of itself be sufficient for this purpose'.<sup>83</sup> That he called this a 'revolutionary moment', though, may suggest one reason for its failure. In the movement's last great stand against the war, meanwhile, a mass demonstration held on 2 August in Trafalgar Square, figures from across the movement were still arguing that war could be avoided by 'a national war strike', with such calls greeted by 'loud cheers' according to the *Daily Herald*.<sup>84</sup> So close to war, this was not about propaganda; the strike was seen as the last-remaining weapon of peace available to the workers of Europe.

The sincerity with which its advocates called for the strike is evident after 1918 when many in the movement returned to it in further periods of industrial militancy and political uncertainty. The general strike was raised as a possible response to military action in Ireland. Matthew Worley has shown, moreover, how direct action informed Labour Party discussions during 1919 and 1920, with serious plans made in August 1920 for a general strike alongside trade unions in opposition to British involvement in the Russia-Poland war. A national council of action was established in this 'Hands off Russia' campaign and 350 local councils were also created to co-ordinate action should it be needed.<sup>85</sup> Though at a national level Labour stepped back from direct action, this did not preclude its future consideration. In 1933, for example, headlines announced that the 'Labour Party demands general strike if war breaks out'.<sup>86</sup> It

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<sup>83</sup> Emrys Hughes(ed.), *Keir Hardie's Speeches and Writings* (Glasgow, n.d.), 174.

<sup>84</sup> *Devon and Exeter Daily Gazette*, 3 August 1914; *Daily Herald*, 3 August 1914.

<sup>85</sup> Worley, *Labour*, 35.

<sup>86</sup> *Hull Daily Mail*, 4 October 1933.

was discussed at the TUC the year after and by the Scottish TUC in 1935.<sup>87</sup> Furthermore, in 1936 the ILP adopted the resolution that a general strike would be called in the event of war.<sup>88</sup> The pre-war calls for the strike, then, were neither meaningless rhetoric nor simply propaganda tools and there was clear continuity in the support for the strike between pre- and post-war Labour.

### **The failure of the campaign for the strike**

That many in the movement continued to advocate the general strike as a weapon of peace until the moment of war and that it was formally adopted by the Labour Party should not distract us from the reality that support for the proposal remained limited to a minority and that its successful prosecution looked a remote possibility. This does not diminish the importance of the debate. Indeed, the factors that explain the more or less limited support in turn reveal much about the wider context in which the dialogue took place. At the heart of socialist division over how to respond to the growing tensions were domestic struggles, within the labour movement and external to it. The growing tension was something that domestic socialist rivals hoped to use to gain political capital over their opponents. Such desires equally conditioned the response of their opponents, and so though the SDP might be able to offer support in principle, they felt compelled to offer criticism too as part of any domestic dialogue. Coupled with this were socialists' often-difficult relationships with trade unions, with many in labour highlighting division, mutual distrust and organizational limitations as fundamental flaws in the implementation of the strike.

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<sup>87</sup> *North Devon Journal*, 13 September 1934; *Scotsman*, 25 April 1935.

<sup>88</sup> *Nottingham Evening Post*, 13 April 1936.

Much of the ultimate rejection of the strike results from the attitudes of the trade unions, which made it impossible to operationalize. As Chris Wrigley has suggested, 'much of the British trade union movement was barely at ease with the ILP before 1914, let alone in sympathy with the SDF or continental Marxists' and, as such, this was a significant episode in the long-running negotiation of policy between Labour and the unions.<sup>89</sup> To persuade the predominately Liberal or even Conservative voting unions that continental workers' interests were their interests too proved to be an impossible task. Duncan Tanner has thus gone as far as to claim that 'many union leaders were emphatically patriotic, to the point, in some instances, of xenophobia' and so socialist internationalism never appealed.<sup>90</sup> It was no surprise, then, to see leading trade union leaders and MPs, such as Ben Tillett and Will Thorne, conducting recruitment campaigns once war broke out. The domestic dialogue discussed above suggests that such reservations were not just limited to the unions and that many in the labour and socialist movement were not convinced by such internationalist ideals.<sup>91</sup> Thus their limited support for the strike may not have been a comment on its worth as a weapon, rather the lack of belief in the weapon's ultimate aim, with peace not as universally desired as those advocating the idea supposed and the internationalism of the workers more rhetoric than reality.

Nevertheless, the efficacy of the strike was central to critics' charges in the domestic dialogue and the lack of support for the general strike as a weapon of peace illustrates the

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<sup>89</sup> Chris Wrigley, 'Widening horizons? British labour and the Second International', *Labour History Review*, 58 (1993), 11.

<sup>90</sup> Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900-1918* (Cambridge, 1990), 361.

<sup>91</sup> For a wider discussion see Neil Redfern, *Class or Nation: Communists, Imperialism and Two World Wars* (London, 2005).

widely-held ambivalence towards the strike as an instrument of direct action.<sup>92</sup> Hyndman summed up the feelings of many when he noted that ‘I have never known what I should call a successful strike’.<sup>93</sup> Such a claim was all the more pertinent given the timing of the debate. With a mass wave of strikes across Britain happening simultaneously, the idea of a general strike was in effect tested. That the effectiveness of such strikes was uncertain in turn generated questions over the movement’s capability to launch such a strike and highlighted its organizational limitations, with many concluding that it was not a viable tactic for maintaining peace. That many socialists chose not to acknowledge these limitations tells us about their perception of the movement, their possible detachment from the majority and their desire to be seen as revolutionary even if they ultimately toed a moderate line. It also illustrates the challenges faced in the development of the Labour Party in the pre-war period, including its lack of unity and the need to appease a diverse supporter base, from internationalist socialists to workers dependent on arms’ manufacture, and their differing agendas.

## **Conclusions**

The domestic dialogue that surrounded the general strike as a weapon of peace was no mere sideshow then in the years before the outbreak of war. It was a dialogue that extended beyond the movement, had important international dimensions, illustrates the attitudes of the British labour and socialist movement in the years preceding 1914 and the challenges

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<sup>92</sup> This was bound up with a wider debate on revolution versus reform within the movement, see Graham Johnson, “‘Making reform the instrument of revolution’: British social democracy, 1881-1911”, *The Historical Journal*, 43 (2000), 977-1002.

<sup>93</sup> H.M. Hyndman, *Further Reminiscences* (London, 1912), 291.

facing a developing Labour Party. Clearly, it was more than just a propaganda exercise, still advocated in the days and hours before war was declared and re-emerging as a weapon after the war, but as a weapon of peace the general strike did not garner the support of either the majority of the movement in Britain or the International. This could be seen as an inevitable consequence of a European-wide proletariat caught up in this age of nationalism, adding weight to the argument that the 'collapse' of the International in 1914 was no surprise. Yet, the dialogue that took place in Britain suggests otherwise. This was not just an abstract debate that took place on the pages of the European socialist press and in the congress halls of the International. This was a debate held by all parts of the movement, in various arenas, including national parliaments. It was a serious proposition, debated as such, and thus should be given the same importance by historians.

In Britain and beyond there was a clear and genuine desire to avert war from within the labour and socialist movement and therefore an extensive discussion took place around the options open to them. With the realisation, perhaps, that their options were in reality limited. This debate was held outside the movement too, especially within the Liberal Party. In the years preceding war, the movement and the nation more generally were not simply swept up in a patriotic tide. Nevertheless, the general strike as a weapon of peace has invariably only been considered from the continental perspective and as one that was of only limited significance. However, there was an equally impassioned response in Britain. To be sure, it did not have the support of the majority, which was always unlikely given the dominance of the unions, but nor was it just backed by Hardie. The domestic debate thus reveals much about the British movement at a very particular moment in its development and the challenges it faced. The context is important and undoubtedly influenced the response to the strike, especially given that this was a moment of mass labour protest. From this we can



illustrate pre-war attitudes to direct action, perceptions of the state of the movement and the distance between socialist idealism and labourist realities.

The dialogue that took place over a decade or so preceding the outbreak of war is also important in helping us understand the decisions that Britain's and Europe's labour and socialist movements made in 1914 when war had been declared across the continent. Though the almost universal support for their nations' war effort was extremely likely, this dialogue indicates why other options were not adopted and why that support, despite the calls for peace, seemed the most likely outcome. Revealed in the criticisms is a collective lack of faith in domestic movements and their capabilities, mutual mistrust between Europe's socialists and trade unionists, and above all serious doubts over the internationalism of Europe's workers. Moreover, if the domestic debate is compared with that in the International it highlights a supra-national movement at odds with itself and one where quite different systems required different responses as war loomed ever larger. In retrospect, the general strike as a weapon of peace may seem particularly naïve, and some contemporaries certainly saw it as this, though that should not take away from the very genuine faith that some had in this as the way to avoid not only war in 1914, but war altogether.