

Racists, Reds and the Revolt on the Clyde, 1919



The story of a race riot that broke out in Glasgow, during the height of Red Clydeside militancy, when around 30 black sailors were chased out of the hiring yard by a mob of white sailors. Yet, rather than a spontaneous outburst of hatred, it was actually the culmination of nationalist and anti-migrant politics promoted within working-class organisations (such as the Independent Labour Party and the British Seafarers's Union) both before and even after the events.

While the rise in workers' militancy was not accompanied by any diminution of racist sentiment some Marxists might contend that the co-existence of an upturn in class struggles and racism was an indication of the bifurcation of the working class. That is, racism emanated principally from the stratum of the working class that remained ideologically wedded to the elite project of national belonging underpinned by an allegiance to race and empire whereas those engaged in collective action in opposition to the state were part of a stratum that had broken from this project, and were moving in a political direction where the language of class and solidarity negated racism. However, such an argument is difficult to sustain when we consider events on Clydeside — arguably the epicentre of the working class revolt during this period — where racism was deployed by socialist activists to create a cohesive opposition to government and employer attacks.

On 23 January 1919, a racist riot occurred in the Glasgow harbour area when around 30 black sailors were chased out of the merchant marine hiring yard by white sailors, beaten in the street, attacked in their boarding houses and then targeted for mass arrest by police called in to halt the disorder. The mob was joined by white bystanders who bolstered the crowd to several hundred with many making use of 'guns, knives, batons, and makeshift weapons such as stones and bricks picked up from the street' (Jenkinson 2009: 73). Cornered in their boarding house, the black sailors offered no resistance when the police entered the premises. In contrast to the immediate arrest of the black sailors — all British colonial subjects from Sierra Leone — not one of the large crowd of white rioters was arrested (Jenkinson 2009: 74).

The riot wasn't a spontaneous eruption against the presence of black workers in Glasgow. Black people had lived and worked in the port area of the city for a number of years with many — along with Chinese labour — employed as seamen. Against a backdrop of rising unemployment, many white seamen branded the 'coloured' seamen as unfair economic competition. References to unfairness referred not only to the alleged tendency of such workers to accept lower wage rates than white workers, but also that minority labour was undeserving of such jobs because it was 'non-white', and, therefore not British. That is, what these white workers desired was that such labour make way for a more deserving category of worker that was white and British.

Jenkinson (2008, 2009) demonstrates how in the days leading up to the riot, socialist leaders on Clydeside actively expressed their support for such racist sentiment. Most notably, Manny Shinwell — leading member of the ILP, President of the Glasgow trades and labour council, and leader of the Glasgow branch of the British Seafarers's Union -- made a number of speeches expressing sympathy with the seamen. He encouraged them to participate in the strike action for the 40-hour week campaign which they could use as a platform voice their concerns about workers from overseas undercutting their wages and threatening their job opportunities as part of the wider strike action' (cited in Jenkinson 2009: 43). A few hours before the racist riot broke out, Shinwell addressed a meeting of over 600 sailors at the mercantile marine yard where he attributed the existence of large numbers of unemployed seamen 'to the refusal of the Government to exclude Chinese labour from British ships' urging them that 'it was essential ... that *action be taken at once*' (cited in Jenkinson 2009: 43). When interviewed by a local newspaper in the immediate aftermath of the riot, Shinwell connected it to the hiring of overseas sailors stating that 'some of the best ships' out of Glasgow were employing black and Chinese labour while a number of recently demobilized (White British) Royal Naval reservists were unable to obtain employment (Jenkinson 2009: 43).

'In the days following the harbour riot, Shinwell continued to speak out at sailors' meetings against the threat to jobs due to the employment of "Asiatic" labour on British ships' (Jenkinson 2009: 43), and tried repeatedly to link this with the 40 hours campaign by calling for the removal of such labour from British ships thereby creating more job opportunities for white British workers. The day before the general strike descended into violence on Bloody Friday (31 January 1919), Shinwell presided over a third meeting of sailors in a week where he 'urged them to take effective steps to prevent the employment of Chinese labour on British ships' (cited in Jenkinson 2009: 44). Willie Gallacher — then chair of the CWC and leading member of the BSP — supported Shinwell and accompanied him to a meeting with seamen on 28 January 1919 to persuade them to take part in the strike action. As Jenkinson (2009: 44) notes:

The tenor of this meeting was no different from the ones addressed only by Shinwell; again, the tactic was to import into the broad strike campaign the 'old demand' that black and Chinese crews should be expelled from British ships.

It was clear that 'the strike committee viewed support from white sailors as useful in widening the protest movement and were none too particular as to how such involvement was secured' (Jenkinson 2009: 44).

This episode draws attention to how even in those regions where working class militancy was most intense, the social and class struggles were sometimes animated and framed in racialized terms both by workers participating in such collective action, and many of the activists and organized social forces who led it. The ILP — of which Shinwell was a leading member — 'was a party that was deeply committed to securing economic and social justice for the working class. At the same time, it was also a party whose members often displayed a deep-rooted, almost unconscious attachment to nationalism. Shinwell himself claimed much later in life that the ILP's 'patriotism was of the subconscious variety Britain was the best country' (cited in Rose 2002: 337). This attachment to a form of banal nationalism (Billig 1995) defined the parameters within which they located the struggle for working class justice. They hoped the intensification of the class struggle would help pressure the elites into including the working class as partners within the confines of the existing capitalist nation-state. That is, leaders of the ILP aimed to use working class anger, the resulting strike action and the large-scale social unrest that ensued as political leverage to force the state to deliver a better economic and social deal to the working class of Britain, to force it to live up to its promise of building a 'land fit for heroes'.

However, there were clear dangers associated with grounding the struggle for working class justice on the ideological terrain of the nation because British nationalism had been thoroughly racialized since the mid-Victorian era. The ILP helped consolidate this discourse of racializing nationalism further within the working class by distinguishing those workers who allegedly belonged to the nation from those that

didn't. When activists like Shinwell employed a discourse that equated the British worker with whiteness they effectively privileged the claims of this stratum for the limited jobs available in merchant shipping over those workers who were constructed as non-white. By creating an idealized image of the British worker as white, those workers who were represented as 'non-white' were deemed less deserving on the grounds that they weren't British, which in turn made them 'legitimate' targets for discrimination and violence, and eventually deportation.

At the same time, on Clydeside — unlike many other parts of Britain — there was a current of socialist opinion that vigorously opposed the manipulation of such racism. Leading activists like Arthur MacManus from the SLP and John Maclean from the BSP located the struggles of the British working class within a broader project of socialist internationalism. The twin pre-suppositions that informed this philosophical standpoint were an attachment to the cause of working class emancipation that transcended national boundaries, and the impossibility of achieving such social, economic and political equality within the confines of the existing capitalist social formation. Instead, for socialist internationalists, a radical social transformation was required that would inaugurate a post-capitalist socialist order. At the same time, it is important to emphasize that this wasn't simply an abstract commitment to proletarian internationalism but historically grounded in personal experience. Arthur MacManus was a Belfast-born Catholic who had witnessed the oppressive and exclusionary effects of the racializing nationalism generated by the machinery of the imperial British state in dividing Protestant and Catholic workers. It was this concrete assessment that led him, and many others to oppose such divisions from the standpoint of the international working class.

It was this political perspective first inculcated by James Connolly which enabled activists from the SLP in particular to directly intervene when attempts were made to racialize the class struggle on Clydeside. In an article entitled *Race Riots and Revolution* published in the SLP's monthly newspaper, *The Socialist*, the party mocked the seamen's union for deploying racism to remove black workers from certain occupations, and condemned them for deflecting working class anger away from the employers: *The Trades Unions have prided themselves on having ousted coloured labourers from certain occupations The very existence of capitalism depends upon driving all the elements of present day pugnacity, a trait always in prominence after a great war, into racial or national avenues. By forcing the workers to ease off their pugnacity over lines of colour, this blinds them to the class line which forms the focus of the struggle of the modern international proletariat. (cited in Jenkinson 2009: 16)*

There was also opposition to such racism from Scottish women married to the black sailors. Letters submitted by these women to local newspapers tried to challenge the racist representations of their black husbands and 'mixed-race' children in the aftermath of the racist riots. One such person calling herself *Justice for the Coloured People* outlined how she had been married to a black merchant sailor for 25 years and reminded the readership of the many sacrifices that black sailors had made in defence of the nation. She went on to describe how her husband had been on ships that were torpedoed on four separate occasions. Three of the black sailors who had visited her house were drowned in these incidents while a further two burned to death 'at the hands of the German' (cited in Jenkinson 2008: 24) Such interventions by local working class women helped re-insert the contribution and sacrifices made by the black community (both British, and those from the colonies) into the national story of Britain. Informed by an emergent multicultural nationalism, they tried bravely in the face of great opposition to construct a counter narrative that would enable their husbands and mixed-race children to be treated like any white individual in British society.

Notwithstanding these important challenges, it was the ILP, and by proxy the Labour Party, that profited most from this wave of class struggles with many of the 'Red Clydesiders', including Shinwell and Kirkwood, eventually being elected to Parliament. The ILP's success lay in its ability to reflect faithfully the dominant cultural and political outlook of the working class at the time -- both in terms of the ideas workers brought with them into this phase of class struggle, and the kind of actions they were willing to undertake in the course of such conflict. When confronted with an opportunity to challenge working class

racism, the ILP instead chose to accommodate to it. Indeed, leaders like Shinwell went further by strategically deploying racism to cement solidarity between white workers at the expense of other non-white workers. In this sense, they reinforced and legitimized racist ideas existing within the working class and bound them ever more tightly to a racializing British nationalism. The task of those socialist internationalists in the SLP and the BSP made doubly difficult; not only did they have to counter the racism and nationalism propagated by the elites, but also that emanating from political formations leading the working class unrest. Given the incremental incorporation of the working class since the mid-Victorian era accompanied by the growing penetration of racist and nationalist ideas, it is highly unlikely that the co-ordinates of the class struggle could have been re-set in the course of this phase of class conflict. There was too much ideological baggage to shed, and the SLP its internationalist outlook was too small to affect it.

This more pessimistic account of the events leading up to 1919 lends weight to John Maclean's scepticism surrounding the legend of 'Red Clydeside' (see also Miliband 1987). Contrary to both the claims perpetuated by some government ministers — concerned about the prospect of revolution in Britain along the lines witnessed in Russia in November 1917 or Germany in late 1918 — and by later socialist writers, Britain, and more specifically Clydeside, was never on the verge of effecting radical social change. Certainly, the epicentre of this revolt on Clydeside produced many revolutionary socialists, most notably John Maclean, Arthur MacManus and Tom Bell, some of whom led influential campaigns for peace. They successfully mobilized workers in defence of transnational working class interests that prevented the delivery of armaments to Poland that were intended for use against the newly-established workers state in Russia (see Pelling 1987; Kelly 1988). Yet, the parties they were affiliated to such as the SLP and the BSP saw little growth in membership. The tendency of proletarian internationalism remained a marginal accretion on the culture and politics of the British working class — restricted in the main to racialized minorities like Irish Catholics and Jews along with other 'outsiders' such as those from the Highland Gaels or the South Wales mining communities.

Originally from Satnam Virdee's excellent book, 'Racism, Class and the Racialised Outsider'.