

No 1 - R 60

MILITARISM
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PEOPLE

THE CANADIAN FORWARD

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MILITARISM

OFFICIAL ORGAN OF THE SOCIAL - DEMOCRATIC PARTY

New Series, Vol. 1, No. 15

TORONTO, CANADA

June 12, 1917

NO COMPROMISE" AGAINST CONSCRIPTION

THE PERIL OF CONSCRIPTION

(By J. BRUCE GLAZIER)



FRANCE.—The greatest of living French writers, M. Anatole France, declares that "the horrors of our military service are such that a Frenchwoman, if she has a son, will rejoice in becoming a widow because the son will then be exempted from two years of the martyrdom." Numerous other novelists and publicists have dealt with the degrading servitude and revolting effects of the French conscription system, including MM. Zola, Octave Mirabeau, Lucien Descaves, Emile de Girardin, M. Urbain Gohier, in his *l'Armee contre la Nation*, and M. Gustave Herve, in his anti-militarist propaganda, which brought him a long term of imprisonment, have also mercilessly exposed the conditions of army life in their country.

And do we not remember the shameful revelations of the notorious Dreyfus affair and the Rousset case, which, together with countless others, of which little has been heard on this side of the Channel, have intensified the anti-militarist feeling of the French working class? Here are one or two typical words of testimony:—

M. Lionel Declé, the French explorer, declares:—The three years every able-bodied Frenchman has to serve in the army are nothing but a ceaseless degradation for men possessing any self-respect.

M. Daumont, the editor of the *Libre Parole*, speaking in the Chamber of Deputies, declared:—Compulsory service, far from being a school of morals, is a school of drunkenness, idleness, and debauchery. . . . It has gone a long way towards ruining our peasantry, and to a large extent has already debased them. . . . I deem the universal military service, as it is sometimes termed, one of the saddest sacrifices our country calls on us to bear.

GERMANY.—In Germany, under conscription, the soldiers are treated with incredible harshness by their officers, and the army caste completely dominates the civil population. The German Social Democratic Party has sustained a ceaseless agitation against the brutality universally inflicted on the soldiers. In connection with the trial of Rosa Luxemburg (now in prison) for having exposed the hateful system of oppression in the army, the Social-Democratic Party prepared a list of thousands of witnesses, who were ready to support the truth of her statements. Lieutenant Bilsé, for publishing his book "From a Small Garrison Town," in which the repulsive features of German military life were candidly depicted, was sentenced to six months' imprisonment and dismissed the service. Ex-Lieutenant

Kraft affirms that "the German barracks are certainly not, as we often hear, and as they should be, a school for the people, but they are a great national misfortune, destroying the progress of our political and agricultural life. They undermine the foundations of humanity, so that the present state of things cannot long continue without fostering a revolution in years to come."

RUSSIA.—It is with reluctance that I cite the case of the Russian conscript soldier just now. I have no wish to reflect on our ally; but as the Russian military system is one of the greatest in the world, it is important that the state of the soldier under conscription in Russia should be brought into view. In a report presented by the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party to the International Socialist Congress at Amsterdam, 1911, the writer says:

"The Russian private is condemned to an antiquated, absolutely senseless discipline, and to Draconian punishment. . . . The Government makes every effort to isolate and alienate the soldier from the people and to terrorize him into silent obedience. He is treated more like a prisoner than a defender of his country. Every sign of independence is suppressed with the utmost severity. A laugh in the ranks or a mere word may lead the soldier into many months or years at a 'disciplinary battalion,' where he is subjected to the most barbarous and lawless treatment."

Kuprine, the celebrated Russian writer, who was for a time an officer in the army, thus describes in his powerful novel "In Honour's Name," the effect of conscript life on otherwise humane and decently-behaved men:—

"Yes, they (the officers) are all alike, even the best and most tender-hearted among them. At home they are splendid fathers of families, and excellent husbands, but as soon as they approach the barracks they become low-minded barbarians. . . . The odious grimaces, swaggering manners, bold and scornful look—'God help the man who dares insult me'—padded shoulders, cock-a-hoop defiance. They live like parasites on society."

And have not you, the workers, in our own country, had some foretaste since the war began, of what compulsion, military and industrial, may bring? I am not going into the subject of recent experiences under the Defense of the Realm and Munitions Acts. But I ask you to consider what your position would be were conscription in full blast. The evidence I have given in these pages of the feeling in the mind of

the leading advocates of compulsion should forewarn you. Remember that in case of a great industrial struggle, a telegram from the War Office might convert half a million trade unionists on strike into half a million conscript soldiers bound to obey orders which they could not question.

Remember that under conscription in Germany, France, Russia, and Italy workmen on strike have been summoned under the colours and compelled as soldiers to play the part of blacklegs against themselves as trade unionists, and even to raise their bayonets against their fellow-workers.

As nothing relating to Germany is reckoned valid just now by way of evidence of what may be done in civilized countries, I shall cite an example from France. In 1910, goaded to exasperation by their miserable conditions of long hours and small pay, and constant intimidation, the railway workers on the western and northern lines came out on strike. The Prime Minister, M. Briand, formerly a Socialist Deputy, instantly took "drastic action," with the full approval of Parliament and the press, except the Socialist Party and the Socialist and Trade Union journals. M. E. A. Vizetelly, in his *Republican France*, thus describes in a sentence what was done: "The Army reserves," he tells us, "were called out, the various lines were guarded by military; soldiers with a knowledge of railway work—among them being all those strikers who, as reserve men, were temporarily reincorporated in the Army—were called upon to ensure the various services, and with few exceptions they did their duty." The strike was broken, hundreds of men were punished, not merely by being refused re-employment, but by prosecution under military law.

But perhaps, you think, that would never occur in this country. One hopes not, but, if so, it will hardly be, judging from past experience, from any lack of will on the part of those in power. Let me recall the great railwaymen's strike in August, 1911. Mr. P. W. Wilson, the parliamentary correspondent of the *Daily News*, in an article in that journal (August 25), giving the inner history of the settlement, declared that the Government (the Liberal Asquith, Lloyd George, and Churchill Government) had at first determined on absolutely crushing that strike by a "policy of batons, bayonets, and bullets." The Government, in advance of the settlement negotiations, had, he stated, given a written *carte blanche* to the railway companies to call upon the troops. He added:

"It was this remarkable and probably unprecedented document that was heralded forth by the companies as an absolute guarantee, of an adequate, if restricted, train service. The knowledge that the troops, with ball, cartridge, and naked bayonets, would be virtually under the instructions of the companies wherever picketing was effective, produced an unparalleled situation. It meant that the Briand policy had been adopted—a policy successful in France

as a means of crushing a railway strike, but fatal to the continuance of a British administration."

It was only, Mr. Wilson tells us, when the Labour Party announced its resolve to move a vote of censure on the Government in the House, that the Government thought better of its bullet and bayonet project and, through the medium of Mr. Lloyd George, adopted a conciliatory policy.

TO CRUSH TRADE UNIONISM REMARKABLE AVOWALS

But we are not dependent upon inference or surmise with respect to the hostile aims of the conscriptionists towards democracy and trades unionism. The militarists have left no room for doubt on that point. Their avowals and admissions are more than plentiful. I have only space here for a few of the more typical examples, but these, I think, will suffice. I shall begin with one of those significant remarks that give piquancy to the "heart to heart" conversations in military clubs, but seldom escape into the columns of the press.

Speaking at the Service Club, August 26, 1915, Colonel Sir Augustus Fitz-george (son of the late Royal Duke of Cambridge, commander-in-chief), said:

"Compulsory service was necessary at this time, when the people were getting out of hand."

There is a world of meaning, as the saying is, in that little sentence, which will be illuminated by the quotations that follow.

Lieutenant-Colonel W. H. Maxwell is brutally frank in his appreciation of conscription and martial law as a short way to crush trade unionism:

"The abuse of personal freedom has reached its climax in this country. Trade unions—that shelter for slinking shirkers—is imperiling our existence, and by its action a rot of our national soul has set in. One remedy, and one alone, can eradicate this state of rot—martial law will cure it. With the knowledge that refusal to assist in the nation's defence means "Death" to the individual so refusing, the shirkers would soon be brought to their senses and fall in wherever required. All who incite to rebellion to be shot at once by drumhead court-martial would have a steady effect. The individual does not count to-day. If Parliament will not act, then let a Cromwell come in and settle the question. He would be welcomed."

Colonel Arthur Lee, M.P., explicitly admits that the conscriptionist's design is to use compulsory service as a means of avoiding having to pay trade union rates to soldiers, and of being able thereby to run wars more cheaply. In a speech at Fareham (August 17, 1915), which the *Times* commended as "well and clearly stating the facts of the matter," the colonel said:

"Not content with coaxing and pushing and bullying Britons to do their

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