

Poppy/Remembrance day, militarism, imperialism and the promotion of intolerance

Workers Solidarity Movement

November 2 2011

The poppy is used as a fundraising appeal by the British Royal Legion and can be traced back to American ex-service men returning home from world war one. It was particularly associated with a poem written by a Canadian doctor, John McCrae (he died of pneumonia in January 1918). His poem begins:

In Flanders fields the poppies blow
Between the crosses, row on row,
That mark our place; and in the sky
The larks, still bravely singing, fly
Scarce heard amid the guns below...

On returning home to Britain ex-servicemen and women found that their sacrifice was met with little enthusiasm in the midst of industrial unrest and they were treated with contempt from the state in terms of providing financial and medical assistance. The purpose of the Legion is to provide support to ex-servicemen, especially the disabled, and their families, and it was to become one of the most successful British charities ever.

However rather than merely 'remembering the dead', Remembrance day celebrations are used to justify war and militarism by politicians and generals today, all under the banner of patriotism. It is a celebration of naked imperial aggression through exploiting the immense sacrifice by mainly working class men and women in wars past. Little is mentioned at these annual rituals of the thousands of innocent civilians who have perished in recent wars nor of the countless men and women who have refused to serve in brutal occupations or mutinied such as during the great Calais mutiny in 1919. We are treated to the annual spectacle of militarist parades reinforcing the Orwellian message that 'war is peace'. In addition in the North poppies are a divisive and sectarian symbol where 'support for our troops' is taken to as 'defence of the union'.

This charade of national unity and patriotism was exposed last year when Channel Four news presenter Jon Snow hit out at 'cultural fascism' and 'intolerance' after being criticised for not wearing a poppy during the Remembrance day celebrations. A section of Celtic fans were also

blasted in the gutter press for unfurling a banner during a match declaring ‘no bloodstained poppies on our hoops’ and ‘your deeds would shame all the devils in Hell’ referring to the occupations of Ireland, Iraq and Afghanistan.

The popularity of the poppies ebbs and flows depending on the level of imperial adventures abroad. The commemorations as a useful ceremony to boost troop morale and rally support for what are often deeply unpopular military occupations at home and abroad. Wars, where we are used as cannon fodder to kill and die for queen and country, to further the privileged interests of capitalists and power hungry politicians.

Anarchist-syndicalist Rudolf Rocker noted when discussing nationalism that, *‘We speak of national interests, national capital, national spheres of interest, national honour, and national spirit; but we forget that behind all this there are hidden merely the selfish interests of power-loving politicians and money-loving business men for whom the nation is a convenient cover to hide their personal greed and their schemes for political power from the eyes of the world.’*

The military, as well as being the vehicle for waging external war, are the last line of defence against a population determined to change social institutions. They have no place in a just and peaceful society. The British military, imperialist enforcers at home and abroad, are no exception and must be opposed wherever they raise their heads from our schools to universities.

To eliminate war and militarism forever, we need to bring the war home and turn it into a class war against the ruling class who are making us pay for the chronic crisis of capitalism which exploits, maims and kills us everyday. We must sweep away all armies, with a social revolution that abolishes the State and capitalism across the world and establishes libertarian communism. It will take nothing less – but we need nothing less, as well.

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