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THE ROUND TABLE
THE WAR AND ENGLISH LIFE.

A Quarterly Review of the Politics of the British Empire—Republished Under the Above Heading

(Continued from page 4.)

meet it and bear its trials. They know by hard experience that life is a severe and difficult pilgrimage, that trouble is certain by the way, and that every bit of fortune or happiness is something to be thankful for. Not hoping for sensational victories from the first, they have not been disillusioned by their absence. The fact of war itself was their disillusionment.

Kitchener's Army is the outward and visible testimony of this working-class outlook at its best. Its quiet endurance, its obstinate but unassuming determination, its free-spokenness and good fellowship, its unfailing and unforced cheerfulness, rising to boisterous humour when things look blackest, are as essentially English to-day as when Shakespeare immortalized them in his English plays. "In ancient days," as the King's proclamation reminds us, "the darkest moment has ever produced in men of our race the sternest resolve." "The customs of a free people are part of its liberty," wrote a great French political thinker in a famous chapter on this country, which has shown itself at least twice to be prophetic. (*Montesquieu, *Esprit des Lois*, Book xix, Chapter 27. Its bearing on the part played by Britain in the Napoleonic wars has often been remarked upon.) Kitchener's Army, the largest voluntary force ever raised in history, is the triumph of the customary English way of doing things. The working classes, from whom the great majority of its men are drawn, are proud of what has been thus characteristically achieved, and hope to achieve more still and in sufficient measure. Whether their hopes will be fulfilled through Lord Derby's scheme for canvassing everyone of military age whose work is not of direct use to the State still remains to be seen.

But there are other reasons besides custom which determine the attitude still held by important sections of workpeople on the question of compulsory service. They are frankly afraid of its reaction upon industrial conditions. The mental furniture of the English workman is often not very considerable; opinions and prejudices he may adopt and again discard, from politicians or from the newspapers, on a variety of topics; but what may be called his "fixtures," the fixed ideas which lie beyond the reach of argument, are few and immovable. One of these is a dislike of the intervention of the military in domestic affairs. In the eyes of Englishmen, as Montesquieu remarked in the chapter already quoted, "military men are regarded as belonging to a profession which may be useful but is often dangerous." The English are an incurably civilian people. Our island position and our traditions have made us so. Military law may be necessary, but we do not regard it as law, as the deep impression made by the death of Miss Cavell has shown. The mere suggestion that the methods of compulsory service might be applied in the workshop as in the Army has reawakened suspicions which were first roused by the use of the military in the English and French railway strikes a few years ago. Compulsory enlistment in order to secure enough men to keep our fighting forces at full strength is an expedient which Labour would be readily open to consider; so many men have already gone that the demand for equality of sacrifice is one which finds an echo in thousands of working-class homes; but military law in the workshop is something which workpeople regard as in quite a different category. Unfortunately, the two are associated, not only in the minds of their proposers, but in the actual facts of the case; and herein lies the real crux of the controversy which has arisen.

The advocates of compulsory service are, many of them, sincere and patriotic men. They are pleading their cause not with any sinister ulterior object, such as the reduction of soldiers' pay, or the creation of a weapon wherewith to break strikes after the war, but with the sole desire of saving the

country and winning the war. But their object is frankly not simply to secure more men but to secure men in what they consider a more advantageous and economical way, by arming the Executive with general powers enabling it to call up men according to their status and occupation. Such a programme would automatically and of necessity carry the element of compulsion into the workshop, for it would give the Executive power to render strikes as impossible as they are under a similar system on the Continent. Moreover, serviceable men in exempted occupations would only be exempted so long as they were needed. In other words, it would be the employer, or rather, in actual practice, the foreman, who would stand between them and the Army. Such a situation would put into the hands of private employers a power which they have never claimed, and which public opinion in this country is democratic enough to allow them to exercise without control. It is because workmen can foresee these results of the introduction of military law, and feel that the advocates of compulsory service (whose motives they undoubtedly misunderstand) do not understand the working-class point of view or sufficiently respect the traditional British sentiment underlying it, that they view their proposals with such grave distrust.

Working people have already had some foretaste of what compulsory enlistment would mean. In the early days of the war, when trade was bad and the Army seemed the only alternative to destitution, employers of labour frequently dismissed men, happily few in number, where the staple industry has suffered through the war, the practice has remained a common one and has not unnaturally provoked considerable resentment and alienation of feeling. Men feel that it is unjust and incompatible with the whole spirit of English life and of the voluntary system. After the first months and even weeks of the war, however, employment improved so rapidly that the position was soon reversed. Men out of work had no difficulty whatever in finding employment, while employers became more and more reluctant to lose workmen, and munition firms had eventually to be prohibited in the Munitions Act from "pilfering" labour from their competitors by the offer of higher wages. Lord Derby's

scheme has, however, brought about a change in the attitude of employers, who are now receiving authoritative advice as to the relative importance of their business in the national economy. At the same time, voluntary enlistment has become more and more a matter of the deliberate choice of the individual citizen, and its unlooked-for success is likely to leave a permanent mark on English life in a new and deeper sense of the relationship between the State and the individual. Englishmen have always been patriots, but they are only now learning, in the fullest sense, what it means to be citizens.

Another factor which has not tended to allay working-class apprehension is the working of the Munitions Act. As passed, that Act was the result of an agreement arrived at in conference between Mr. Lloyd George and the Trade Union representatives, and it was arranged that Labour should have fair representation both on the Local Committees which were to be responsible for the local organizing work under the Act and on the special tribunals which were to penalize its breaches. In practice the Act has worked out very differently from what was expected either by its author or by the Trade Union leaders. The Local Committees, having finished their preliminary organizing work, have fallen into abeyance, while the Munition Tribunals have suffered in working-class estimation from the fact that the so-called Labour representative is nominated by Whitehall instead of being representative of local labour opinion. Partly as a result of this, and of the comparative ineffectiveness of the Labour representatives in handling the difficult and novel points that have arisen, there has been a good deal of friction which better handling might have avoided. Trouble has arisen especially on the clause forbidding the employment of workmen within six weeks without a certificate from their last employer, which obviously leaves an opening for vexatious treatment. Difficulties such as these were only to be expected and are not incapable of fair adjustment; it would indeed be deplorable if such precedent for the equal partnership of Capital and Labour as the Local Committees and the Munition Tribunals were allowed to pass away without an effort to extend and develop the spirit which gave rise to them.

These various considerations may serve to explain the course of proceedings at the most authoritative and representative of recent working-class deliberative gatherings—the Trades Union Congress held at Bristol in the second week of September. Three resolutions relating to the war were brought forward and carried with practical unanimity. One supported the action of the Labour Party in co-operating with the other political parties in the national recruiting campaign. Of the other two one related to the prosecution of the war and the other to compulsory service; their wording is so characteristic that it is worth giving in full:

1. "That this Trades Union Congress, whilst expressing its opposition (in accordance with its previously expressed opinions) to all systems of militarism as a danger to human progress, considers the present action of Great Britain and her Allies as completely justified, and expresses its horror at the atrocities which have been committed by the German and Austrian military authorities, and the callous, brutal, and unnecessary sacrifice of the lives of non-combatants, including women and children, and hereby pledges itself to assist the Government as far as possible in the successful prosecution of the war."

2. "That we, the delegates to this Congress, representing nearly three million organized workers, record our hearty appreciation of the magnificent response made to the call for volunteers to fight against the tranny of militarism."

"We emphatically protest against the sinister efforts of a section of the reactionary Press in formulating newspaper policies for party purposes and attempting to foist upon this country a description, which always proves a burden to the workers, and will divide the nation at a time when absolute unanimity is essential."

"No reliable evidence has been produced to show that the voluntary system of enlistment is not adequate to meet all the Empire's requirements."

"We believe that all the men necessary can, and will, be obtained through a voluntary system properly organized, and we heartily support and will give every aid to the Government in their present efforts to secure the men necessary to prosecute the war to a successful issue."

To the Continental mind, accustomed to regard universal compulsory service as the only thorough way of organizing national defence, the two resolutions may even seem incompatible and illogical. To this the only answer

that can be made is that the two expressions of opinion do in fact hang together in the minds of their authors. But he would have a poor knowledge of the temper of Englishmen—and especially of that Puritan layer in English life from which these resolutions mainly emanate—who could deduce from them any weakening in the national determination to carry the war through to a successful end. Working-class opinion, though neither angry nor bitter, and, in spite of the gutter Press, quite devoid of racial hatred, is more united and determined on the issues of this conflict than over any struggle in English history.

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