

New Zealand: WWI *Home Front* exhibition buries mass opposition to war

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Home Front opened at the Auckland Museum on February 26 and will run until November 13.

Advertised as “focusing on life ‘at home’ during the First World War,” the exhibition is part of multi-million dollar government-sponsored WWI centenary commemorations to promote militarism and nationalism. It consists of patriotic memorabilia, including flags, embroidery, badges and medals, recruitment posters; and clothes and other items sent to soldiers overseas. Photographs and wall texts depict fundraising efforts to support New Zealand troops.

The museum has organised several events connected with the exhibit, mainly aimed at children. In July it advertised a holiday program, “Doing Our Bit: Kids on the Home Front,” inviting children to “do some fundraising with specially created games—collecting scrap, bottles and even eggs! ... Have fun discovering how kids in the First World War made a big difference!” In June, members of the public were invited to knit blankets for charity to emulate women who knitted socks and mittens for soldiers during the war.

In a media release, Auckland Museum director Roy Clare laid out the pro-war character of *Home Front*. He declared: “The generosity of spirit and the human concern shown by Aucklanders and New Zealanders towards our own troops and, in turn, to the fate of innocent peoples caught up in the War, as for example this city’s care for those in Belgium, is a testament to our ability to come together in times of need.”

The WWI celebrations are unfolding amid escalating global instability generated by US imperialism’s wars in the Middle East, its military build-up in Asia and belligerent threats against Russia and China.

The Australian and New Zealand ruling elites, who have strengthened their alliance with Washington, are seeking to ideologically prepare the population to “come together” in support of the next war. The museum recently hosted a secondary school debate on whether individuals should have had “the right to object” to conscription in WWI. The unstated subtext of the debate called into question the right to oppose contemporary wars.

Home Front presents WWI-era propaganda depicting the British Empire’s declaration of war as a humanitarian response to Germany’s invasion of “poor little Belgium.” In reality, the war was the outcome of the historic breakdown of the capitalist system, brought about by the contradiction between the global economy and the outmoded nation-state system.

Britain joined the war to defend its vast colonial possessions and conquer new markets and territories. New Zealand, a minor imperialist power, sacrificed 18,500 young lives in the war as the price for annexing German Samoa and sharing the plunder from

phosphate-rich Nauru. In 1926 New Zealand was also given the Tokelau Islands, which Britain had annexed during the war.

Like other WWI centenary productions, *Home Front* covers up the mass opposition to war that emerged in the working class. It gives the impression that anti-war sentiment was confined to a small handful of the population, including pacifist politicians, conscientious objectors and some Maori tribes.

The wall text states: “When war was declared ... [p]ersonal hardships were put aside and everyone seemed to share the goal of supporting New Zealand’s fight for ‘King and Country.’” Later, it says, “small cracks appeared in this social cohesion,” and “[p]ublic discrimination and scorn awaited those who took stands against the war and prevailing opinions.”

This picture is completely one-sided and false. The surge of nationalist enthusiasm that accompanied New Zealand’s entry into the war began to disappear as the fighting progressed and thousands of NZ soldiers were killed and maimed at Gallipoli and on the Western Front.

Home Front notes that “criticising conscription and the war effort” was made illegal. The text expresses sympathy for the victims of anti-German discrimination and for conscientious objectors who were imprisoned and sometimes tortured. But it obscures the fact that police-state measures were implemented to clamp down on opposition in the working class, above all its most conscious anti-capitalist representatives.

Altogether 208 people were convicted of sedition during the war and 71 were imprisoned. The government suppressed the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), whose leaders had played a major role in a 1913 nationwide strike. Some IWW members fled the country to escape prosecution and others were imprisoned. Wellington IWW leader Joseph Herbert Jones, for instance, was jailed in January 1917 for a speech to 500 people in Dixon Street, where he called on the working class to “say to the masters we don’t want war.” Hysterical newspaper headlines denounced the IWW as “Hirelings of the Huns” and “German-born children of the devil.” [1]

The government was acutely aware of anti-war sentiment. In the years leading up to the war more than 7,000 young men were convicted for refusing compulsory military training. By 1916, 70 percent of those eligible to enlist had refused and in mid-1916 the government imposed conscription. About 5,000 soldiers deserted after being called up.

From 1916 onward there were numerous demonstrations against conscription. One anti-conscription meeting in March 1917 attracted 2,600 people in Christchurch, a city with fewer than 100,000 residents.

Defence Minister James Allen feared that illegal strikes by coal miners in 1916 and 1917 against conscription and low wages could spread and trigger another nationwide strike. In February 1917 the Military Service Board warned that the mining Grey district was “a powder magazine.” Miners Federation leaders Bob Semple and John Dowgray, among the founders of the Labour Party, worked with the government to prevent a general miners’ strike. Allen eventually agreed with the union leaders to exempt miners from conscription in exchange for an end to industrial action. [2]

Ignoring the mass opposition, *Home Front* instead focuses on various campaigns in support of the war. It claims that “New Zealanders took to war fundraising with gusto” and “the whole country got involved.” Several panels and photographs describe the 1915 Auckland Patriotic Queen Carnival, which raised £344,000 (the equivalent of \$NZ45 million in today’s dollars) over ten weeks. There are cabinets filled with badges and books sold to raise money. Also on display is a New Zealand flag, covered with embroidered signatures of people who made donations.

Such pro-war events did not involve “the whole country.” They were coordinated by members of the bourgeoisie and upper middle class. Fundraising organisations such as the War Contingent Association, the Food for Britain Fund, the Otago Patriotic Association were run by some of the country’s wealthiest industrialists and financiers. The exhibition shows examples of the fundraising efforts of Lady Liverpool, the governor-general’s wife. Lady Sadie Mills, the wife of Sir James Mills, one of New Zealand’s richest men, chaired a sewing committee that stitched items of clothing for soldiers.

One panel asserts: “Up and down New Zealand ... [w]omen and children put in huge efforts to provide comforts and provisions for the war.” Another states: “New Zealand’s women ... threw themselves into fundraising, selling badges and making clothes.”

However, many working class women fiercely opposed the war. In May 1918, around 2,000 people, mostly women, protested at King Edward Barracks in Christchurch, disrupting an intake of conscripts. The crowd “jeered, hectoring and shouted at army officers [who were] trying to take roll-calls of conscripts ... The mayor turned up but was hooted.” [3]

The global breakdown of capitalism that produced the war also provided a powerful impulse for socialist revolution. The Russian Revolution of October 1917 provoked fear among the ruling classes of the Allied countries and forced them to bring the war to an end. This earth-shaking event, which is ignored by all the WWI centenary exhibitions, deeply alarmed the New Zealand government. It maintained a strict ban on socialist literature, and on immigrants believed to be socialists, well into the 1920s. The *Free Lance* newspaper warned that “the Bolshevik menace ... fed by the manure of I.W.Wism” could spread to America, Australia and New Zealand. [4]

There was widespread unrest after the war, including among returned soldiers. By 1920, only around 2,000 disabled former soldiers were receiving permanent war pensions (more than 40,000 had been wounded) and only 8,000 dependents of dead soldiers were receiving payments. A crowd of 2,000 returned soldiers protested outside parliament on September 10, 1919, demanding greater assistance. The Labour Party’s Bob Semple made a speech “exhorting the men to reasonable behaviour.” [5]

Home Front includes a small section about the Labour Party, which was founded in July 1916 by the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the United Labour Party. A copy of a December 1916 speech by

Labour member Peter Fraser is on display, in which he called for “peace negotiations” and declared: “For the past two years and a half we have been looking at the ruling classes of Europe spreading woe, want and murder over the continent, and it is time that the working classes of the different nations were rising up in protest against them.” Fraser was arrested for this speech and sentenced to a year in prison.

The exhibition falsely labels the Labour Party founders “socialists.” In fact, it was a capitalist party founded to prevent the anti-war upsurge in the working class from threatening the profit system. Labour bitterly opposed the perspective of international socialism that guided the Russian Revolution. The party founders, like their counterparts in the Second International parties in Europe, represented an upper layer of the working class whose privileged position was bound up with the strength of “their” ruling class.

A typical statement in the SDP newspaper the *Maoriland Worker* in September 1915 explained that while its leaders opposed conscription, they supported the war, “believing that the Empire was in a supreme struggle to uphold the principles of Democracy” (see: “New Zealand’s first Labour Party leader was no socialist: A reply to the pseudo-left ISO”).

Home Front’s silence on the opposition to war in the working class, its rosy picture of wartime “unity” and promotion of the Labour Party, serve a definite contemporary political purpose. The ruling elite wants to prevent workers and youth from learning and being inspired by the struggles of the past. Above all, it aims to prevent them from drawing the conclusion that another world war can be prevented only through the unification of the international working class in a revolutionary struggle for socialism.

Notes:

[1] Jared Davidson, “Fighting War: Anarchists, Wobblies and the New Zealand State 1905–1925,” May 2014.

[2] Len Richardson, “Politics and War: Coal Miners and Conscription 1914–1918,” *Miners and Militants: Politics in Westland*, Ed. Philip Ross, May 1975, pages 128–155.

[3] Stevan Eldred-Grigg, *The Great Wrong War*, 2010, page 374.

[4] *Free Lance*, January 16, 1919, page 8.

[5] *The Press*, September 11, 1919, page 6.

The authors also recommend:

NZ government-produced book describes WWI as “successful and profitable”

[24 April 2014]

Australian World War I “celebration” buries history of mass anti-war opposition

[18 April 2015]

New Zealand’s WWI exhibitions falsify history and glorify war for a new generation

[22 April 2015]



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