

The War and You

As we went to Press with our last issue, but too late for us to deal with the events in our pages, the great capitalist States of Europe were flinging declarations of war at each other and rushing in frenzied haste to the long-expected and carefully prepared for Armageddon.

When we say that this mad conflict has been long expected and well-prepared for we make a statement which is almost trite. However much the masters of Europe may have tried to hide the underlying causes and objects of their military preparations, they have never taken any pains to conceal the fact that they were arming against "the day", and that "the day" was inevitable. Miles of paper and tons of printing ink have been used in the various countries in order to disseminate among the "common" people—i.e., the working class—explanations calculated to fix the blame on other shoulders. In each country voluminous "exposures" have been made of the villainous machinations of the "foreigner", always in such deep contrast to the Christian innocence of the exposers. But so far have any of the chief parties ever been from disguising the inevitability of the event they have been arming for, that they have used these very "exposures" to obtain the assent of public opinion to the race for armaments and the preparations for wholesale slaughter.

On the Continent they speak of British hypocrisy. The truth is that there is among the rulers of every capitalist country, hypocrisy enough and to spare, and the attitude of British Statesmen toward neutrals and the working class at home reeks with characteristic hypocrisy. In spite of the fact that nowadays very few even of their working-class dupes really believe in the "altruistic" humbug regarding the maintenance of the "independence of small nations", or attach any importance to Asquith, Grey & Co's drivel about the "honour of Britain", it is on those canting grounds that our masters seek to justify their plunge into the red vortex of war.

However hard our masters may try to cover their actions with the tattered and slimy cloak of "national honour" like slobbering and sentimental frauds, and however a politically and economically ignorant working class may applaud and echo these sentiments as if in an effort to hide from themselves brutal facts of which they are conscious and ashamed, there remains the obstinate truth, obvious to anyone who will go out into the streets and listen to what is there said, that even the working class realise that the motive for the war is in the last resort an economic one. Behind the covering screen of cant about British honour and German perfidy is the consciousness, frequently voiced, that it is a question, not of German perfidy but of German trade; not of British honour, but of wider markets for the disposal of British surplus products.

Let us, then, clear away from our minds the befogging folds of cant and humbug in order that we may see the facts naked and understand them, and face the situation as it really is.

We must understand, first of all, that it is essentially the character of the modern system of wealth production to bring into existence a tremendous amount of surplus wealth. This surplus wealth is that portion which the workers produce but do not

receive; the portion which goes to the employers and other sections of the ruling class in the shape of Rent, Interest and Profit.

There are two things peculiar about this surplus: (1) Production cannot continue unless it is produced, because the landlord only lets his premises in order to get his rent, the investor only lends his money in order to get interest, and the employer only employs to get profit. (2) Production can only continue whilst this product can be sold, because the proceeds of the sale to pay the landlord his rent, the investor his interest, and to realise for himself that profit which is his sole incentive to engage in industrial enterprise.

The result of these two features of modern production is very simple. They have brought the master class of every capitalist country face to face with the problem of finding a market for the disposal of their surplus products. And this problem becomes every day more pressing for the following reason.

The wealth produced by the workers is divided into two portions—the portion which they receive (wages) and the portion which is retained by the masters. The portion they receive is just sufficient to enable them to reproduce their strength and efficiency, and is therefore nearly stationary. But as the means and methods by which they produce are improved, the total of their product increases. Hence, since their share remains practically constant, what remains—the surplus or master's share—increases in proportion as the machinery of production improves. Therefore, since this machinery improves at a prodigious rate, the surplus which the masters have to find a market for becomes larger every day.

As the rate of surplus wealth produced increases, it becomes more impossible for the inhabitants of the country in which it is produced—inhabitants of both classes—to use it up. The consumption of the working class is limited to that which their wages will buy, and therefore cannot encroach upon the surplus which is just that portion of their product their wages will not buy back. The consumption of the master class is limited on the one hand by their physical capacity, and on the other hand by their necessity for ever increasing their capital. Hence an outlet for it must be found in foreign markets.

Every reader will go with us so far, of course. Every British working man feels that behind all the cant and slobber about honour and the rest of it, is the solid, practical consideration that the successful issue of the war will cripple a great trade rival and provide increased opportunity of work for British workers—and so far our theory does not conflict with this. That the conception is false, however, we shall see when we return to it, as we shall later.

Military history of the past fifty years has been based upon this fact. Britain has gained control of the sea trade routes, and has seized most of the best markets of the world. At the same time it has been the policy of her statesmen to take up a repressive attitude towards the aspirations of all possible rivals. Hence the Crimea was fought in order to prevent Russia establishing herself on the trade routes to the East. Since then every endeavour has been made to prevent Russia getting an outlet to the sea through a port free from the ice grip in winter, and from the oppression of commanding forts of rival nations. This antagonism continued until the Japanese put a stopper on Russian hopes in the East, and other jealous eyes were watching her nearer home.

Now took place a change of policy—or rather, a change in the direction of the old policy. A new rival had come to ripeness. And here we come to the drivel about national "honour".

First, a treaty with Japan releases the larger part of the British Naval forces in the Far East. Then an arrangement with France transfers the French Fleet to the Mediterranean, and clears the way for the concentration of the British Fleet in Home waters.

Now these facts are matters of history, and allow of no dispute. Therefore it is quite plain that so far was it from being any question of honour which impelled the British Government to range themselves on the side of France, that they had deliberately planned the present situation years ago.

Therefore when Sir Ed. Grey came before the British House of Commons and declared that it was simply a point of honour for the British Fleet to defend the Northern coast of France he spoke with his tongue in his cheek. It was not honour but just cut and dried policy. A man so completely versed in these matters as is Sir Edward Grey must have known that there could have been no such qualified neutrality as this. In the face of such an attitude as this not only was the Northern coast of France protected from German attack, but her Southern shore and her Fleet in the Mediterranean also; for the German Fleet dared not put to sea for fear of being cut off by the British ships and caught in a trap. Meanwhile German shipping was to be at the mercy of the French and the latter left to transport troops from their African colonies without a care in the world.

As far as effecting the course of the war goes England could do very little more. If Germany was to be strangled at sea by a "neutral" nation who could not strike very hard on land, then Germany had but little more to fear from flouting that nation's "love" for Belgium. And this is so very obvious that it must have been plain to those who entered into the arrangement with France by which the defence of the French coasts was shouldered by the British Navy.

That arrangement was no secret to Germany, and its purpose and object must have been perfectly clear to them. It meant that, under the guise of neutrality, perhaps, the British naval force was to be thrown into the scale against Germany. How would this affect the situation of Belgium? The very foundation of the treaty to respect the independence of Belgium was the assumption that when either France or Germany should attempt to use Belgium as a jumping off ground against the other, it would be at the cost of arraignment Britain on the opposing side

But years before the war broke out the British Fleet was placed at the disposal of France, under a cunning arrangement that could not possibly deceive those against whom it was directed, and on whom the responsibility of meeting it fell. All they had to consider, then, in making their plans, was whether the British Naval force against them, and the rapidity of action more than ever necessary by reason of their strangulation at sea, the employment of the British Expeditionary force against them was too dear a price to pay for the advantages of a passage through Belgium. Whether the German military authorities blundered or not, they decided to take the risk.

There is no escaping, then, from the conclusion that British statesmen deliberately planned some years ago to place the country in such a position that the outbreak of the war must inevitably have involved both the participation of Britain and the invasion of Belgium. So much, then, for the canting reference to honour and the preservation of the independence of small nations—such as the Boers, for instance!

It is not for us to say that there is anything to be ashamed of in admitting that the war has an economic basis. It is certainly more honest than throwing it back upon such humbug as the "honour of the British nation". But it has this disadvantage in the eyes of the ruling class—it leaves this clear issue facing the working class (who are to do the fighting): what economic advantage are *they* going to gather as the reward of the blood they spill, the lives they sacrifice, and the miseries they endure through this most ghastly of all ghastly wars?

To this question their masters have but one reply, and that is based on an economic fallacy. They say that as a result of humbling Germany British trade will expand and there will be plenty of work for everybody. Only so long as the ruling class can maintain the belief in this fallacy among the working class can they hope to get working-class support for their wars. The old "bull dog breed" brand of "patriotism" is nearly dead—as the War Office recognised when, in their great recruiting campaign of a few months ago, they abandoned their time-worn policy of trying to convince the worker that he has a "glorious heritage" to fight for, and appealed to him on the ground that civil life had such poor prospects to offer him that he would be better off in the Army.

The contention that the crushing of Germany would lead to the extension of British trade and plenty of work for the British worker is plausible and perhaps partly true. British trade may certainly expand, but then the curious thing is that expansion is its normal condition, yet unemployment accompanies the unceasing growth of "Britain's prosperity".

Extracts from two Government publications will knock the bottom clean out of the argument that the expansion of British trade necessarily means less unemployment for British workers.

The 55th No. of the *Statistical Abstract* (Cd. 4258) published in 1908, gives the following information (p. 69):

	1897	1907
Total exports of the United Kingdom	£234,219,708	£426,035,083
Proportion per head of population	£5 17s 2d.	£9 13s 3d.

(The figures refer to the produce of the United Kingdom only.)

In ten years, it will be seen, the total exports of home produce almost doubled, and even as regards proportion to population, jumped up from £29 5s 10d. to £48 6s 3d. per family of five people. Now what was the result upon unemployment? Has this gigantic increase in the national exports provided "plenty of work"?

The Local Government Board's *Statistical Memoranda* Cd 4671 tells us that the average unemployment among Trade Unions making returns was in 1897, 3.65; in 1907, 4.3.

So we arrive at the result, fatal to the argument that the seizure of Germany's trade must mean "plenty of work for the British worker", that this vast increase of exports which took place in a single decade, was actually accompanied by an increase of unemployment. The reason for this is very simple. It is due to that unceasing improvement in machinery which is constantly making human productive energy more fertile and enabling each worker to produce more wealth in a given time.

Now what would be the effect of Great Britain capturing a large portion of Germany's export trade? The capitalist economists say that it would result in the absorption of the unemployed. Suppose we accept that, even then what is the position?

One of the first effects of a decrease in unemployment is the rise of wages, as is indicated from the Local Government's Board's Cd. 4671 (p. 44):

Year	Unemployment	Wages
1897	3.65	162.3
1898	3.15	166.5
1899	2.40	170.4
1900	2.85	178.7
1901	3.80	177.0
1902	4.60	174.7
1903	5.30	173.7
1904	6.8	172.8
1905	5.6	173.3
1906	4.1	175.7

It will be noticed that there is a fall, a rise, and a second fall of unemployment recorded in the above table, and in agreement therewith, a rise, a fall, and a second rise in wages.

Wages are the price of labour power. Labour power, like other commodities, cannot be sold in the face of cheaper and efficient competitors. It has one such competitor—machinery.

Think what the general nature of the pressure of machinery upon labour power is. It is not that this pressure is only asserted when and where some new invention has appeared. No, on the contrary there are many labour saving devices which are anything but new which still have not altogether displaced the means which were in use before them, though they are conquering fresh ground every day. The steam plough is an example in farming, the morticing machinery in joinery, and the Linotype Composing Machine in printing.

In almost every field of industry the workers know that what they are doing by hand can be done quicker with machinery, and what they are doing with machinery can be done still quicker with more efficient machinery. Take the cylinder machine in printing. First a worker is necessary to "lay on" the sheets of paper and another to "take off". Then the invention of "flyers" knocked out the latter, and the perfection of a pneumatic appliance made the "layer-on" redundant. Yet today there are probably far more machines in operation without flyers than there are with the "laying on" apparatus.

So it is in every branch of industry. At every point operations are being performed by the means that are cheapest today, but at every point also other and more highly developed means are trying to oust the old. They can only advance by cheapening the productive process, that is, by economising the labour cost.

It is clear from this that a rise in wages, desirable as this is, is after all a handicap on labour power. At a given price it offers a given resistance to the advance of its competitor, machinery; but a rise in that price (a rise in wages) at once encourages the introduction of machinery which will enable the work to be done by fewer men.

For instance, suppose ten men with horse ploughs can plough a field at the same cost as three men with a steam plough outfit. If all their wages go up 5s. the steam plough at once becomes the cheaper means, because the advance of wages is only 15s. on three men, while in the other case the rise affects ten men, and amounts to 50s.

So it is seen that the inevitable result of the capturing of German trade must be after a little that machinery would advance and, by displacing workers, provide a new unemployed army. This indeed always happens with the expansion of trade. The exports of British products increased by over £50,000,000 in the single year 1906-7, yet so easily did machinery absorb the "shock" that, instead of there being "plenty of work", unemployment rose from 4.1 to 4.3!

So much, then, for the economic fallacy with which the masters, with their tales of their preparations for capturing German trade, try to make the workers think they are interested in the issue of the war. The workers are wage-slaves, and as such they are and always must be subject to economic laws which govern the wages system. An unemployed army suitable to the capitalist requirements of the time is one of the constant provisions of the operation of those laws—working through the development of machinery. No matter how trade may expand, or whether the German masters rule the country or the English masters continue to do so, this unemployed army will continue to be produced, and will determine the main conditions of working-class existence.

In addition, to take a job from a German in order to give it to a Briton still leaves unemployment in the working class, and the unemployed German simply follows the job to this country, and thus unemployment is again in our midst.

The question for the working class, then, is not that of British or German victory, since either event will leave them wage-slaves living upon wages. Under German rule those wages cannot be reduced lower than under British, for every British workingman knows that the masters who are shouting so loudly today for us to go and die in defence of our shackles and their shekels, have left no stone unturned to force wages to the lowest possible limits. The question, then, before the workers, is the abolition of the whole social system of which war and unemployment are integral parts, and the establishment of society upon the basis of common ownership of the means of production—the establishment, that is, of SOCIALISM.

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