

## Anton Pannekoek, The Fight Against Militarism (1915)

If we ask why a number of socialists who are not satisfied with the weak and submissive attitude of the S.D.A.P. towards the ruling class have not joined the S.D.P. but have formed their own organization in the "rev. soc. clubs", we are not much wiser as to the aim they have set for themselves, as to their program. But of course it is not a mistake or a misunderstanding that they do not join the S.D.P. - some were with us before and then returned to the S.D.A.P. - there is a real difference between us. To understand this, we must look at their views and ideas and compare them with our own. Only then can we clearly see our differences, and only then is it possible to set aside all the incidental issues and personal animosities in our debate with them and exchange views on the factual basis of our ideas. In this regard, we can refer to the article that Mrs. Roland Holst, the spiritual leader of the direction represented in the clubs, wrote in the *Nieuwe Tijd* about "The fight against militarism in the Netherlands".

We fully agree with what Mrs. Holst says about the tremendous growth of militarism in this country. She sees the symptoms very clearly, is not fooled by false slogans, wants to fight with passion and energy, and her sharp criticism is absolutely correct. But this criticism stops at the phenomenon of militarism and does not go deep enough to get to the root causes. Those who only see this phenomenon can feel deeply and keenly how pernicious it is, how it oppresses, enslaves and destroys peoples; they can stir up the struggle; but precisely because they see it as such a monstrous madness, they will consider the struggle too easy, they will probably believe that it will be possible to bring the masses to resistance and thus tame the monster with strong, fiery exhortations. We say that militarism and its growth are not monstrous madness, they are completely rational and natural, they logically belong to the modern development of capitalism, they are deeply rooted in the foundations of modern society. *Therefore, militarism as a separate phenomenon cannot be fought and resisted fruitfully; it can only be destroyed by fighting the entire social order of which it is a necessary tool.* We are not dealing with a trinity of pernicious phenomena: nationalism-imperialism-militarism; we are dealing with a modern form of capitalism which is growing, which is awakening new views, a new will, a new fierce striving in the entire propertied class, and which we call imperialism; militarism and nationalism are its material and spiritual tools, which it creates, strengthens, develops and cultivates because it needs them. Militarism is not the root of the evil that threatens and oppresses the people, but it is its hideous head, not the cause, but the consequence. Consequences can only be fought by eliminating the causes.

This is not a matter of barren theoretical erudition. If we lack a powerful and clear insight into this connection, then the way is open for all kinds of tactical deviations. Then it is all too easy to resort to the superficial method that was so common in German party propaganda before the war: to thunder and scream against militarism, instead of calmly and seriously building up power against it, and thus to find oneself defenseless at the decisive moment and forced to bow obediently. Then it is all too easy to arrive at Kautsky's petty-capitalist utopia, which, with the help of the good, peace-loving part of the bourgeoisie, wants to abolish the "unnatural", violent, imperialist character of modern capitalism, force history to reverse itself and bring back the old, peaceful, tolerable capitalism. Then it is all too easy to arrive at the reactionary petty-bourgeois view of the S.D.A.P. leaders that this vile German militarism must be defeated and destroyed in order to achieve lasting peace in Europe-a view that could,

at an opportune moment, play right into the hands of the warmongering government. However good it may be in this age of inertia and collapse of the workers' movement to see the will and the desire to fight: if the most necessary insight and understanding of the coherence of phenomena is lacking or is not heeded, the struggle has every chance of ending in a quagmire.

When we say that militarism is necessary, natural and inevitable in this stage of capitalism, this does not mean to give up the struggle against it, but on the contrary, *to raise the struggle to a higher and broader level, to make the struggle bigger and more general*. Militarism cannot be affected directly, but only indirectly, by undermining capitalism in its imperialist form. This can only be done by building up the power of the proletariat, which is the gigantic, self-conscious power of the bourgeoisie, which wants militarism - or rather, is beginning to want it more and more, is becoming more and more aware of it. What we observe here as its modern essence, growing stronger and stronger, is the power of the proletariat. This power cannot be built by simply stirring up a popular movement against militarism; even if that were possible and did happen, that movement would soon collapse after a few apparent successes, while the organized power of the bourgeoisie remains. This power can only grow through struggle in all fields, in the whole field of politics, in the trade union struggle against the employers, through the slow and patient building of the organization and through clear insight and militancy within it. Does this mean that we should just let militarism grow unchecked until the organization of the proletariat is strong enough to crush and destroy it? No, because all experience in the history of class struggle teaches us that the propertied class gives in when the workers act forcefully, even when the workers are far from being able to defeat them.

The fact that the large socialist parties have submitted to nationalism without a fight, without protest or resistance, has made the bourgeoisie so bold and brave, and that is why militarism is now rearing its ugly head. If there is a strong struggle with strong proletarian power, the bourgeoisie must act much more cautiously, then militarism can only grow more slowly, with more difficulty, and its demands must be somewhat curbed. *The building of proletarian power is of great importance not only for the future, but also for the present.*

In one respect, the "struggle against militarism" is of great importance, and this is felt - usually semi-consciously and instinctively - by the defenders of this slogan and makes them realize that they are right after all. Militarism is the fiercest expression of modern capitalism, the one that exerts the greatest pressure and is therefore the most suitable for arousing the masses to resistance: Those who have been held under the rod must leap at the scorpion when it is held before them; this is the way to lead the people in a general revolt against their rulers. This line of thinking is certainly correct, and here lies the significance of imperialism as a whole for the proletariat's struggle for freedom. But there is something primitive about this view. Does one really believe that the masses remain so calm because they like militarism, because they like being in the barracks or in the trenches and drilling, because they are so grateful to eat expensive war bread? Do the people think that they do not know and feel, often with a strong, dull hatred, that militarism is their enemy and wants to oppress and destroy them? Why then do they remain silent and patient, without resistance? It is because they feel weak and powerless. They instinctively feel completely right and justified in their powerlessness and that nothing can be achieved with a single outburst. They do not see the road that leads directly to a lasting victory. They cannot see it because the factors necessary for victory are still beyond their grasp: namely, general class consciousness, broad understanding and strong organization. Where these are generally and massively available, as

practical things whose power everyone recognizes, the road to the goal becomes clear, and one can speak of victory as something visible and possible in the distance. This was the case in Germany, but here in Holland there is hardly a beginning of these things, and so one does not see and recognize their effect from personal experience. Only the growth of the general movement can give this confidence in the struggle that is necessary to achieve mass resistance.

This brings us back to the same conclusion: *only as part of the general struggle against capitalism can the struggle against militarism have results*. It is only in this larger whole that it can first come into its own and realize its great full value. Everything that is gained through powerful speeches and the stirring up of the struggle as an outburst of indignation and a flaring up of enthusiasm or determination, and that would otherwise evaporate or be uselessly wasted in aimless individual acts of resistance, is now recorded and preserved as a growing organization that holds on to everything that its participants bring together, that it educates through its press, that it deploys wherever it is needed, that it allows to participate in every field of political and social struggle, thus constantly exercising and strengthening its insight. Only in this way can a revolutionary class movement grow into a force that, by its steady and sure progress, inspires confidence in those who are still distant.

In earlier years this confidence was the great recruiting force of the social-democratic parties, such as the German and the S.D.A.P.; now that this confidence has collapsed, the working class, bewildered and confused, has been struck with greater impotence than ever before, and years of rebuilding on new principles will be necessary before such confidence is possible again. Therefore, it is true that one can bring together all kinds of elements opposed to militarism for ethical, civil-pacifist or proletarian-revolutionary reasons. However, a large, powerful resistance that carries the masses so enthusiastically that it drives militarism back to its old modest insignificance is impossible in any case. *A struggle against militarism with lasting results can only exist in the growth of an organized class movement with much broader and greater goals, and in all areas of the ruling class.*

## **Source**

A.A.A.P.: [De strijd tegen het militarisme](#) / A[nton]. P[annekoek]. In: De Tribune, soc[ial].-dem[ocratic]. organ, 8th year. (1914-1915), no. 75 (June 19, 1915). Translation from the transcription and partial modernization of the Dutch: F.C. 2025.