

Labour & Empire working group panel

“The fragmentation of British labour over imperial and racial issues (1870s-1920s)”

held at the “Fragmented Powers – Confrontation & Cooperation in the English-speaking World” international conference, Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris, France), 23–25 June 2022

Thursday 23 June, 14.45-15.30

Steven Parfitt (Auckland University): “Knights of the Empire”

Steven Parfitt is a historian of labour and working-class history. He has written several books, including Knights Across the Atlantic: The Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland (Liverpool University Press) and Emma Paterson: Pioneer of Women's Unions (upcoming with Trent Editions), as well as numerous scholarly articles on labour history and many articles on history and contemporary issues with the Guardian, Jacobin, In These Times, Tribune, and other newspapers and magazines. He is currently working on a global history of the Knights of Labor, as well as a shorter history of the Knights in South Africa and a biography of their most prominent woman leader and organiser, Leonora Barry. He can be reached at spar232@aucklanduni.ac.nz

The Knights of Labor (1869-1917) became the preeminent American labour movement of the nineteenth century. They were also one of the century's most extensive labour movements. Their assemblies (branches) appeared in the French-speaking world, in France, Belgium and Luxemburg in particular; but aside from the US, their greatest successes came in the British imperial world, from the metropole to the white settler states of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. In this paper I want to look at how Knights in the last three of those countries, and in Britain itself, addressed questions of race and empire – belonging, as they did, to an American movement noted both for inclusion of black American workers to an unprecedented degree, its fierce opposition to Chinese immigration, and the Irish origin and ancestry of many of its leaders and members. Knights in all these places took their movement in very different directions – and those differences help us to think about the idea of “white labourism,” of an “imperial white working class,” in comparative perspective.

Yann Béliard (Sorbonne Nouvelle): “Hull labour and foreign workers: the shifting and disputed boundaries of class solidarity” (1880s-1920s)”

Yann Béliard is a Senior Lecturer in British studies. Since the completion of his PhD on class relations in Hull from 1894 to 1910 (2007), he has directed a special issue of the Labour History Review (April 2014) revisiting ‘The Great Labour Unrest, 1911–1914’. In 2018 he co-edited Labour United and Divided from the 1830s to the Present (Manchester University Press, 2018). He is also the co-editor of Workers of the Empire, Unite. Radical and Popular Challenges to British Imperialism, 1910s-1960s (Liverpool University Press, 2021). His research focuses on British labour in the age of empire, with particular emphasis on workplace struggles, transnational activism, and race.

Based on a series of biographical notices written for the *British Dictionary of Labour Biography*, this paper examines the conflicting attitudes that competed with each other inside Hull's labour movement regarding international, imperial and racial issues from the late 1880s to the early 1920s. Though Hull's connection with the Empire is less obvious than Liverpool's or Glasgow's, the working environment of its seamen and dockers was by definition transnational, and its labour force in general was the product of successive waves of migration, notably from Ireland and the Russian Empire. In this maritime context familiar with the circulation of goods, human beings and ideas, were foreign workers seen as allies in the construction of a stronger labour movement or as aliens threatening that march forward? This paper will examine the contrasted and sometimes contradictory ways in which labour activists understood the notion of class solidarity, the way they tried to reconcile – or didn't – the Red Flag and the Union Jack.

The individual cases I will present are varied, from the archetypal jingoism of trade unionists John Burn and John Bell to the moderate pacifism embodied by Alfred Gould, the pioneer of the local ILP, and the more radical internationalism advocated by socialists Gustav Schmidt and Cornelius Shearsmith – a broad spectrum of points of view that can be seen as evidence that opinions on class, empire and race inside the British labour movement were probably more diverse, and complex, than is often contended.

Joe Redmayne (Newcastle University): “Political itineraries: labour imperialism, anti-imperialism, and traditions of white labourism and anti-racism within County Durham’s labour movement (1919-30)”

Joe Redmayne is a third year History PhD student at Newcastle University and interested in global labour history. His thesis situates County Durham during the year 1919 transnationally, and explores the global implications of Empire on British society through regional working-class consciousness. Joe is particularly interested in the category of ‘whiteness’ to renew our understandings of class consciousness in an age of world empires.

This paper will scrutinise public support by County Durham’s labour movement for ideologies of labour imperialism and anti-imperialism. Scholars have come to understand the year 1919 as unique moment of destabilisation and profound intellectual flux that the transition from war to peace brought. The compression and social polarisation of the world during 1919 between the ideological contests of Wilsonianism-versus-Leninism formed a new politics that would soon dominate the century to come.

In Britain, accompanying the unrest of 1919, was the expulsion of colonial workers who filled labour shortages during the war. The exigencies of the First World War introduced a significant population of British colonial subjects from the empire into the metropole’s port towns; but at the same time, raised questions about continued desirability of their presence. Hostility took place amid the xenophobic climate of war, exemplified with the passage of the Aliens Restriction Act and Coloured Alien Seamen’s Order of the 1920s. “Race Riots” even occurred in British ports in the years 1919 and 1930.

The legacy of 1919, in turn, would have a bearing upon politics, social movements and activists of the 1920s. The transition to peace and social dislocation contributed to a generation that had to refashion themselves at the onset of imperial instability and global depression. The paper will shed light on the developments of weak class identification, where political groups and trade unions have employed exclusionary practices to restrict employment of racialized workers to defend the economic interests of their members. It will also consider where rank-and-file members have formed new movements, to undermine the prevalence of racism in trade unions and advance towards interracial class solidarity. In other words, the paper will attempt to understand why certain historical actors transcended oppositional ideologies, as well as succumbed to deferential, dominant and official ideological forms.