

# British WWI veterans fighting for dignity and social justice

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**Governments want us to respect World War I veterans in an apolitical way. But we should not forget the thousands of veterans who returned home to fight for their rights.**

In British society, biting representations of the Great War such as the seminal *Blackadder Goes Forth* and Joan Littlewood's *Oh, What a Lovely War!* have successfully popularized the idea of the war as a bloodbath in which millions of men were led into pointless carnage by foolish officers.

But the political call to honor the dead in a way that goes “beyond politics” has an effective — and wholly understandable — emotional resonance. The Royal British Legion, which organizes the Poppy Appeal every year, has earned the respect of the vast majority of the population for its charity work on behalf of veterans.

But the broader question of why the Legion was created is rarely discussed. In reality, when it was formed in 1921, it was out of General Earl Haig's fear that “revolutionary ideas” were widespread among ex-servicemen, and saw that “the only solution was to get those men back to their old leaders, the officers.”

Following World War I, millions of men returned to countries ravaged by mass unemployment and general social disorder. Like workers organizing to defend and advance their interests, British war veterans — particularly those influenced by socialist and radical democratic ideas — organized collectively to demand jobs, proper mental health treatment, and a society that they saw as fit for them.

## Justice, Not Charity

While the British Legion was created two and a half years after the end of hostilities on the Western front, ex-servicemen began to organize at the height of war. Around a third of British trade unionists served in the armed forces during the war, and despite traditional labor movement antipathy towards the military and a general disregard (if not open opposition) for the British Empire, labor traditions soon asserted themselves in the ranks.

In early 1917, the National Association of Discharged Soldiers and Sailors (NADSS) was founded in the cotton town of Blackburn. Enjoying strong links with local trades councils, NADSS was founded to oppose the Review of Exceptions Act, a bid to re-enlist some of the million men who had been ruled unfit for service due to wounds already sustained in the war. It emerged with a simple, egalitarian call for equality in the conscription system: “Every man [should serve] once, before any man twice.”

Linked to local trades councils, the NADSS was forceful in its demands to provide returning and

wounded men with work, but it was neither a united labor movement campaign (not least given the obstacles posed by rows over the war effort itself) nor the only such organization to arise in this period. A similar organization to emerge at this time was the National Federation of Discharged and Demobilized Sailors and Soldiers (“the Federation”), whose core demand was “Justice — not charity.”

The aim of the group was to advocate for rank-and-file soldiers; commissioned officers were excluded from membership, and the structures of the organization were democratic. The former Transport and General Workers’ Union leader Jack Jones, whose docker father was involved in the Federation, recalled it as a “truly fighting militant organization,” while veterans’ leader and future Labour MP Ernest Thurtle called it an “essentially proletarian” force. It gained notoriety in May 1919, when it organized an advertised “monster demonstration” that twenty thousand ex-servicemen attended.

Still, the organization had an eclectic and muddled political outlook. Despite its working-class base, the Federation’s political messaging was dominated by James Hogge and William Pringle, two Liberal MPs. The Federation adopted a “trade union manifesto,” swearing that members would not be used as scab labor; however, released archival documents show parts of the organization’s leadership were involved in clandestine work to disrupt the strike waves of 1919-1921 and discourage pacifist sentiment. Its statutes called for the nationalization of industry and land, but it was also rallied against wartime strikes.

Despite containing figureheads such as the future socialist Labour MP Ernest Thurtle, several of their candidates at the 1918 general election, such as Henry Beamish in Clapham, became fascists during the thirties, and the organization was openly opposing the Bolshevik Revolution and holding joint memorial services with the Conservative Party by 1919.

This did not mean that the relative independence of this “truly proletarian” body did not alarm Britain’s ruling order. These organizations emerged as soldiers in Russia and France had begun mutinying, and the establishment were paying close attention. To counter these two organizations, right-wing politicians and industrialists led by the arch-reactionary Lord Derby launched The Comrades of The Great War, an association that the historian Niall Barr claimed was created to “form a buttress against Bolshevism.”

Fronted by the Tory MP Wilfred Ashley, who was also the secretary of the Anti-Socialist Union, the Comrades enjoyed the wholesale support of the War Office and the Cabinet. It did not campaign for veterans’ rights, and most of the content of its publication, the *Comrades Journal*, focused on mocking Jewish people, universal suffrage campaigners, the trade union movement, and pacifists (the “Everyday Problems” section included questions such as: “My comrades — or my union?” and “Would a fighting man trade with a Conchie [a conscientious objector]?”)

## “I Am Out For Bolshevism”

The labor movement, which had been slow on veteran affairs until this point, had to move fast to combat the growing popularity of the Comrades among returning soldiers. In early 1919, the National Union of Ex-Servicemen (NUX) was founded, growing out of the revulsion of a huge section of former soldiers to jingoistic and anti-Bolshevik forces seeking to continue the glorification of the old order. By the end of the year, the NUX had grown to an organization of two hundred thousand members, with two hundred branches across the country.

The NUX came at a time when the patience of veterans became increasingly frayed. A breakaway group from the Federation's May 1919 rally had left the meeting point in Hyde Park, London and marched on parliament, demanding that unemployed men be given work at a union rate of pay. They attacked police with planks of wood, and attempted to knock police horses over. When James Hogge discussed the event in parliament, he quoted a letter had received earlier in the week: "I am one of the poor devils that is now paying for his patriotism by having two rooms ... I am out for Bolshevism if a move is not got on soon and some of the West End houses are turned into flats at a reasonable figure."

This was only one incident of many. Earlier in January, thousands of armed soldiers engaged in mutinies in Southampton and Calais, while Luton Town Hall was burnt down in July 1919 by ex-soldiers rioting against poor treatment by the government.

In this strained atmosphere, the NUX believed that any attempt to make an "apolitical" organization of war veterans was nonsensical, and that standing above declared class interests would only serve the enemies of workers. Quickly, they began to grow outwardly hostile to the Federation, claiming that its anti-Labour stance (it had decisively rejected affiliating to Labour in 1918) made the organization a more dangerous threat to working people than the brash jingoism of the Comrades.

Their point was served perfectly by the railwaymen's strike of September and October 1919, where the Federation called on prime minister Lloyd George to "hold firm against Labour tyranny." The NUX offered the railwaymen their full support, with the general secretary A.E Mander telling fellow ex-servicemen: "Neutrality be damned! You cannot be neutral in a struggle like this. You are either for the workers or against them." In their words and deeds, the NUX sought not only to resist the influence that right-wingers had over working-class veterans, but also to quash the prejudices that many workers privately held about discharged servicemen being disposed towards scabbing and strike breaking activity.

The strike caused considerable tensions within the Federation, whose leadership were now increasingly seen to be propping up an unpopular government, and defections to the NUX from the Federation exploded. In Special Branch reports from the time, anxious policemen record the growing radicalization of Federation branches, noting that ex-servicemen in major industrial areas were becoming "Socialist in complexion" and "very Revolutionary." In many areas, such as Monmouthshire, former rivals in Comrades and the Federation had to combine in order to resist the NUX's growth among workers.

Soon, Labour began properly funding the NUX, despite the leadership's reservations with the NUX's politically radical demands, such as the democratization of the army. The leadership included the socialist intellectual G.D.H Cole, the veterans' leader Ernest Thurtle, and the future prime minister, Major Clement Attlee. Internationally, the organization was aligned to the International of Ex-Servicemen, the antiwar socialist organization created by the Communist novelist Henri Barbusse. The NUX also enthusiastically backed the Hands Off Russia campaign, which sought to protect the young Soviet Union from foreign intervention, and publicly argued for the occupations of empty homes to give to unemployed former soldiers.

Perhaps most importantly, the NUX was renowned for tenaciously fighting for the dignity for disabled soldiers. The NUX were early campaigners for the rights of soldiers with mental health problems; by forcing it through the party's structures in 1920, the NUX led Labour to condemn the treatment of shell-shocked soldiers as "pauper lunatics," and forced the demand for improved mental health provision a mainstream political issue. On a local level, NUX branch secretaries spent much of their time giving advice on welfare and pensions to local soldiers and their dependents, and writing letters on their behalf.

However, they were aware of the temporary nature of the movement. Against the fetishization of “soldierliness” espoused by both the Comrades and the Federation, the NUX took the traditional socialist view that soldiers were workers-in-uniform — and therefore, upon their demobilization, return to simply being workers. The NUX believed that the renormalization of veterans should be encouraged, not resisted, by veterans’ organizations, arguing that any veterans’ movement must be a temporary affair.

When it became clear in 1920 that there would not be a movement of right-wing veterans in Britain to mirror reactionary movements in central Europe or Italy, the NUX considered its own demobilization.

This no doubt relieved a paranoid British ruling class, who saw in the NUX the seeds of a potential Red Army. After holding forty-seven thousand meetings, gaining hundreds and thousands of members, and fighting with ferocity against the government and their allies, the NUX reconstituted itself as a loose federation of autonomous branches who got to decide whether it was worth continuing the work as the NUX, or in other political forms — be it Labour, the Independent Labour Party, or the Communist Party.

Throughout their organization, the Comrades, the Federation, and the NUX could marshal approximately half a million men to the veteran’s cause. These volatile, often confused movements emerged in an era where Captain E.C Whillier felt confident writing in his book, *The Case of the Ex-Service Man*, that “if the mass of the workers rose against the profiteer, not one returned soldier would raise a hand in his defence.” British society was in a state of defiance; mass unemployment, unacceptable war pensions, and shoddy housing were core questions, while strikes by engineers, railwaymen, dockers, and even police officers showed that society was no longer willing to accept the way things are. By 1919, a Home Office secret report expressed its anxiety about the former soldiers filling up Britain’s unemployed exchanges, noting that “in the event of rioting, for the first time in history, the rioters will be better trained than the troops.”

By the time the Royal British Legion was established in 1921, it had recruited less than twenty thousand people. Even by the beginning of World War II, it had never gained the support of more than 10 percent of eligible veterans. There was no significant opposition to its creation — by that time, the immediate postwar chaos that had brought such high unemployment had been tamed, and most troops had been demobilized.

Yet nor was it simply created in order to represent veterans. Its creation owed in large part to elite fears that a working class that had proven itself on the battlefield was unlikely to accept subordination easily. The rise of militant ex-servicemen’s associations, unashamed of demanding dignity for soldiers, seemed to confirm this.

One hundred years on from the end of the Great War for Civilization, life is tough for former soldiers. In 2012, more British soldiers and veterans took their own lives than died fighting in Afghanistan.

In the past fortnight, the Falklands War veteran Gus Hales went on [hunger strike](#) to demand better mental health services for ex-servicemen. On Sunday, reactionary commentators castigated Corbyn for dressing like a “tramp” during the Remembrance Day ceremony — a peculiar way to show one’s sensitivity and respect towards former soldiers, since charities [estimate](#) that 13,000 British soldiers are homeless. Far more welcoming is the Labour leadership’s new “[soldier’s social charter](#)” for soldiers will guarantee housing, mental health support, and education opportunities for former service personnel.

Despite these highly positive suggestions for reform, we should not forget the collective power that ordinary soldiers once harnessed, and the steps that ex-servicemen took in this country to secure

dignity for themselves and their comrades. Just as Britain's ruling elites today seem reticent to deliver on the just country that they promise to those who fight their wars, the labor movement must be steadfast in demanding, in the words of the old Federation, "Justice, not Charity!"

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**P.S.**

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