

Glasgow Central: A history of working class struggle

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9 April 2015

Glasgow Central offers a remarkable historical cross section of the development of capitalism in Scotland and Britain, the emergence of the working class and the failure of the Labour Party's perspective of social reformism. It testifies to the common experience of generations of the working class in Britain.

Glasgow's historic town centre, around Glasgow Cathedral, the High Street and the nearby site of the city's university, founded in 1451, lies towards the east of the constituency.

The cathedral became one of the focal points of the bourgeois revolution in Scotland, hosting, in 1638, the Glasgow Assembly of Presbyterian radicals seeking an end to Charles I's support for episcopacy. The Assembly organised an invasion of England, in alliance with Parliament in England against the Stuart king.

The invasion set fire to the already combustible relations between the English Parliament and Crown, leading to civil war, the execution of Charles I, and Oliver Cromwell's Commonwealth incorporating England and Scotland. With the Glorious Revolution of 1688 and the Act of Union 19 years later, stable conditions were established for the rapid expansion of capitalism in Britain. Glasgow's trade and merchant capital flourished.

The city's expansion in the 18th century was based on the triangular trade of slaves and commodity exports between West Africa, the West Indies and Britain. The names of shopping streets in the constituency such as Buchanan Street or Glassford Street are those of leading merchants. The Museum of Modern Art is the former private residence of another, William Cunninghame, who made a fortune during the tobacco shortage caused by the American war of independence.

Merchant capital provided resources for another consequence of the Union with England—the unprecedented application of new industrial and scientific techniques to production geared towards rapidly growing English markets. Glasgow, like Manchester, Leeds, London and Sheffield in the late 18th and 19th centuries, became one of the first

centres of industrial capitalism in the world. Industrial profit paid for the elegant squares, parks and circuses that characterise the wealthy areas of the western city centre.

The wealth was extracted from a rapidly expanding working class employed in burgeoning textile, mining, iron and engineering industries.

Savage conditions in the early days of industrial production along with terrible overcrowding and insanitary housing gave rise to decades of brutal class warfare. The names of localities in Glasgow Central constituency—the Gorbals, Bridgeton, the Calton, Anderston—are all synonymous with the early struggles of the working class against vicious exploitation by capitalists and landlords.

Glasgow Green, the largest park in the constituency, was cleared by an early public works programme to give work to a few hundred of the thousands left unemployed after the Napoleonic Wars. The first mass event at the Green witnessed the execution of James Wilson in 1820. He was one of three weavers tried, found guilty of treason and executed for their role in a mass uprising and general strike of 1820. Inspired by the French revolution and galvanised by the 1819 Peterloo Massacre in Manchester, Wilson was put to death in front of a sympathetic crowd of 20,000. Soldiers attacked the onlookers.

Wilson's family had been weavers for generations. In 1787 weavers in the Calton were involved in a bitter strike to demand a wage increase. On September 3, the city magistrates, with a force of officers, went to the Calton but were repelled by the workers. In response, a detachment of the 39th Regiment was mobilised. The riot act was read and the soldiers killed three of the weavers and injured others in a volley of musket fire.

In 1831, 80,000 workers from the rapidly-emerging trades unions marched through to the Green in support of the movement for parliamentary reform. Eight years later, 130,000 assembled to listen to speeches during the 1838-39 tour of England and Scotland by the Chartists—the revolutionary movement demanding the extension of the franchise to working men.

Chartist leader James Bronterre O'Brien told the audience in Glasgow that their "present House of Commons did not represent them; it represented the fellows who live by profits, who live by usury. It also represented a rascally crew of attorneys, bishops and parsons, pawnbrokers and stockjobbers."

Subsequent decades saw an enormous expansion of heavy engineering industry in the city to a position of global pre-eminence.

By the outbreak of World War I, Glasgow and its immediate neighbours produced one third of all the railway rolling stock and shipping in Britain. Shipping tonnage amounted to one-fifth of global production, more than all the yards of Germany combined, while locomotive production made the city the greatest centre in Europe. The ostentation of the city's public buildings such as the City Chambers or the popular Kelvingrove Art Gallery speaks to the confidence of the period.

Yet much of the city's working population were crammed into housing that was generally in worse condition, more overcrowded and more insanitary than in comparable large cities in Britain. Low wages were sustained by a continual flow of cheap labour, most of it from Ireland, combined with the careful stoking of sectarian tensions between Catholic and Protestant workers.

At the turn of the 20th century, seeking a political way forward, workers joined the new Labour Party. One of those present at Labour's founding conference was George Barnes. Barnes was elected Labour MP for Glasgow Blackfriars and Hutchesontown, now part of Glasgow Central, in 1906. In 1914, Barnes toured industrial districts making recruiting speeches for British imperialism. Yet 5,000 demonstrated at Glasgow Green on August 9 against the outbreak of the world war in 1914. British Socialist Party (BSP) members in Glasgow noted that "this war has been brought about by the intrigues of the capitalist and landlord interests of all the countries involved."

Leading BSP member John Maclean was prosecuted twice for his anti-war activities. In 1915 he was jailed in Duke Street prison. He was jailed again the following year. In 1918, Maclean, the Consul for Soviet Affairs in Great Britain following the Russian Revolution was arrested again at his office in Portland Street and tried for sedition.

From the dock in Edinburgh, Maclean denounced capitalism and the war and explained, "My appeal is to the working class. I appeal exclusively to them because they and they only can bring about the time when the whole world will be in one brotherhood, on a sound economic foundation."

In his last years, Maclean adapted to Scottish nationalism, an erroneous political turn still employed by the pseudo-left

tendencies to justify their own nationalist politics. But this does not diminish the clarity and bravery of his efforts to mobilise workers against one of the greatest bloodbaths in history.

On Friday January 31, 1919, the "Battle of George Square" took place with workers clashing against police during widespread strike action around a campaign for shorter working hours. The Scottish Secretary Robert Munro described the events as a "Bolshevist uprising." After police were unable to contain the workers, the British government under David Lloyd George sent in the army. Ten thousand troops armed with machine guns, tanks and a howitzer arrived on the Friday evening and Saturday to occupy Glasgow's streets and quell the movement.

The postwar upsurge of class struggle in Britain culminated in the 1926 General Strike, that saw numerous pitched battles across Glasgow between workers, scabs and the police. Aware of the existential threat to British capitalism the huge concentration of industrial workers represented, public meetings were banned and the government sent seven warships up the River Clyde.

Over the intervening nine decades a great deal has changed in the constituency. From 1950 onwards, Glasgow was dominated by the Labour Party and its perspective of social reform coupled with defence of capitalism. But over the same period, as with the rest of Britain, most of the city's industrial base was destroyed. Areas once famous for large engineering works are now retail locations. Working class areas such as the Gorbals or Dalmarnock have been bulldozed repeatedly and remain impoverished.

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