

ACT Reading - WWI - Helen Keller
“Strike Against War” (January 5, 1916)

Background

The overseas wars, the bitter conditions of workers, the misery of the poor in the crowded cities — these factors contributed to the rise of radicalism in the early part of the twentieth century.

One important expression of the radicalism of this period was the anarchist-influenced labor union called the Industrial Workers of the World — the IWW, popularly known as the “Wobblies.” When the IWW was formed in 1905, on the platform with labor leader “Big Bill” Haywood were the Socialist Party leader Eugene Debs and the seventy-five-year-old organizer of miners, Mary “Mother” Jones.

The IWW preamble of 1908 spoke of the class struggle: “The working class and the employing class have nothing in common. There can be no peace so long as hunger and want are found among millions of the working people and the few, who make up the employing class, have all the good things of life. ... By organizing industrially we are forming the structure of the new society within the shell of the old.”

The socialist movement was another powerful movement born of the grievances of this era. Eugene Debs had become a socialist while in prison for his participation in the Pullman strike of 1894. He became a leader of the party, running as its presidential candidate five times. The Socialist Party at one time had one hundred thousand members and 1,200 office holders in 340 municipalities. Distinguished writers of the time such as Upton Sinclair, Helen Keller, and Jack London were socialists. This period was the high water mark for the idea of socialism in the history of this country.

In the war between the Allied Powers (England, France, Russia, and later the United States) and Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey, between 1914 and 1918, ten million men died on the battlefields of Europe. They died often for a hundred yards of land, for a line of trenches. Many who didn’t die ended up without arms or legs, or blinded, or simply driven out of their minds (it was called “shell shock”). One memorable photograph of the war shows soldiers, walking in a single line, each with a hand on the shoulder of the soldier in front of him — all of them blind.

When it was all over, no one could explain what the war had been about. No wonder, then, that there had been widespread opposition in the United States to the country’s entrance into that war. No wonder also that the government had passed legislation allowing it to put anti-war protesters in prison.

A huge propaganda effort had been launched by the Wilson administration, backed up by punitive laws, the Espionage Act of 1917, and the Sedition Act of 1918. Using those laws, the government had sent to prison close to a thousand people for speaking out against the war, many of them labor activists and radicals, including the Socialist leader Eugene Debs, who had been sentenced to ten years in prison. The anarchists Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman would be deported.

After the war, as the wartime atmosphere of hysterical patriotism dissipated, a powerful anti-war literature appeared: by Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, Irwin Shaw, Dalton Trumbo.

One of the most important — and earliest — voices against the war was Helen Keller. In our schools we learn about Helen Keller, the deaf and blind girl who became a famous writer, but we do not learn that she was a socialist and an agitator. Here is the text of a speech Keller delivered before U.S. entry into the war in 1917.

Speech

Helen Keller "Strike Against War" (January 5, 1916)

To begin with, I have a word to say to my good friends, the editors, and others who are moved to pity me. Some people are grieved because they imagine I am in the hands of unscrupulous persons who lead me astray and persuade me to espouse unpopular causes and make me the mouthpiece of their propaganda. Now, let it be understood once and for all that I do not want their pity; I would not change places with one of them. I know what I am talking about. My sources of information are as good and reliable as anybody else's. I have papers and magazines from England, France, Germany and Austria that I can read myself. Not all the editors I have met can do that. Quite a number of them have to take their French and German second hand. No, I will not disparage the editors. They are an overworked, misunderstood class. Let them remember, though, that if I cannot see the fire at the end of their cigarettes, neither can they thread a needle in the dark. All I ask, gentlemen, is a fair field and no favor. I have entered the fight against preparedness and against the economic system under which we live. It is to be a fight to the finish, and I ask no quarter.

The future of the world rests in the hands of America. The future of America rests on the backs of 80,000,000 working men and women and their children. We are facing a grave crisis in our national life. The few who profit from the labor of the masses want to organize the workers into an army which will protect the interests of the capitalists. You are urged to add to the heavy burdens you already bear the burden of a larger army and many additional warships. It is in your power to refuse to carry the artillery and the dread-noughts and to shake off some of the burdens, too, such as limousines, steam yachts and country estates. You do not need to make a great noise about it. With the silence and dignity of creators you can end wars and the system of selfishness and exploitation that causes wars. All you need to do to bring about this stupendous revolution is to straighten up and fold your arms.

We are not preparing to defend our country. Even if we were as helpless as Congressman Gardner says we are, we have no enemies foolhardy enough to attempt to invade the United States. The talk about attack from Germany and Japan is absurd. Germany has its hands full and will be busy with its own affairs for some generations after the European war is over.

With full control of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, the allies failed to land enough men to defeat the Turks at Gallipoli; and then they failed again to land an army at Salonica in time to check the Bulgarian invasion of Serbia. The conquest of America by water is a nightmare confined exclusively to ignorant persons and members of the Navy League.

Yet, everywhere, we hear fear advanced as argument for armament. It reminds me of a fable I read. A certain man found a horseshoe. His neighbor began to weep and wail because, as he justly pointed out, the man who found the horseshoe might someday find a horse. Having found the shoe, he might shoe him. The neighbor's child might some day go so near the horse's heels as to be kicked, and die. Undoubtedly the two families would quarrel and fight, and several valuable lives would be lost through the finding of the horseshoe. You know the last war we had we quite accidentally picked up some islands in the Pacific Ocean which may some day be the cause of a quarrel between ourselves and Japan. I'd rather drop those islands right now and forget about them than go to war to keep them. Wouldn't you?

Congress is not preparing to defend the people of the United States. It is planning to protect the capital of American speculators and investors in Mexico, South America, China, and the Philippine Islands. Incidentally this preparation will benefit the manufacturers of munitions and war machines.

Until recently there were uses in the United States for the money taken from the workers. But American labor is exploited almost to the limit now, and our national resources have all been appropriated. Still the profits keep piling up new capital. Our flourishing industry in implements of murder is filling the vaults of New York's banks with gold. And a dollar that is not being used to make a slave of some human being is not fulfilling its purpose in the capitalistic scheme. That dollar must be invested in South America, Mexico, China, or the Philippines.

It was no accident that the Navy League came into prominence at the same time that the National City Bank of New York established a branch in Buenos Aires. It is not a mere coincidence that six business associates of J.P. Morgan are officials of defense leagues. And chance did not dictate that Mayor Mitchel should appoint to his Committee of Safety a thousand men that represent a fifth of the wealth of the United States. These men want their foreign investments protected.

Every modern war has had its root in exploitation. The Civil War was fought to decide whether to slaveholders of the South or the capitalists of the North should exploit the West. The Spanish-American War decided that the United States should exploit Cuba and the Philippines. The South African War decided that the British should exploit the diamond mines. The Russo-Japanese War decided that Japan should exploit Korea. The present war is to decide who shall exploit the Balkans, Turkey, Persia, Egypt, India, China, Africa. And we are whetting our sword to scare the victors into sharing the spoils with us. Now, the workers are not interested in the spoils; they will not get any of them anyway.

The preparedness propagandists have still another object, and a very important one. They want to give the people something to think about besides their won unhappy condition. They know the cost of living is high, wages are low, employment is uncertain and will be much more so when the European call for munitions stops. No matter how hard and incessantly the people work, they often cannot afford the comforts of life; many cannot obtain the necessities.

Every few days we are given a new war scare to lend realism to their propaganda. They have had us on the verge of war over the Lusitania, the Gulflight, the Ancona, and now they want the workingmen to become excited over the sinking of the Persia. The workingman has no interest in any of these ships. The Germans might sink every vessel on the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, and kill Americans with every one--the American workingman would still have no reason to go to war.

All the machinery of the system has been set in motion. Above the complaint and din of the protest from the workers is heard the voice of authority.

"Friends," it says, "fellow workmen, patriots; your country is in danger! There are foes on all sides of us. There is nothing between us and our enemies except the Pacific Ocean and the Atlantic Ocean. Look at what has happened to Belgium. Consider the fate of Serbia. Will you murmur about low wages when your country, your very liberties, are in jeopardy? What are the miseries you endure compared to the humiliation of having a victorious German army sail up the East River? Quit your whining, get busy and prepare to defend your firesides and your flag. Get an army, get a navy; be ready to meet the invaders like the loyal-hearted freemen you are."

Will the workers walk into this trap? Will they be fooled again? I am afraid so. The people have always been amenable to oratory of this sort. The workers know they have no enemies except their masters. They know that their citizenship papers are no warrant for the safety of themselves or their wives and children. They know that honest sweat, persistent toil and years of struggle bring them nothing worth holding on to, worth fighting for. Yet, deep down in their foolish hearts they believe they have a country. Oh blind vanity of slaves!

The clever ones, up in the high places know how childish and silly the workers are. They know that if the government dresses them up in khaki and gives them a rifle and starts them off with a brass band and waving banners, they will go forth to fight valiantly for their own enemies. They are taught that brave men die for their country's honor. What a price to pay for an abstraction--the lives of millions of young men; other millions crippled and blinded for life; existence made hideous for still more millions of human being; the achievement and inheritance of generations swept away in a moment--and nobody better off for all the misery! This terrible sacrifice would be comprehensible if the thing you die for and call country fed, clothed, housed and warmed you, educated and cherished your children. I think the workers are the most unselfish of the children of men; they toil and live and die for other people's country, other people's sentiments, other people's liberties and other people's happiness! The workers have no liberties of their own; they are not free when they are compelled to work twelve or ten or eight hours a day. they are not free when they are ill paid for their exhausting toil. They are not free when their children must labor in mines, mills and factories or starve, and when their women may be driven by poverty to lives of shame. They are not free when they are clubbed and imprisoned because they go on strike for a raise of wages and for the elemental justice that is their right as human beings.

We are not free unless the men who frame and execute the laws represent the interests of the lives of the people and no other interest. The ballot does not make a free man out of a wage slave. there has never existed a truly free and democratic nation in the world. From time immemorial men have followed with blind loyalty the strong men who had the power of money and of armies. Even while battlefields were piled high with their own dead they have tilled the lands of the rulers and have been robbed of the fruits of their labor. They have built palaces and pyramids, temples and cathedrals that held no real shrine of liberty.

As civilization has grown more complex the workers have become more and more enslaved, until today they are little more than parts of the machines they operate. Daily they face the dangers of railroad, bridge, skyscraper, freight train, stokehold, stockyard, lumber raft and min. Panting and training at the docks, on the railroads and underground and on the seas, they move the traffic and pass from land to land the precious commodities that make it possible for us to live. And what is their reward? A scanty wage, often poverty, rents, taxes, tributes and war indemnities.

The kind of preparedness the workers want is reorganization and reconstruction of their whole life, such as has never been attempted by statesmen or governments. The Germans found out years ago that they could not raise good soldiers in the slums so they abolished the slums. They saw to it that all the people had at least a few of the essentials of civilization--decent lodging, clean streets, wholesome if scanty food, proper medical care and proper safeguards for the workers in their occupations. That is only a small part of what should be done, but what wonders that one step toward the right sort of preparedness has wrought for Germany! For eighteen months it has kept itself free from invasion while carrying on an extended war of conquest, and its armies are still pressing on with unabated vigor. It is your business to force these reforms on the Administration. Let there be no more talk about what a government can or cannot do. All these things have been done by all the belligerent nations in the hurly-burly of war. Every fundamental industry has been managed better by the governments than by private corporations.

It is your duty to insist upon still more radical measure. It is your business to see that no child is employed in an industrial establishment or mine or store, and that no worker is needlessly exposed to accident or disease. It is your business to make them give you clean cities, free from smoke, dirt and congestion. It is your business to make them pay you a living wage. It is your business to see that this kind of preparedness is carried into every department on the nation, until everyone has a chance to be well born, well nourished, rightly educated, intelligent and serviceable to the country at all times.

Strike against all ordinances and laws and institutions that continue the slaughter of peace and the butcheries of war. Strike against war, for without you no battles can be fought. Strike against manufacturing shrapnel and gas bombs and all other tools of murder. Strike against preparedness that means death and misery to millions of human being. Be not dumb, obedient slaves in an army of destruction. Be heroes in an army of construction.

Questions

1. How does the author use evidence to support their ideas in the passage?
 - a) By providing personal anecdotes
 - b) By citing statistics and data
 - c) By appealing to the reader's emotions
 - d) By using quotes from famous individuals
2. In context, what does the author mean by the phrase "fold your arms"?
 - a) To relax and do nothing
 - b) To prepare for war
 - c) To show defiance
 - d) To embrace peace and non-violence
3. What is the main field of study discussed in the passage?
 - a) History
 - b) Social studies
 - c) Science
 - d) Literature
4. Based on the passage, what is the author's view on preparedness of war?
 - a) It is necessary for national security
 - b) It is a burden on the working class
 - c) It should be supported by the workers
 - d) It is an effective strategy to prevent wars
5. How does the author describe the working class?
 - a) Exploited and oppressed
 - b) Uneducated and ignorant
 - c) Powerful and influential
 - d) Wealthy and privileged
6. What does the author suggest is the motivation behind calls for preparedness?
 - a) Genuine concern for national defense
 - b) Desire to protect foreign investments
 - c) Fear of imminent invasion
 - d) Political manipulation and distraction

7. Which of the following best describes the author's tone throughout the passage?
 - a) Angry and confrontational
 - b) Sarcastic and mocking
 - c) Optimistic and hopeful
 - d) Neutral and objective
8. What is the author's stance on the use of force and war?
 - a) It is necessary to protect the country
 - b) It should be avoided at all costs
 - c) It is a justified means to an end
 - d) It is a necessary evil in certain situations
9. According to the passage, what is the main cause of wars?
 - a) Exploitation and greed
 - b) Ideological differences
 - c) Lack of communication
 - d) Nationalistic pride
10. What is the author's message to the working class?
 - a) Rise up and revolt against the system
 - b) Embrace peaceful solutions to conflicts
 - c) Support the government's preparedness efforts
 - d) Seek individual prosperity and success