



**Charles Butt Stanton MP (1873-1946)**

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*“Every day, every week, the delay is an encouragement to the enemy and may it not cause a note of despair in the hearts of our poor boys in the field – the hearts of my sons, your sons, your brothers, somebody’s sweethearts out in France and elsewhere? We ought to drop this sham, hypocritical, nonsensical talk about avoiding Conscription.”*

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From a mining and trade unionist background, Charles Stanton won Keir Hardie's seat on the Labour leader's death in 1915 on a jingoistic campaign. His life illustrates the divergent paths taken by both socialists and the trade union movement in response to the First World War.

### **Working class roots**

Stanton was a miner before he became active in the labour unrest endemic in the South Wales coalfield, and then became involved in the docker's strike in London in 1898. On returning to Wales he became known as a militant, advocating a more confrontational form of industrial relations. He was unsuccessful in the general election of December 1910, as he was not endorsed as a candidate by the Liberal supporting Miners' Federation of Great Britain. Despite being a member of the Marxist British Socialist Party he adopted an extreme patriotic stance at the outbreak of war in August 1914, and was directly involved in breaking up a peace meeting at Cardiff in November 1916.

By contrast, Keir Hardie, the former leader of the Labour Party, was an outspoken pacifist. Attempts by the international labour movement to ensure a general strike on the outbreak of war were immediately ineffectual. Together with Labour Party leader Arthur Henderson he had issued the following communique to 'the British Working Class' on 31 July 1914 as the conflict suddenly escalated:

*"You have never been consulted about this war.*

*Whatever may be the rights and wrongs of the sudden crushing attack made by the militarist empire of Austria upon Serbia, it is certain that the workers of all countries likely to be drawn into the conflict must strain every nerve to prevent their governments from committing them to war."*

On 6 August Keir Hardie visited Aberdare, part of his constituency, to address local miners and campaign for a peaceful resolution before the onset of war. However the jingoistic patriotism that had swept most of Britain was also prominent in the valleys. As soon as Hardie spoke, boos rang out from the crowd and he was greeted by patriotic songs. After 20 minutes Hardie was forced to leave the stage, accompanied by a police escort to the train station. Stanton was to tap into this popular, bellicose mood in his by-election campaign the following year.

The International Socialist Bureau, through Jean Jaurès (France), Hugo Haase (Germany), Emile Vandevelde (Belgium), Ilya Rubanovitch (Russia), Oddino Morgari (Italy) and Keir Hardie (Britain), had also issued a

declaration in favour of a peaceful settlement of the Serbian question. However, Governments ignored such moves, and labour leaders began to line up behind their national governments.

### **Merthyr Tydfil by-election**

Following Britain's entry into the war, the big flashpoint was on the question of conscription. On Hardie's death in September 1915, the Merthyr Tydfil seat became vacant. Stanton stood against the South Wales Miners Federation and Independent Labour Party candidate James Winstone. Although a British Socialist Party candidate, Stanton was secretly funded by prominent Conservatives, including Arthur Steel-Maitland, chairman of the Unionist Party. The contest focused on conscription, with Stanton vehemently in support.

In a speech outside Merthyr Town Hall on the eve of the election, he declared that James Winstone had no right to be in the constituency as he been previously earmarked by the Miners' Federation of Great Britain for North Monmouthshire.

As it turned out, he won the election easily with a majority of 4000 on 25th November (62% of the vote). In his maiden speech he referred to his sons who had volunteered:

*"I have been sneered at and reviled because I declared that I was a Britisher. I discovered it; I really did not know it. But I was a true Britisher when the hour of trouble came. My boys have gone, and I have done what little I could in my humble way to try to make things hummingly successful."* (HC Deb 21 December 1915 c227)

In the context of the wider debate the Government were testing the waters to see whether a conscription bill would receive significant backing in Parliament. Stanton's by-election victory and the prevailing mood in the country would offer vital evidence of the momentum behind the war effort.

### **Creation of the British Workers' National League**

Stanton along with other Labour MPs created the British Workers' National League (BWNL) in March 1916, with Stanton taking the role of Vice-President. The organization was heavily funded by Viscount Milner who later became the Secretary of State for War in 1918. The League played a key role in disrupting and halting peace meetings. In November 1916 Stanton was involved in whipping up the mob before they rushed the doors at Cory Hall in Cardiff, Union Jack in hand. The ensuing chaos led to fights and the peace rally being abandoned.

Despite the death of his eldest son Lieutenant Clifford Stanton at Ypres on 31 July 1917 aged 23, he remained strongly in favour of the war.

By 1918 the British Workers' National League had re-formed under the name of the National Democratic party (NDP). The NDP split from the Marxist British Socialist Party over the war, fielding 28 candidates in 1918. Stanton was re-elected in 1918 for the NDP, defeating the pacifist and Labour candidate Thomas Evan Nicholas. The party's funding came mainly from the Lloyd George Coalition Liberals.

Stanton lost his seat in 1922 and retired from electoral politics, becoming a supporter of the Liberal party. He died in 1946, survived by his wife Alice and son Frank.

### **Sources**

<http://www.independentlabour.org.uk/main/2014/02/28/wwi-'workers-stand-for-peace'/>

[http://www.abgs.org.uk/history/memorial\\_board1/cwgc\\_infoWW1.htm](http://www.abgs.org.uk/history/memorial_board1/cwgc_infoWW1.htm)

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