Chapter Three – Red Clydeside

From one perspective, Ellen’s formative years remain shrouded in almost total mystery, and yet from another perspective they are the most researched in Scottish labor history. Almost none of the personal details of Ellen’s life as a young textile worker in Scotland survives. We know where her family lived and the approximate time she entered the labor force, but not where she worked or what exactly she did from day to day. By contrast, the larger world in which she and countless other young women workers lived – the world of Red Clydeside1-- has been researched by numerous scholars. These historians provide us with a detailed understanding of these turbulent times, and the labor unrest that occurred in Ellen’s own backyard. Thus, to better understand the forces that shaped Ellen during these critical years, years so important to forming her personality and character, we must again look to the larger world. There, in that ferocious outpouring of collective action by the workers of Glasgow and the surrounding industrial communities, one can find powerful forces that directly influenced Ellen’s radical activities in the United States.

Although still elusive at times, Ellen was far more visible in America during the late 1920s. There she became a highly effective labor organizer, known for her courage on the picket line and her fiery oratory. Hard working, unselfish, and dedicated to the workers’ cause, Ellen demonstrated the skills of a seasoned activist. I
believe that Red Clydeside was Ellen’s classroom, and the activists of the period were her teachers. It was during these years that she entered the work force, was introduced to the realities of industrial wage labor, and began formulating her own attitudes and opinions as a worker. It was during this time that Scottish women emerged not only as rank-and-file workers, but as leaders within several major labor confrontations. And it was during this time that the workers confronted many of labor’s central issues. Ellen may have been only a silent witness to these events, but I find it impossible to believe that she, or any other young worker of the period, could have escaped the influence of such firebrand rhetoric and monumental events.

Looking at Ellen’s life in its entirety, Red Clydeside is clearly a pivotal moment. Without the experiences of Red Clydeside, Ellen would most certainly have been a very different person. For these reasons, I believe it is essential that we examine Red Clydeside from the perspective of Ellen Dawson.

Like other young women of her time and class, Ellen went to work at the age of thirteen, sometime during 1913 or 1914. As a young worker, she was influenced by the intellectual debate that filled the workrooms, public houses, schoolyards, tenements, wash houses and street corners of her working class community during the early twentieth century, discussions which often focused on the problems of the workers and the action workers and their families took to address those challenges.

Ellen was a blue-collar worker in a family of such workers. Her mother had been a power-loom weaver, her maternal grandparents worked in a chemical plant, her aunts worked in thread mills and at the bleach fields, her father worked in a foundry, her paternal grandfather worked at a water and sewer plant, her uncles were copper miners, her older brothers were laborers, and she worked in a local textile mill,
just as her mother and her aunts had done before her. It was a life of long hours, hard and monotonous work, and few rewards.

Mary Brooksbank, an Aberdeen-born woman three years older than Ellen, recalled her first days in a Dundee jute mill, writing, “Once in the mill you had to be smart to earn your seven and six (seven shillings, six pence a week). Dashing around the spinning frames, knocking off the ‘flup’, whipping off the full bobbins, and on with the empies (sic), tying the ends round the “flys’, tempering the ends – then on to the next frame. I ran round the frames with the sweat dripping off the point of my nose.”

Mary Brooksbank, like Ellen, was from a Catholic family and she remembered how she never liked working in the mill. “I learned the habit of self-discipline. My wishes, desires, hopes, ambitions, were dutifully suppressed in the interests of those I loved…On the way to the mill, as a good little Catholic girl, I said ‘Hail Marys’ to St. Anthony that my father would get work, that my mother would keep well and that I would be kept free from sin.” She later noted, “Oh, the irony of it all! My life at this time was spent from six a.m. to six p.m. at the mill, then for another two or three hours at the steam wash-house cleaning, washing and scrubbing. As can be imagined, this left no time for sinning!”

Looking at the enormous amount of labor unrest in Glasgow and the surrounding communities during the first two decades of the twentieth century, there can be little doubt that Ellen’s early years in the mill were some of the most turbulent in Scottish labor history. It was a time when few, if any, workers escaped the thunderstorm of revolutionary ideas that deluged working class women and men in that time and place. Although no record has been found of Ellen or her family taking a leadership role in any of the events discussed in this chapter, given the large number
of individuals involved in many of these events, it is likely that one or more of them were active participants. Regardless, there should be little doubt that Ellen, like countless other working class individuals, knew of these events and their leaders, talked about them, and was influenced by them. These were forces that helped to shape her political opinions concerning the rights of workers and a workers’ relationship with employers, the government, and with each other. These were forces that influenced her later actions as a labor activist in America.

To fully appreciate how the labor unrest in Glasgow and the surrounding communities influenced Ellen, and other young women like her, requires a brief geographical overview of the region, insight into some of the activists who influenced working class women in Barrhead during those years, and a survey of the most significant events.

In the first two decades of the twentieth century, Glasgow was the heart of a rapidly growing industrial metropolis. According to a 1910 description of the area written by a Cambridge University geographer, “there is probably no district in Britain where the variety of industries…is greater.” In addition to large coal deposits and a long-established textile industry, “the production of pig-iron, the rolling of steel, the firing of pottery, glassmaking, the building of bridges, the manufacture of chemicals, distilling and brewing, and a thousand and one other industries from the building of battle-ships to the making of clay tobacco-pipes.”5 One of the reasons for this early twentieth century industrial power base was the River Clyde, which flows westward through Glasgow toward the Atlantic Ocean. It provided an excellent port for importing raw materials and exporting finished products, and it gave the industrial region its name -- the Clydeside. Numerous heavy industries related to building ships and locomotives were active on the banks of the Clyde during this period. Paisley,
the heart of the local textile industry, was approximately seven miles west of Glasgow. Barrhead was approximately seven miles southwest of Glasgow and approximately three miles southeast of Paisley. While there are numerous other communities in the region, I believe these are the three communities most relevant to understanding Ellen.

Some historians, most notably Iain McLean, have suggested that during this time the numerous communities within the region existed separately, with little or no interaction. The evidence suggests otherwise. Public transportation throughout the region was readily available and inexpensive, thanks to a network of trams that began operation in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. *The Forward*, Glasgow’s leading socialist labor publication during these years, *The Scottish Co-operator*, and other reformist publications were widely circulated throughout the region, and available at many local libraries. Reform-minded activists traveled throughout the region, often speaking in several different communities in a single week, as they distributed their literature. Finally, thanks to almost a half century of mandatory education, a significant number of Scotland’s younger workers, such as Ellen, were able to read the many newspapers and pamphlets that circulated among them, something that had not been true just a generation earlier. For example, Ellen and all her siblings were literate, while her mother never learned to read or write.

The labor and social unrest among Scottish workers during the period was not isolated, but was inspired by a national debate that covered Britain. Robert Blatchford’s Clarion Fellowship, had Glasgow area members and recruited with flying columns of cyclists. Keir Hardie addressed audiences in Paisley in 1897 and 1906, and as one local historian asked, “surely it was not pure coincidence that those were years of labour trouble in the mills?” In 1907 the Labour Party proposed its first
candidate, Robert Smillie. Smillie did not win, but he split the Liberal Party vote, thus throwing a safe Liberal seat to the Conservative Party.\textsuperscript{8} Despite this early failure, it was the beginning of a process that would see the demise of Britain’s Liberal Party, replaced by a national Labour Party after World War I.

In 1906, T. Gavin Duffy, a socialist lecturer speaking at the Barrhead Public Hall, pointed to the inequality of the British industrial system, noting “…that Great Britain was wealthier than any other country in the world. That…(British) workers…produced more wealth per head than the workers of France, of Germany, or even of the United States of America.” The problem was “if the British worker is the greatest wealth producer in the world he ought to live on a higher and more secure social plane than any other worker in the world..”\textsuperscript{9} But, as Duffy went on to explain, this was not the case.

Activists such as John Maclean\textsuperscript{10} conducted free classes on Marxism for workers in Glasgow and several other Clydeside communities. Mary Brooksbank recalled hearing Maclean speak one Sunday. “I was held spellbound by this man’s oratory…He spoke with such earnest and sincerity, his logic so clear and concise. I was absolutely fascinated as he quoted facts and figures, and also passionately condemned the capitalist system, which he proclaimed was the root of all wars, all poverty, and all the social evils that exist.”\textsuperscript{11} Certainly Ellen must have heard Maclean and probably had a similar reaction. Socialist education was widely available in Scotland, sponsored by groups such as the Clarion Scouts, Socialist Sunday Schools and the educational committees of the numerous cooperative societies. In fact, the idea of Socialist Sunday Schools began in Glasgow in the 1890s, seeking to provide an alternative to what was seen as the middle-class bias of the established churches. In 1912 there were fifteen Socialist Sunday Schools meeting in Glasgow.\textsuperscript{12}
For a young worker coming of age on Clydeside during the early decades of the twentieth century, there was a numerous and diverse selection of activist role models – suffragettes, cooperators, syndicalists, anti-militarists, pacifists, socialists, Marxists, and communists – all actively challenging the established order. For a young Barrhead worker like Ellen, the most influential activists must have included individuals such as James Maxton, a Barrhead resident and one of Scotland’s leading socialists; Mary Macarthur, a native of Glasgow, and perhaps Britian’s foremost women’s labor activist of the period; and John Maclean, from the neighboring village of Pollockshaws, a fiery Communist and Scotland’s best known radical.

James Maxton lived in Barrhead during most of the years that Ellen lived there. She would certainly have known him by reputation, and it is highly probable that she heard him speak many times. Interestingly, Maxton attributed his own conversion to socialism to pamphlets he “borrowed from …a semi-skilled worker in the big sanitary engineering works there…(The pamphlets) had been circulated round the (various departments)…and were very filthy, but still legible and to me inspiring.” Ellen’s father, Patrick Dawson, worked in the Shanks’ Foundry and Sanitary Engineering Works at the time and was probably exposed to the same pamphlets. In a 1921 letter from Patrick to Ellen’s brother, Edward, Patrick made reference to his belief that regardless of the difficult times the family was enduring in Millgate, life would be far worse if the Bolsheviks were in charge. This suggests that while he was more conservative than his daughter, he thought seriously about such issues.

As for Mary Macarthur, she provided Ellen with a role model. One eyewitness recalled, “Coming along the Embankment to-day, I found my way blocked
outside the Army Clothing Factory by a crowd of employees. There was a slip of a fair-haired girl, mounted on a chair, speaking to them with great fire and persuasiveness.” As Macarthur’s biographer, Mary Agnes Hamilton, later noted, “This little picture of the ‘slip of a girl mounted on a chair’ shows, in a flash, the new method. In addition to the ordinary routine meetings and the big public meetings arranged beforehand, she was ready to take, and make, any and every informal opportunity. She knew that if she could get at people she would make them listen – because she had something to tell them and could put it in terms they understood.”

Macarthur’s view of trade unionism was not mechanical. “It was the expression of a living faith in the power of men and women to do things together. Even when she talked to the simplest people in the simplest terms, fire and persuasiveness came from this bigger idea behind.”

Ellen later used a very similar style, a style that helped bring her to the forefront of the American labor movement during the late 1920s. As a Catholic, Ellen would not have been exposed to this evangelical style in church, so she must have learned it elsewhere. There is every reason to believe that a young Ellen saw Macarthur in action. Despite moving to London, Macarthur never forgot her roots. She returned to Scotland many times, actively campaigning for women workers, workers such as the thread mill “lasses” in Paisley and the jute workers of Dundee.

As a young Scottish worker, Ellen was not only physically within reach of a new generation of activists; her working life, and that of her family, was repeatedly shaken by a ferocious outpouring of collective action by workers throughout Glasgow and the surrounding industrial communities. The extent of this unrest was noted by John Maclean in a 1911 address to the Renfrewshire Co-operative Conference, a group that included the Barrhead Co-operative. “The times we are living in are so
stirring and full of change that its is not impossible to believe that we are in the rapids of revolution.” While such a comment may be viewed as wishful thinking on the part of a Marxist such as Maclean, it is supported by the fact that between 1910 and 1914 there were 261 recorded strikes in the region, often among the poorest workers – especially women – workers who were previously unorganized. The significance of these strikes can be seen in the fact that they represented more than six million lost workdays. Further, in the pre-war years membership in trade unions increased dramatically in Scotland, climbing from 129,000 in 1909 to 230,000 in 1914.

A survey of the most significant events occurring in the world immediately surrounding Ellen does offer a meaningful picture of this highly volatile environment and the diversity of issues being confronted by Scottish workers. The most important were: the thread mill strikes in Paisley and Neilston (which involved many Barrhead workers) and the decline of the paternalistic management system used by many of the textile companies; the Singer Strike of 1911 and the fight against “scientific management;” World War I, which unleashed a wave of anti-militarism and pacifism in the area; the Glasgow rent strikes of 1915 and 1916, which demonstrated the effectiveness of a campaign led by women; the 1915 Clydeside engineers’ strike and the response of the skilled male workers to the question of dilution – the use of unskilled workers, often women; and the 40-Hours Strike of 1919, which some observers believe brought Great Britain closer to a workers’ revolution than at any other point in its history.

The thread mills of Paisley and Neilston employed workers from numerous villages in the area, including Barrhead and Nitshill. The Paisley area textile industry was one of the oldest and most famous in Britain, begun during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, and made famous by the Paisley shawl and the
weavers who created their distinctive designs. During the late eighteenth and early
nineteenth centuries, the making of textiles in Paisley evolved from a cottage industry
to a factory system. This industrial transformation helped Paisley’s dominant textile
company – J & P Coats – gain a virtual monopoly over the thread manufacturing
industry, with facilities on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean and a ninety percent share
of the world’s production. Between 1897 and 1914, unrest among the thread-mill
workers increased dramatically, challenging the long-established paternalistic
management system used by mill owners and building a surprising level of class
consciousness among this previously unorganized and historically docile workforce.

After the consolidation of the Coats empire in 1896, the company began
shifting toward a more bureaucratic approach to labor management, taking advantage
of new technology and slowly instituting some of the production efficiency
techniques that became popular during this period. For workers, this often meant
changes in the tasks they performed and reductions in their weekly wages. As a
result, the Paisley area thread mills saw a series of spontaneous strikes, during the late
1890s and early 1900s, by women workers, usually over the issue of wages.

Siobhan Tolland, in her research concerning the life of Mary Brooksbank and
the jute workers of Dundee during this period, suggests that one of the reasons why
women workers were more apt to strike spontaneously, compared with their male
counterparts, was because of the culture of Scottish women during the period. For
women workers, strikes took on a carnival-like or party atmosphere. They involved
music, dance, poetry and other forms of public celebration, similar to the children’s
programs sponsored by the Cooperative Women’s Guild. This willingness to strike is
particularly interesting, considering the fact that women workers in Dundee were
often the primary breadwinners, as was the case with women textile workers in
Lancashire, but not with the mill workers in the Paisley area. Mary Brooksbank’s account of the opening moments of one strike supports Tolland’s theory. Mary recalled how young women textile workers danced around a policeman singing. “He took it in good part, and laughed with us,” she later wrote.

In November 1897, eight hundred female spoolers went on strike at the Ferguslie Spooling Department after new machines were introduced, a change that resulted in a reduction in wages. Ellen’s Aunt, Grace Halford, was a fifteen-year-old thread mill worker at the time and may have been one of the workers involved in this or one of the subsequent strikes. By 1900, Grace’s younger sister, Ellen Halford, had joined her in the thread mills. Ellen Halford’s life was cut short when, in 1903, she died of acute pulmonary phthisis, a lung disease common among textile workers of the time.

In 1900, copwinders and ring spinners went out on strike in separate actions. In response, the company fired strike leaders and threatened to discharge workers who attempted to organize other workers. In 1904, 200 hankwinders struck over a wage dispute and were quickly joined by 2,800 workers who left in a sympathy walk-out. In 1905, a walk-out by about a hundred hankwinders led to mass demonstrations throughout Paisley, a strike that brought out local men, women and children in support of the striking women workers. At the conclusion of that strike, Coats workers approached the Paisley Trades Council for help in forming a union. As a result, both the newly created National Federation of Women Workers, led by Mary Macarthur, and the Independent Labour Party, in which James Maxton was a leading activist, became participants in the next round of labor disputes.

In 1906, Archibald Coats abandoned plans for expanding the company’s Paisley facility because of what the company termed “interference by outsiders with
our Paisley workers.” The Economist in London observed, “The Socialist has been preaching, and the Labourist has been intriguing.”27 By this point, Coats’ profits were in the millions and shareholders were earning a consistent twenty percent annual dividend, often with a five percent bonus. With investors doing so well, workers were motivated to strike for higher wages and better working conditions. Coats, speaking at the Annual Meeting in 1906, responded, “I am expected to apologise for the profitableness of our business,” adding that “there is bound to be a certain number (of workers) who think they have cause to complain, and those are almost invariably the worst workers, who would not be able to make good wages under almost any condition.” His comment brought laughter and applause from shareholders attending the meeting.28

More strikes occurred in 1907,29 when young male laborers went out in response to the introduction of new machines. They were joined by female cone-winders. Within a few days, the dispute escalated into one of the most disorganized and violent strikes of the period. Management refused to negotiate. Workers broke windows, the company called police to have the workers forcibly removed from the mill. Driven from the mill, woman workers battled with police in the surrounding streets, often using their foot-long hat pins to defend themselves. The Coats company closed its Paisley mills, idling 12,000 thread mill workers for approximately a week. This strike hardened Coats against the workers, and a strike the following year, according to the NFWW’s publication The Woman Worker, resulted in the firing of “every worker who had shown a spark of resistance to unfair treatment.”30

Throughout the Paisley strikes, the question of paternalism remained a central issue. During the 1906 labor unrest, for example, The Paisley and Renfrewshire Gazette printed a letter signed “A Mill Worker,” that encouraged mill workers to
oppose the union and recommended that they go to their masters “with that confidence a little child approaches its parents.” In this same vein, another group of workers issued a statement in opposition to the union and expressed their “confidence that the directors of the firm will continue to deal justly with them.”

In contrast, the Scottish Observer, another newspaper based in Paisley, attacked the sincerity of the paternalistic feelings that the Coats company claimed to hold for its workers, and demonstrated that there was support for the workers within the larger community. The paper observed that the Coats family was “moved with the sufferings of a heroine in a sentimental novel or a tale of slum-life in a book; but they overlook the…suffering heroines who are slaving daily, from morn till night, in an atmosphere worse than tropical – slaving (for) enough to eat and be clothed respectably…they are like bees in a hive who strive and toil to make a comb, which the enterprising bee-keeper comes and lifts in due season and eats himself.”

Perhaps the most important textile strike of the period, certainly from the perspective of Ellen, was the 1910 strike at the R.F. and J. Alexander and Co. plant in Neilston. The Alexander mill was not part of the Coats empire; it was owned by the English Sewing Cotton Company. Unlike earlier strikes, this was the first strike with viable trade union backing. From the beginning, it was supported by the NFWW, who had representatives at the mill daily, and the Glasgow Trade Council. It also attracted support from John Maclean and James Maxton. The strike began on May 25, as cop winders at the Alexander mill sought wage parity with wages paid at the neighboring Coats mills. Alexander refused to negotiate with the workers’ representatives, describing them as “outsiders.” On June 6, the company locked-out all the workers. Workers responded by breaking windows and mobbing the mill manager. On June 8, the workers convinced the foremen to join the strike. At this
point, the company offered to deal with the workers, but the workers insisted upon working through their trade unions. On June 10, five thousand people marched to the mill manager’s house in Barrhead, in a public demonstration that included banners, songs and pipers. The parade included workers, family members and local children. Ellen, who was nine years old at the time, may well have been a participant. The largest banner bore the slogan, “We want justice, fair conditions and a living wage.” Lacking the strength of a global corporate giant such as Coats, Alexander was ultimately forced to negotiate, and the strike was resolved by the arbitration service of the Board of Trade in Glasgow. As Bill Knox and Helen Corr noted, the Neilston strike “represented a leap forward in terms of class consciousness for, at the very least, it involved a break with paternalism and opened space for a counter-employer culture and language to emerge.”

The Singer Strike of 1911 was the largest confrontation between management and labor on Clydeside in the pre-war years of 1910 to 1914. It occurred when Ellen was ten years of age and nearing the end of her schooling. The Singer strike illustrates the harsh, anti-union bias held by many companies in the Glasgow area, where strikes were routinely broken by the use of force, intimidation and the importation of replacement labour. It also demonstrates the response of workers to the introduction by employers of American-inspired “scientific management” into the workplace,” also know as Taylorism. In the name of increased efficiency and maximized profits, scientific management usually involved changes in established work procedures, reduction of the number of workers assigned to a particular task, increased work loads and wage reductions. For most workers, it simply translated into more work and less pay.
On March 21, 1911, at the American owned and managed Singer sewing machine factory in Clydebank, twelve women, whose job it was to polish sewing machine cabinets, went out on strike when their working procedures were reorganized in a manner that increased their workload and decreased their wage. Conditions in the plant were ripe for a strike, and by the next day most of the plant’s eleven thousand workers had walked out in support of the women. An explanation of why so many workers were ready to strike was explained by the following eyewitness account of conditions inside the plant, as reported in the *Forward*: “In many of these departments foremen stand with their hands timing the men and girls so that the maximum amount of labour can be exacted from the operatives in return for the minimum wage…Wages are not reduced collectively…the wages of two or three are broken today; a few others tomorrow, and so on until all the workers have been reduced, and the game of SCIENTIFIC REDUCTION begins once more.”

What made the Singer strike unusual was the solidarity shown by the workers, uniting women and men of all occupations and most skills within the company, without regard to religion, a force which often divided Protestant and Catholic workers in the region. A primary reason for this cooperation was the support provided by two organizations – the Industrial Workers of Great Britain (IWGB) and the Socialist Labour Party (SLP). However, there was one group of workers that did not willingly participate in the strike. That group was the engineers, a group the SLP journal called “the blue blood of the working class, the aristocracy of labour, who added still further to their reputation which stinks in the nostrils of all honest men. After being virtually shamed out, they lived up to A.S.E. (Amalgamated Society of Engineers) ethics, deciding…by a large majority to kow-tow to the firm.” Engineers were among the highest paid and best organized workers in Scotland, the
workers who had the most to lose in a strike. Their reluctance played a key role in the 
failure of the Singer strike and offers evidence of the divide between skilled and 
unskilled workers. As the SLP went on to note: “In strong contrast with the fine spirit 
of loyalty displayed by the unorganized and ‘unskilled’ strikers is the pitiful part 
played by…the ‘skilled’ trade unionists…The majority of them stayed in altogether or 
only came out either because there was no work for them to do…or because they were 
shamed into it by the well merited stigma of ‘scab’ which was hurled at them by the 
indignant strikers.” After joining the strike, the skilled workers continued to distance 
themselves from the unskilled workers. “Members of the A.S.E came out…cursing 
the strikers as a mob, ignored the strike committee, and tearfully apologised to their 
officials for their actions, explaining that they did not come out on account of 
sympathy with the strikers but because their sentiment of self-respect was hurt by the 
odious monosyllable which greeted them as they entered the gate.”

In response to the strike, Singer shut down the plant and threatened to move 
production to its other European facilities. In addition, they intimidated workers by 
telling them they would be blackballed if they did not immediately return to work. 
When the workers did return, “a campaign of systematic victimisation was initiated 
by Singer and over 400 workers, including all the strike leaders and known members 
of the IWGB, were sacked.” Like Coats, Singer was an international company, 
with facilities on both sides of the Atlantic. As a result, it could shift production to 
plants in other countries, effectively neutralizing the impact of a work stoppage at one 
factory or in a single country.

While the strike was ultimately a failure from the workers’ perspective, one 
point of particular importance to Ellen must be stressed. As noted by the Glasgow 
Labour History Workshop, “Contrary to male labourist myths, the women workers in
the 1911 Singer confrontation were neither weak, unreliable nor peripheral to working class struggle. Indeed, women played a critical and active role throughout the stoppage and were amongst those sacked and victimised in the aftermath of the strike.  

It was, after all, twelve women who led thousands of Singer workers out on strike. For Ellen, a young girl of ten and about to enter the work force, the story of how women workers led such a massive strike must have been inspirational.

World War I began in August of 1914, immediately changing the lives of Scottish workers as they were forced to shoulder the demands placed upon them by the British industrial war machine. This is also the year Ellen, age 13, most probably took her first job in a local textile mill. The anti-militarism and pacifism of many of Scotland’s most prominent labor leaders – including Maxton and Maclean – created numerous points of ideological confrontation for workers and the government.

Many workers greeted the beginning of the war with a sense of excitement, optimism and opportunity. During the first weeks of the war, the British army had more volunteers than it could process. As Gerard J. DeGroot noted, workers volunteered for many different reasons. “The rush to the colours was not one monolithic mass, but rather some two million separate individuals, each with a different set of reasons for volunteering. In varying degrees, these recruits were deferent, desperate, drunk, bored, destitute or deluded; many sought glory, others were drawn by a patriotic duty, and many simply did what they were told.”

As Willie Gallacher, a labor activist from the period, noted in his biography, *Revolt on the Clyde*, “What a terrible attraction a war can have! The wild excitement, the illusion of wonderful adventure and the actual break in the deadly monotony of working class life! Thousands went flocking to the colours in the first days, not because of any ‘love of country,’ not because of any high feeling of ‘patriotism,’ but
because of the new, strange and thrilling life that lay before them.” War, however, changed the men who served in the trenches of France. As Gallacher later wrote, “the reality of that fearsome slaughterhouse, with all its long agony of filth and horror, turned them from buoyant youth to despair or madness.”

Political organizations such as the ILP and the Socialist Labour Party condemned a war they saw as imperialistic. The Women’s Peace Crusade organized anti-war rallies on Glasgow Green during the years of 1914 through 1916. Perhaps most dramatically, Emily Orr, a pacifist poet of the time, addressed the one most important question – Why would workers defend a system that treated them so badly? In her poem “Recruit from the Slums,” she wrote:

What has your country done for you,
Child of a city slum,
That you should answer her ringing call
To man the gap and keep the wall
And hold the field though a thousand fall
   And help be slow to come?…
“What can your country ask of you,
Dregs of the British race?
“She gave us little, she taught us less,
And why we were born we could hardly guess
Till we felt the surge of battle press
   And looked the foe in the face.”

The Glasgow Rent Strikes of 1915 were the first important point of confrontation between the workers, or more accurately wives of workers, and the government during the war. These strikes were a direct result of the start of the war and the greed of profiteering slumlords. As Gallacher observed: “Wages which had been inadequate before (the war broke out), rapidly became worse. From the very first day the profiteers were on the job. ‘There’s profit in blood,’” Gallacher explained, “Prices first, then rents. The difficulties of the house-wives increased daily. In the workshops we agitated continually. Meal-hour discussion circles, with a big sale of books, pamphlets and periodicals, had for long been a common feature in
most of the Clyde factories, but following the outbreak of war these increased vastly in range and importance.47

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this profiteering was its acceptance by the British government. As Lloyd George48 admitted in January 1915, “The first interest of the taxpayer is that the supplies should be secured. With this object it may be to the public advantage to conclude contracts in the negotiations of which the prime necessity of securing expeditious and satisfactory delivery has been regarded as of more urgent importance that the actual terms of the bargain.”49

As the British industrial machine geared-up for the production of war materials, Glasgow became a primary center for the production of munitions.50 Thousands of workers were attracted to the area and this rapid growth placed an even greater strain on the already inadequate housing, especially in areas where war production was concentrated. Glasgow’s housing before the start of the war was bad. Working class families were crammed into tenements; density rates were the highest in Britain, sometimes with more than a thousand people living within a single acre. Many people lived in the “Backlands,” tenements built in the backyards of older tenement buildings. Such accommodations provided inadequate sanitation, living space, light and breathing room.51 In Barrhead, like many industrial villages throughout the region, there had long been a housing problem. Ellen’s family, for example, moved several times during her early years, living in some of the worst housing in the community. The war made things much worse. Barrhead dwellings that had been condemned in 1913 were reopened in October 1914, in order to provide housing for approximately eighty Belgian war refugees who were relocated to the village.52
Profiteering landlords throughout Clydeside saw this acute housing shortage as their opportunity to increase the rents they charged working class families, families who were already suffering from rapid price increases for food and other essential items. In Barrhead, for example, rents increased by 16 percent during the opening months of the war.\(^53\) In the prime munitions production centers, the rents were raised even higher. In Govan, for example, some rent increases were as high as 23 percent.\(^54\) Landlords took tenants who could not pay to court and had them evicted, often seizing all of their possessions as compensation for unpaid rents. Evictions became a common occurrence during 1915, even among women with husbands fighting and dying in the trenches. Such heartless and unpatriotic action on the part of greedy landlords helped to build public support for the tenants.\(^55\)

In response, women like Mary Barfour and Helen Crawfurd organized housewives in a massive campaign against the landlords. Aided by skilled factory workers, especially from the munitions and shipbuilding industries, and with the political support of the Independent Labour Party and the Cooperative Women’s Guild, they were able to unite more than twenty-thousand working class women and men in a campaign of withholding rent payments. Rent strike activists addressed crowds from the roofs of local washhouses, renters stopped making rent payments, and when the sheriff’s men tried to evict the tenants for non-payment, local women bombarded them with flour and peasemeal.\(^56\) Afraid that the rent-strikes might threaten war production, the government was ultimately forced to pass legislation that prevented additional rent increases in areas surrounding munitions factories, and returned rents to their pre-war levels until the end of the war. The ultimate success of the 1915 rent strikes, perhaps the only significant worker victory during the war, was
made possible by the women who organized and provided the leadership for the campaign.\textsuperscript{57}

The engineers’ strike over the question of “dilution” began in 1915 when skilled workers, often referred to as engineers, went on strike for higher wages, an action in response to the rising cost-of-living associated with the war. The strike ultimately involved more than ten-thousand members of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) and eight different manufacturing facilities on the Clyde. Although the strike failed, workers formed the Labour Withholding Committee (LWC), a group that represented the rank-and-file members of the union, workers who were dissatisfied with the decisions being made by trade union officials.\textsuperscript{58}

In response to this dispute, the British government became an active participant in the relationship between Scottish workers and their employers. Concerned that labor stoppages might interrupt the production of war materials, the government enacted the Munitions of War Act. The act dramatically reduced the rights of the individual worker, and significantly strengthened the authority of the government and employer over the worker. The three most onerous aspects of the act were provisions that made it a criminal offense for workers to: (1) leave their job without the written consent of the employer; (2) refuse to accept a new job assignment, regardless of the rate of pay; or (3) refuse to work overtime. Workers charged with violations of the Munitions Act were brought before munitions tribunals, courts that had the authority to fine and imprison workers who were convicted of offenses under the act. Most skilled workers saw the Munitions Act as an attempt by the government to take away their hard-won industrial rights, and among Clydeside workers it was known as The Slavery Act.\textsuperscript{59}
In December, 1915, relations between skilled workers and the government deteriorated even further when the question of dilution came to the forefront. Because of the massive increase in production required to meet the demands of the war, employers and the government sought to simplify production so that more semi-skilled and unskilled workers, especially women, could be hired. This dilution of the work force was seen by the skilled workers as a major threat to both their status as craftsmen and their long-term earnings potential. As R.J. Morris noted, “Men had learnt from long experience that the introduction of women to an occupation was associated with a tendency to lower wages…From such a perspective, keeping women out of an occupation was an essential part of defence against increased exploitation by the owners of capital.”

Under the banner of the LWC, which was reorganized into the Clyde Workers’ Committee (CWC), the skilled workers tried to fight the government over the issue of dilution. The government used the Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), an act which made almost every form of opposition to government policy a treasonous act, as justification for deporting CWC leaders to other parts of Britain, effectively ending serious opposition to dilution by the engineers and opening the doors of munitions factories to women and unskilled men. This increase in available workers allowed the munitions plants to operate non-stop, and made women an essential part of the wartime workforce. Between July 1914 and January 1918, the number of women employed in Britain increased from 3,224,600 to 4,814,600, many in industries that had excluded women before the war. Women worked in armaments factories, while others did heavy labor such as building ships, stoking furnaces and unloading coal.
While much of the debate surrounding dilution ignored the rights of women and focused on protecting the existing rights of the skilled male workers, labor activists like Mary Macarthur recognized that dilution provided a meaningful opportunity for women workers. Macarthur concentrated her efforts on the section within the Munitions Act that required a worker to obtain a certificate of discharge from her employer before she could move to a new job. This article effectively prevented workers from moving to higher paying positions, something which would have forced employers to pay higher wages in order to retain existing workers and attract new ones. This requirement was especially hard on women, who normally had the lowest paying jobs. "In many cases women were regularly working between seventy and eighty hours a week, and this in factories and shops where there were no adequate sanitary or other arrangements for their comfort." Macarthur confronted the government on what she believed was the central issue -- "If you say to the women, you are not to leave your employment, then you must make the conditions of that employment decent." Thanks to her "bull-dog tenacity," the government created the Labour Supply Committee, to which she was appointed. From that position, she was able to push successfully for a minimum wage for women workers and improved sanitary facilities for women.64

The 40-Hours Strike of 1919 was the most dramatic of the labor confrontations of the period, and it is the event that some believe was when the workers of Scotland came closest to open revolution. The end of World War I brought the sacking of thousands of workers, especially women who had been hired for munitions work. Mary Macarthur noted that by the start of 1919 more than 500,000 women workers in Britain were already out of work.65 Unemployment was compounded by the demobilization of soldiers returning from Europe. In response,
the leading labor organizations in Glasgow organized a strike to provide jobs for these ex-soldiers by reducing the work week to forty hours. They also wanted to prevent the re-emergence of an unemployed reserve, and thus help labor establish a stronger bargaining position with employers. By the end of January, more than seventy-five thousand workers were out on strike, representing engineering, shipbuilding, electrical supply and mining industries throughout the region. Flying pickets of ex-service men, organized by the CWC, enlisted the support of workers throughout the region. *The Strike Bulletin* printed by the Socialist Labour Party reported that in Barrhead “the sheet-metal workers are on strike. The others will come sure if they have the case put to them on the spot.” By the end of the first week, almost every trade on the Clydeside was represented in the strike.

Writing about this time, Mary Brooksbank noted, “short time and lock-outs became the order of the day…(and) it became apparent that the returning soldiers were not to be allowed to work in the country they had fought for. Unemployment grew, but these were different men from the young lads who had so bravely and unquestioningly gone off to war. They realised now just whose country it really was.”

The confrontation came to a head on January 31, 1919, when more than sixty-thousand workers assembled in George Square, in the heart of Glasgow. While strike leaders met with government representatives in the city chamber, violence broke out between police and demonstrators. As the *Evening News* reported, “The police found it necessary to make a baton charge, and strikers and civilians – men, women, and children – were felled in the melee that followed.” What started the battle is not clear, although historians at the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow described it as “a vicious and unprovoked attack on the demonstrators.” Demonstrators, who
included recently released soldiers, fought back with the available weapons at their disposal, including “fists, iron railings and broken bottles.” The confrontation became known as “Bloody Friday.” In response, the government ordered troops with tanks into Glasgow, careful not to use local Scottish troops who might join the strikers. As one Scottish veteran, who had just returned from France and was garrisoned with the Seaforth Highlanders in Cromarty recalled, “We had no idea what was going on in Glasgow. But one morning the whole battalion was paraded and all men from Glasgow and district were told to come out to the front of the parade. We thought that this was us going to be demobbed (discharged), but instead we were kept in Cromarty, while the rest (around 700 men) were sent to Glasgow to shoot if it were necessary.” Ten days later, the strike was called off. The workers did not get a forty-hour week, but, based on a prior agreement, the work week was reduced from fifty-seven hours to forty-seven.

Late in 1919, Ellen and almost her entire family were forced to move to Lancashire in search of employment, an indication that they may well have been active participants in these events. If not, they certainly understood the plight of the workers who did participate.

In the following months and years, the workers’ cause in Britain became more political. Whereas before the war Conservatives and Liberals had been Britain’s two leading political parties, things changed dramatically after the war. In the 1920s the newly formed Labour Party replaced the Liberal Party as one of Britain’s two major parties. In the 1922 Parliamentary elections, Labour became the dominant party in Glasgow, jumping from a single seat in 1918 to ten seats in 1922. A key reason for this transfer of power was passage of the Representation of the People Act, providing for universal male suffrage and giving women over the age of thirty the right to vote.
Mary Macarthur noted what she saw as the most significant result of the war from the perspective of women workers. “Of all the changes worked by the war none has been greater than the change in the status and position of women: and yet it is not so much that woman herself has changed, as that man’s conception of her has changed.” However, with respect to Ellen, an earlier comment of Macarthur’s seems even more apropos. “One of the most hopeful signs… is the development of many women leaders from the ranks of the workers themselves – women who are imbued with the justice of a cause, and realising the great issues involved, have become enthusiastic missionaries, preaching the gospel… to their fellow workers in the factory, mill and workshops.”

Today, the labor turmoil that raged in Scotland during the early decades of the twentieth century remains controversial. Until now, the debate has focused on the influence these individuals and events had within Scotland, but as Terry Brotherstone suggested, in light of individuals such as Ellen, who took their experiences to other parts of the world, perhaps the debate needs to be expanded to include the unexpected and previously unexplored effects these individuals and events had on the world outside Scotland. Certainly, Ellen can be viewed as a disciple of Red Clydeside, as a women who carried the gospel of individuals such as John Maclean, Mary Macarthur and James Maxton to the United States and strikes in industrial communities such as Passaic, New Jersey, New Bedford, Massachusetts, and Gastonia, North Carolina.
1 Much of the initial scholarship surrounding Red Clydeside focused on the engineers’ strike of 1915, the question of dilution, and the 40-Hours Strike of 1919. In recent years, historians at places such as Strathclyde University have begun to expand the definition of Red Clydeside to include other major events between 1910 and 1919. Roots of Red Clydeside, edited by William Kenefick and Aruthur McIvor, (Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd., 1996) and the Glasgow Digital Library, Strathclyde University, “Red Clydeside: A history of the labour movement in Glasgow 1910-1932,” (http://gdl.cdl.strath.ac.uk/redclyde/rcevets.html) are two of the best examples. However, very little research has been done with respect to the role women played in the events of Red Clydeside, or how dilution affected women workers.
3 During this time, working class women did their washing at communal wash houses.
7 Robert Blatchford and Keir Hardie were two leading socialists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their activities and speeches were widely reported and influenced many of the labor activists of this period.
10 John Maclean (1879-1923) was perhaps the most famous labor activist in Scottish history. One contemporary called Maclean “the greatest revolutionary figure Scotland has produced.” [Gallacher, William, Revolt on the Clyde, (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1980), p. 22.] Like James Maxton, he was born in Pollockshaws, approximately three miles east of Barrhead. There he was active in the local cooperative society and in 1910 played a key role in organizing young women workers in the thread mills of Neilston. Maclean came into prominence among Glasgow’s labor activists in the years just before the start of the First World War, when he wrote a weekly column in Justice under the pseudonym of “Gael,” and conducted weekly classes on Marxism throughout the region. Hundreds of workers attended, and as Harry McShane later noted, “All the best elements of the working class movement, particularly the younger people went to them enthusiastically.” [Knox, William, Scottish Labour Leaders (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1984), p. 182.] Maxton, for example, was one of the tutors for Maclean’s classes. During World War I, Maclean was convicted of sedition after making anti-conscription speeches in Glasgow and served several months in prison. Then, following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, he was appointed Consul for Soviet Affairs in Great Britain and opened an office in Glasgow. Police soon raided the office and arrested Maclean on charges of mutiny, sedition and disaffection amongst the civilian population. At his trial, in true Maclean style, he declared, “I am not here as the accused, I am here as the accuser of capitalism, dripping with blood from head to foot.” [Brotherstone, Terry, editor, Accuser of Capitalism (London: New Park Publications, 1986). Not surprisingly, he was found guilty of the charges and sentenced to five years. Workers demonstrated throughout Britain against his imprisonment. In Barrhead, for example, the local chapter of the ILP voted 300 to 0 in support of a resolution demanding that Maclean be released. Maclean was ultimately pardoned by the King. Maclean rejected the pardon, saying that it was the workers who earned him his freedom and not the King. When Maclean died in 1923, more than 10,000 people attended his funeral in Pollockshaws. As Terry Brotherstone noted, Maclean was “a courageous supporter of the Bolshevik Revolution, and an uncompromising internationalist.” (Brotherstone, Terry, “John Maclean and the Russian Revolution,” Scottish Labour History Society Journal, Nov. 23, 1988, p. 26.)
12 “Development of a Socialist Infrastructure,” Glasgow Digital Library. The Glasgow Digital Library is based at the Centre for Digital Library Research in the University of Strathclyde to support teaching, learning and research. It can be accessed on the web at http://gdl.cdl.strath.ac.uk/. It provides one of the most comprehensive collection of articles and documents related to Red Clydeside and other events related to Scottish labor history.
13 James Maxton (1885 – 1946) was Barrhead’s most prominent political figure. Born three miles away in the village of Pollockshaws, he moved to Barrhead at the age of five when his father was named headmaster of Grahamston School. After becoming active in politics during his university days, Maxton joined the Barrhead branch of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) in 1904. Almost immediately he became one of the ILP’s leading propagandists. Rising quickly within the party, he served as chairman of the Scottish ILP from 1913 to 1919. A staunch pacifist, Maxton refused any
type of service that supported the war effort. In March, 1916, speaking on Glasgow Green against the deportation of local labor leaders, Maxton encouraged workers to stop work in protest against the government’s action, defiantly repeating his comments for the benefit of police officers who attended the speech. He was arrested four days later on charges of sedition. At his trial in Edinburgh the following month, he took the advice of his legal counsel and pled guilty to the lesser charge of “attempting to impede, delay, and restrict the production of munitions.” He was imprisoned in Calton Jail for approximately eight months, where he convinced several of his jailers to organize a chapter of the Police and Prison Warders’ Union and to join the ILP. Still unwilling to work in support of the war, he spent 1917 and 1918 helping construct barges for neutral countries and working in support of causes such as the Women’s Peace Crusade. In 1922, as part of the reordering of Glasgow politics which threw out the Liberal Party, he was elected to Parliament, a seat he held until his death in 1946.

Mary Macarthur (1880-1921) was born to middle-class parents in Glasgow. At the age of fifteen, her family moved to Ayr, on the southwest coast of Scotland at the mouth of the Clyde. There she worked as a bookkeeper in her father’s drapery business and as a freelance journalist. It was as a journalist that she was first exposed to the trade union movement. As she later told an American newspaper interviewer, “I went to a meeting (of shop assistants) at Ayr to write a skit on the proceedings. Going to scoff, I remained to pray. I became impressed with the truth and meaning of the Labour movement.” It was a life-long conversion. In 1903 Macarthur moved to London, where her potential was quickly recognized and she was named secretary of the Women’s Trade Union League (WTUL), a position which put her into the middle of the women’s labor movement. In 1906, she established the National Federation of Women Workers (NFWW), which according to Sarah Boston “organized more women, fought more strikes and did more to establish women trade unionists than any other organization.”

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Women Workers and the Trade Unions (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1987), p. 60.]


Hamilton, Mary Macarthur (London: Leonard Parsons, 1925), p. 34.


During the nineteenth century, a philosophy of paternalism provided Paisley area mill owners with a highly successful method for controlling their workers. Under such a system, employers created a workplace in which the owner and his management representatives took on the role of a benevolent father figure, responsible for making decisions that were in the best interest of the corporate family and providing direction to the other members the family. The company often provided workers with a variety of benefits in conjunction with their employment, such as housing, company stores, health care, childcare and retirement pensions – all designed to strengthen the relationship between workers and the company, and to re-enforce the idea that the company was looking out for the workers. In return, workers were expected to be loyal and obedient. This paternalistic approach to the management of workers was based on Christian traditions and replicated life in the days of cottage industry textiles, when the head of the family, usually the father, managed family production and finances, directing the wife and children in their day-to-day activities. Such a management system was particularly successful in places such as Paisley, where a large majority of the workers were single, young women. From the workers’ perspective, however, there were also significant disadvantages of working under such a system. Benefits were often designed to tie workers to the company, helping to keep wages low and making it difficult for workers to move to better jobs. Paternalism supported the myth that the rewards of production were being equitably distributed among everyone associated with the company. The reality was very different. With a workforce of young women, thread mill companies were able to keep salary costs extremely low, because women workers were paid less than half what their male counterparts received, and because most thread mill jobs were classified as unskilled. Their status as unskilled workers can be questioned, since many positions required significant training. To become a twister, for example, required twenty-one weeks of training before a worker was given a full workload. By classifying workers as unskilled and keeping wages low, textile companies were able to keep profits high.


Tolland, “Mary Brooksbank.”

General Register of Scotland: Census 1901; Deaths 1903.
Clark, Paisley: A History, pp. 166-167. Several hours were spent in the Queen Mother Library reviewing original copies of The Economist trying to find the original quotation. Unfortunately, it was not found.
Mary Macarthur was in Paisley during 1907, representing the NFWW. Responding to a charge by the Paisley Gazette that she was attempting to “speak for” the women workers of Paisley, Macarthur said the workers “are perfectly able to speak for themselves. I only urge that they should do so with united voice and so be loyal to each other. I claim no right to speak for the women of Paisley, but I claim the right to speak to them. I claim the right to convey a message of comradeship and good cheer from the 80,000 women Trade Unionists whom I represent.” [Hamilton, Mary Agnes, Mary Macarthur (London: Leonard Parsons, 1925), p. 50].
The Woman Worker, June 5, 1908; Roots of Red Clydeside, pp.117-119.
MacDonald, The Radical Thread, p. 158.
As the members of the Glasgow Labour History Workshop noted in their essay on the Singer Strike in Roots of Red Clydeside, “Whilst some new skills were created in this process, more than ever, mass production under ‘Taylorism’ was dehumanising and degrading the worker, who, in the interest of increasing profits, was seen as merely another element in the production process – as (Frederick Winslow) Taylor put it, the worker would be a ‘trained gorilla.’”
The Singer Strike 1911,” Glasgow Digital Library. In the United States, this system of increasing the workload of workers was often called “speed-up” in New England and “stretch-out” in the American South.
Like the J&P Coats Company, Singer was a international company with production facilities on both sides of the Atlantic.
Forward, April 1, 1911; “A Clash of Work Regimes,” Roots of Red Clydeside, p. 195.
The Socialist, April, 1911; McLean, The Legend of Red Clydeside, p. 101. A very similar scenario was played out in New Bedford, Massachusetts when the skilled workers negotiated a settlement with the mill owners, undercutting the unskilled workers. This will be discussed more fully in the “New Bedford” chapter.
The Socialist, April, 1911; McLean, The Legend of Red Clydeside, p. 101.
Roots of Red Clydeside, p. 210-211.
DeGroot, Blighty, pp. 48-49.
David Lloyd George served as Minister of Munitions and later Minister of War, prior to becoming Prime Minister in December, 1916.
DeGroot, Blighty, p. 71.
The definition of munitions used by the government during the war was extremely broad and included far more than just military weapons and ammunition. It encompassed everything that might be needed to support the war effort, including the production of food, clothing and fuel.
McLean, The Legend of Red Clydeside, p. 18.
Housing the Heroes (Barrhead: Community Council, 1983), p. 16.
Ibid.
McLean, The Legend of Red Clydeside, p. 22.
“Clydeside Rent Strikes 1915-16,” Glasgow Digital Library.
“Clydeside Rent Strikes 1915-16,” Glasgow Digital Library.
“The Clydeside Engineers’ Dispute 1915,” Glasgow Digital Library.
The issue of “dilution” carried with it a gender bias in favor of the male workers. Dilution implies a workforce that is less than it was before women workers were introduced.


“Clydeside Resistance to Dilution,” Glasgow Digital Library.


*The Strike Bulletin*, February 9, 1919; Smith, *The Story of the 40 hours Strike*.

“Flying pickets” were use to expand a strike quickly. Workers from one striking facility were sent to other factories to encourage workers there to join the strike. Also known as “Flying Squadrons,” this technique had been used by socialists in the years before World War I. It was used in the U.S. as well.

*The Strike Bulletin*, January 31, 1919; Smith, *The Story of the 40 hours Strike*.

“The 40 Hours Strike 1919,” Glasgow Digital Library.


“This Battle of George Square (Bloody Friday) 1919,” Glasgow Digital Library.

Smith, *The Story of the 40 hours Strike*, February 1st.


This point was suggested by Brotherstone in a conversation on February 20, 2003.