

# MARXIST STUDY COURSES

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<b>Lesson</b>	<b>PRICE SIXPENCE 2</b>

Marxist Study Courses

Course 2.

# History of the Working Class

LESSON II.  
THE ENGLISH INDUSTRIAL  
REVOLUTION AND CHARTISM



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## LESSON II

# THE ENGLISH INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND CHARTISM

### PLAN OF WORK

#### I. THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION IN ENGLAND AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

*Conditions prior to the industrial revolution—Its character—Its consequences—Why did the industrial revolution take place first in England?—Why was it not accompanied by a political revolution?*

#### II. THE CHARTIST MOVEMENT, ITS CHARACTER, AND THE MOST IMPORTANT STAGES OF ITS DEVELOPMENT

1. The labour movement in England before Chartism: *The fight against machinery—The Luddite movement—The Reform of 1832—How the bourgeoisie turned the labour movement to its own advantage—Robert Owen.*

2. The Chartist movement: *The party of moral force and the party of physical force—The Chartist convention—The second period of the Chartist movement—The social programme of the Chartists—The third period of the Chartist movement.*

#### III. CAUSES OF THE DEFEAT OF CHARTISM—ITS HISTORI- CAL SIGNIFICANCE

#### IV. TEST QUESTIONS



## INTRODUCTORY REMARKS TO LESSON II

*The origin of industrial capitalism, of large-scale industry and machine technique, and the formation of the two main classes of modern bourgeois society—bourgeoisie and proletariat—can be best studied by an examination of English history. The present chapter is intended to show how the conditions necessary for the development of large-scale industry were created, what was the process of the "primitive accumulation of capital," what course it took, and what economic and social effects followed upon the industrial revolution. Further, we shall inquire into the nature of Chartism, as the great political mass movement in which for the first time the proletariat set up as its goal the seizure of political power in its own class interests.*

*In studying the first section particular attention is directed to the forcible eviction of tenants and the proletarianisation of the peasantry. A comparison is made between the industrialisation of England and the corresponding process in the other principal capitalist countries, and it is contrasted with socialist industrialisation in the Soviet Union and the position of the peasantry there.*

*In working through the second section, the reader should note how the working class freed itself from the influence of the bourgeoisie and realised the necessity for independent class action. He should examine the ideology of Robert Owen and his influence on the working-class movement. The characteristic peculiarities of each of the three periods of Chartism should be noted, as well as the importance attached by the Chartists to their political platform, the Charter. The student should also distinguish, within the varied composition of the Chartist movement, the principal differences of opinion, both as to programme and tactics, among the Chartists (the tendencies represented by Lovett, O'Connor, O'Brien, and Harney).*

*In the third section the industrial advance and world economic monopoly of England deserve special attention ;*

*it was these circumstances which strengthened the position of the labour aristocracy. A comparison should be made between the disappearance of the revolutionary character of the English labour movement (in the post-Chartist period) and the process of radicalisation now proceeding in that movement (as witnessed in the general strike of 1926), and the causes of the two processes should be examined.*

*Finally, the reader should study the opinions of Marx and Engels on Chartism, and the lessons which that movement has to offer to the working class of to-day.*

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## I. THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION AND ITS EFFECTS

### CONDITIONS AND NATURE OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

The capitalist order of society arose out of a thorough transformation of the old system of production and the old social relations. This change occurred at different times in different countries. In England the modern capitalist system grew up earlier than in other countries and there assumed its harshest forms. Large-scale capitalist industry was developing in England at the end of the eighteenth century—machines began to take the place of hand labour, agricultural England gave way to industrial England, a class of proletarians arose, large new towns grew up, new means of communication were established.

What conditions were necessary for the capitalist mode of production to triumph? 1. The presence of capital to set large industrial concerns going; 2. The presence of "free" labour power—"free" also of ownership of the means of production and of property in land. Obviously both these requisites were not created to an adequate extent at one blow; they developed gradually in the course of a period which Marx

called the period of the primitive accumulation of capital.

This process of primitive accumulation was not, however, a smooth, peaceful, and purely economic development, as bourgeois historians are wont to describe it. On the contrary, the rise of capitalism was accompanied by a social revolution, "the most sanguinary revolution known to the history of mankind." (Marx.)

Dealing with the seizure and plundering of colonies in the period of primitive capitalist accumulation, Marx wrote :

"The discoveries of gold and silver in America ; the extirpation of the indigens [natives], in some instances, their enslavement and their entombment in the mines, in others ; the beginnings of the conquest and looting of the East Indies ; the transformation of Africa into a precinct for the supply of the negroes who were the raw material of the slave trade—these were the incidents that characterised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These were the idyllic processes that formed the chief factors of primary accumulation. . . . In England at the end of the seventeenth century, they were systematically assembled in the colonial system, the national debt system, the modern system of taxation, and the modern system of production. To some extent they rested upon brute force, as, for instance, in the colonial system. One and all, they relied upon the power of the State, upon the concentrated and organised force of society, in order to stimulate the transformation of feudal production into capitalist production, and in order to shorten the period of transition."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital*. Vol. I. Allen and Unwin, 1928, p. 832-3. J. M. Dent ("Everyman" Series), 1930, and International Publishers. The references to *Capital* throughout are to these editions, which have the same pagination.



Even a bourgeois professor like Werner Sombart has to argue that capitalism arose in western Europe because three-quarters of the world had been plundered. By the ruthless expropriation of the peasantry and the ruin of handicraft the peasant and the independent craftsman were changed into proletarians looking for work, whose only property is their labour power.

“The so-called primary accumulation, therefore, is nothing other than the historical process whereby the producer is divorced from the means of production. It assumes a ‘primary’ aspect, because it belongs to the primary phase that is traversed immediately before the history of capitalism begins, immediately before the establishment of the method of production proper to capitalism. . . .

The immediate producer, the worker, could not dispose of his own person until he had ceased to be bound to the soil; he had ceased to be the slave, serf, or bondman of another person. . . . But, on the other hand, these newly liberated persons do not come to the market in order to sell themselves until they have been robbed of all the means of production, and of all the safeguards of existence which the old feudal institutions provided for them. The history of this expropriation is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire.”<sup>1</sup>

The substitution of capitalist for feudal relations within society, the disappearance of the small tenant before the large farmer, the expropriation of the peasantry, had begun in England as early as the end of the fifteenth century; but towards the close of the eighteenth century it became particularly widespread. In the period from 1710 to 1760 335,000 acres of land were enclosed, while from 1760 to 1843 seven million acres were enclosed. The English landowners found it more profitable, for example, during the rapid develop-

<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 792

ment of the woollen industry in the sixteenth century, to drive the peasants from the land and to turn arable land into sheep pastures. "Men are being swallowed up by sheep," wrote Thomas More in 1516. The State lent vigorous support to the landowners, by giving legal sanction, through Acts of Parliament, to the enclosure of common lands. Backed by these laws, wrote Marx, "the landlords took to themselves as their private property the land belonging to the people." Large numbers of peasants had to make way for sheep and go to the towns in search of work. Of the 180,000 smallholders in England at the end of the seventeenth century, practically none was left a century later.

The historian Toynbee wrote :

"A person ignorant of our history during the intervening period might surmise that a great exterminatory war had taken place, or a violent social revolution which had caused a transfer of the property of one class to another."<sup>1</sup>

These profound changes in the countryside tore thousands of peasants from the soil and created an army of wage workers for industry. The agrarian revolution, which cleared away all vestiges of the old village institutions (e.g. divided holdings and common land), helped forward the development towards intensive cultivation, the change from the three-field system to that of crop rotation, the introduction of agricultural machines. It was also of great importance for the extension of the home market for industry. So long as the peasant stuck to his piece of land, he himself produced the greater part of the things he needed, buying but little on the market. This situation changed with the expropriation of the peasantry. The number of those consuming the products of industry grew,

<sup>1</sup> Arnold Toynbee, *Lectures on the Industrial Revolution*, London, 1908, p. 36.



while the products of agriculture became to an increasing extent commodities produced for the market.

“ The break-up of the peasantry,” Lenin wrote in 1899, “ creates the home market for capitalism. Among the poorer sections there grows up the market for consumption articles (things for their own use). The rural proletariat consumes less than the middle peasant, and consumes products of a poorer quality (such as potatoes instead of bread), but he buys more.”

The disappearance of the class of middle peasants, their forcible expropriation, gave a powerful impetus to the extension of the home market and at the same time created a mass demand for goods ; it thus increased the division of labour more and hastened the victory of large-scale industry and machinery. One result of all these processes was the great increase in the export trade and in the importance of foreign markets.

The technical revolution—a number of discoveries in spinning and weaving, and particularly the discovery of the steam engine—determined the change-over to machine production. Bourgeois historians regard discoveries as the accidental work of highly talented individuals. That is incorrect ; for the most part discoveries arise from economic and social requirements.

#### EFFECTS OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Machinery effected a tremendous change in the entire social order of England.

“ Before the introduction of machinery,” Engels wrote in 1845, “ the spinning and weaving of raw materials was carried on in the working-man’s home. Wife and daughter spun the yarn that the father wove. . . . These weaver families lived in the country,

in the neighbourhood of the towns, and could get on fairly well with their wages. . . .

“ So the workers vegetated throughout a passably comfortable existence, leading a righteous and peaceful life in all piety and probity, and their material position was far better than that of their successors. They did not need to overwork ; they did no more than they chose to do, and yet earned what they needed. They had leisure for healthful work in garden or field, work which, in itself, was recreation for them, and they could take part besides in the recreations and games of their neighbours. . . . Their children grew up in the fresh country air, and, if they could help their parents at work, it was only occasionally.”  
(Engels : *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, pp. 1-2.)

With the coming of the machine these conditions were radically changed. The spinning-jenny (invented by Hargreaves in 1764) turned out six times as much as the old spinning wheel. Thus every new invention and every improvement made a certain number of workers superfluous, and that number was constantly increasing. The introduction of machinery brought in its train the gradual and painful decline of hand labour.

“ History has no more pitiful spectacle to offer than that of the gradual decay of the English handloom weavers, a process which took several decades, and was finally complete by 1838.”<sup>1</sup>

To an increasing extent women and children were drawn in to work in the factories. The growing demand for factory products urged the capitalists on to greater and greater exploitation of the worker. A similar impulse was given by the desire to get the fullest possible use out of the machines in the shortest time possible, for in that period of technical revolution machinery

<sup>1</sup> Marx, *Capital*, p. 461.

rapidly became obsolete. The working day was extended to sixteen and even eighteen hours. Dealing with the working day in *Capital*, Marx wrote (pp. 283-4) :

“ All the boundaries set by custom and by nature, by age and by sex, by day and by night, were effaced. Even the very ideas of day and night, defined with rustic simplicity in the old statutes, became so much confused that as late as 1860 an English judge would have needed all the shrewdness of a commentator on the Talmud in order to give a legal decision as to what was night and what was day. Capital was celebrating its orgies.”

Children of the tenderest age were employed in the factories ; the capitalists did not shrink from letting four- and five-year-old children work.

It was stated in a report by the Factory Commissioners that children were pulled from their beds by the overseer, that they were driven by blows and cuffs to the factory, naked, carrying their clothes in their hands, and that, although beaten, they yet fell asleep at the machine, utterly exhausted. The same report relates that one child, having fallen asleep at the machine, sprang up at the shout of the overseer and began, with closed eyes, to make the movements of his work, although the machine itself was not running ; children, too tired to go home after work, crawled behind the bales of cotton and fell asleep, but were driven and beaten out of the mills ; many of them reached home so tired that they did not wait to eat, but straightway fell asleep.

As the industrial revolution developed the material insecurity of the worker greatly increased. The domestic worker lived under the continual menace of being swallowed up by the factory. The worker in the factory had to be prepared at any moment for a crisis



or an improvement in machinery which might make his labour unnecessary.

At the same time large towns and industrial centres grew up, where the workers lived crowded together in small, wretchedly built houses. Drunkenness, prostitution, and crime flourished freely on that soil of poverty and misery. In England in 1805, 4,605 persons were arrested for criminal offences; twenty years later, capitalism having meanwhile established itself, the figure rose to 14,737. English capitalism achieved its first victories at the cost of a wretched and hungry working class, of a ruined peasantry at home and in the colonies.

Industrialisation and construction, as they are now developing in the socialist order of society prevailing in the Soviet Union, differ fundamentally from these processes as they occurred within capitalist society.

“ For in this respect the proletarian state possesses advantages which bourgeois states do not and cannot possess. Nationalised industry, nationalised transport and credit, the monopoly of foreign trade and the internal trade regulated by the state—these are all sources of additional capital which can be used to develop the industry of our country, and which have never been available to a bourgeois state. . . . That is why the road of development impossible for the bourgeois states, is, despite all difficulties, open to the proletarian state.” (Stalin: *Problems of Leninism*.)

And the effects of the industrialisation of the U.S.S.R. on the workers and peasants? By the help of socialist industry small peasant holdings are transformed into large-scale socialised agricultural enterprises—collective and Soviet farms—which by the end of 1931 included 62 per cent. of the farms and 79 per cent. of the total area under cultivation. While the development of capitalism meant the greatest deprivation and immeasurable suffering for the peasantry, socialist

construction in the Soviet Union offers to the peasant a level of material and cultural welfare unprecedented in his history.

The world bourgeoisie and social democracy talk of slave labour in the Soviet Union, but actually the huge growth of Soviet national economy has gone hand in hand with a systematic improvement in the worker's standard of life. In capitalist countries unemployment has reached unparalleled dimensions; in the U.S.S.R. it has been completely abolished. Certain difficulties, caused by the necessity of investing very large amounts in capital goods in order to accelerate the pace of industrialisation, and by the transformation of scattered and backward peasant farms into collective undertakings, will be eliminated when the five-year plan has been accomplished.

But let us return to England. In the sphere of communications, a technical revolution was accomplished in the opening years of the nineteenth century (Fulton's steamship in 1815 and Stephenson's locomotive in 1829). Here is a description, from the pen of a contemporary, of the passage of the first steamship across the English Channel.

“ The inhabitants of the towns in the neighbourhood gathered in large crowds on the shore, attracted by the roar of the engine and scared at the sight of the sparks and tongues of flame which shot from the funnel. This extraordinary torch ploughed the waves, followed by every eye, spreading terror along its path. Cries of ‘ Fire, fire!’ the ringing of alarm bells, and the howling of dogs followed this fantastic phenomenon until darkness fell.”

No less curious were the prejudices aroused by the first railway. The famous scholar Arago declared in 1835 that, considering the low temperature of tunnels, the sudden transition to warmth might easily give



people who sweated easily inflammation of the lungs, catarrh, etc. Others maintained that when two trains, travelling in opposite directions, passed each other, the air between the two would be compressed to such an extent that the travellers were bound to be suffocated. Peasants attributed long periods of rainfall, potato disease, and every other misfortune, to the smoke produced by the locomotives.

Notwithstanding all obstacles and prejudices, the machine triumphed. By the middle of the nineteenth century, the industrial transformation of England was complete. Thanks to machinery the productivity of labour had increased enormously; England became the workshop of the world; the national wealth—i.e. the profits of the capitalists—rose by leaps and bounds. At the same time all the contradictions born of the anarchic nature of capitalism also developed. With the triumph of capitalism profound and protracted crises occurred regularly (1825, 1836, 1847). All earlier social relationships were shattered by the industrial revolution. The old patriarchal relationship between master and apprentice could no longer be maintained. The gulf between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat called into existence by that revolution became ever wider and deeper.

But before we turn to an examination of the first appearance of the English proletariat on the stage of history, two questions claim our attention: why did the industrial revolution take place in England, and not in any other country? Why was this transformation not accompanied by a political revolution?

#### WHY THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION TOOK PLACE FIRST IN ENGLAND

How did it happen that the industrial revolution occurred first in England, and not in any other country? Was it because of the national and racial peculiarities

of the British character, as many idealist historians would have us believe? Or was it because England was the first country to grow rich by plundering her colonies, and to accumulate large amounts of capital? This explanation, too, will be found inadequate. In Europe, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there were countries far wealthier than England, who pursued a colonial policy later than her neighbours in western Europe. In the sixteenth and seventeenth century, for example, Spain and Portugal were great colonial powers. Why was it that the industrial revolution did not take place first there? The reason is that the mere development of colonial trade and merchant capital is not sufficient to give rise to industrial capitalism. Colonial possessions do not in every case promote the capitalist development of the European motherland. The development of merchant capital can undermine the old relations of production, but in itself it is incapable of creating a new system of production. The particular form of the economic order which arises as a result of commercial capitalism depends upon the productive relations which prevail at the time that commercial capitalism develops. For example, the vast colonial wealth of Spain hindered its capitalist development, for it strengthened feudal relations, which had actually already outlived themselves. Only feudalism derived benefit from the great riches of the Spanish and Portuguese colonies—the royal power, the Catholic church, the feudal authorities who had dealings with the colonies. The Spanish feudal lords preferred the easy opportunities for getting rich offered by the colonies to developing the economy of their own country; productive labour they regarded as a contemptible occupation. Briefly, the progress of merchant capitalism in Spain, led, however peculiar this may appear, to a strengthening of the decaying feudal order and not by any means to the birth of the new capitalist order. Holland presents another example. Holland

was the country which reached predominance as a colonial and commercial power after the decline of Spain and Portugal. At first Dutch colonial policy was closely connected with the development of manufacture in the country itself. Nevertheless there was no industrial revolution there. Why? Because Dutch colonial policy soon lost its connection with the basis of production. The carrying trade and usury turned out to be more profitable. Consequently the one-sided development of merchant capitalism in Holland was not accompanied by the development of capitalist production—indeed, it hindered that development.

In England, on the other hand, events took an entirely different course. England began actively to pursue her colonial policy about the same time as the struggle against feudal absolutism at home was practically concluded. The bourgeois revolution had occurred in the middle of the seventeenth century (in the struggle against the Stuart kings). Consequently feudalism in England could not, as it did in Spain, reap for itself the great advantages of the colonial trade. English capital, swelled by colonial wealth, did not appear as a force independent of its basis in production. At a relatively early stage in its development British merchant capital had been drawn into a fairly close relationship with industry. In the seventeenth century large quantities of capital had already found their way into industry. Capitalist manufacture, and domestic industry controlled and organised by capitalists, had become the characteristic forms of production, for example in the woollen industry. Then merchant capital, constantly increasing, influenced by the opening of new markets and under the pressure of foreign competition, began to penetrate still further into industry, first of all into the branches of production connected with the export trades.

The Dutch Empire, as we had seen, collapsed because of the insufficient connection between its colonial trade



and the industries in the motherland. The French colonial power fell behind England for the same reason. The growth of a close contact between capitalist production at home, which developed early, and her foreign trade, gave England a great advantage and resulted in the rapid transformation of merchant into industrial capital.

In addition, we also have to take geographical factors into account—England's position as an island, her favourable coast-line, temperate climate, and possibilities of easy internal communication, together with the rich deposits of coal and iron, discovered in England earlier than in other countries. These natural advantages also contributed to establish England's military supremacy. With the breakdown of the Italian and Spanish-Portuguese domination in the colonial countries, with the growing maritime importance of France and Holland, England's situation was of the greatest advantage, for it commanded the sea routes to the harbours of her competitors, France and Holland. Unassailable by land, she had no need to expend large sums on maintaining an army as they had, and could concentrate on the building up of a strong navy, the most important weapon of colonial policy, both from the military and the commercial point of view.

#### WHY WAS THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION NOT ACCOMPANIED BY A POLITICAL REVOLUTION?

The bourgeois revolution had taken place in England in the middle of the seventeenth century. Feudalism had already broken down long before the industrial revolution began. Thus in eighteenth-century England the power of the old regime was not nearly so great as it was in France before the Revolution. That was why the industrial revolution could occur without being accompanied by a political revolution. This does not by any means imply that the industrial revolution was

of advantage to all classes of society. On the contrary! The expropriated peasant, driven from his land, the domestic worker and handicraftsman ruined by machinery, the wage labourer brutally exploited by rising industrial capitalism—they had no cause to be satisfied with the great changes proceeding around them. But at first their protest was of a spontaneous character only.

## II. THE CHARTIST MOVEMENT, ITS CHARACTER, AND THE MOST IMPORTANT STAGES OF ITS DEVELOPMENT

### I. THE LABOUR MOVEMENT IN ENGLAND BEFORE CHARTISM—THE STRUGGLE AGAINST MACHINERY— THE LUDDITES

Spontaneous acts of protest occurred first among domestic workers and handicraftsmen. They had been torn from their customary way of life by the industrial changes and suffered most from them; in the closing years of the eighteenth century, they began a desperate struggle against the factory system, destroying machinery,<sup>1</sup> setting fire to factories, rioting. These outbreaks of the masses, thrust into the abyss of misery by capitalism, assumed wide dimensions from the year 1811 onwards.

Thousands of artisans and home-workers, known by the name of Luddites, planned the wholesale destruction of machinery, and organised factory revolts. The movement aroused considerable trepidation among the possessing classes. The exact origin of the term Luddite is unknown. It is supposed to refer to a certain Ned Lud, a weaver by trade, who shattered a stocking frame to bits, thus giving rise to the saying, "I'm going to do what Lud did." In 1811 Luddism seemed to be a

<sup>1</sup> The first law against the destruction of machinery and factory buildings was passed in England in 1769.



widespread secret league. When machines were destroyed, the machine wreckers would leave a notice behind, saying that the work had been done on the orders of Ned Lud, or King Lud. The Luddites did not confine their activities to the fight against machinery ; they tried to uphold the interests of the workers by other means as well. They carried on a struggle against high food prices, coming into the market places and forcing traders who asked very high prices to sell their goods at the price which they dictated, on pain of having to give them away for nothing at all. Sometimes they penetrated into the houses of the rich and demanded sums of money from them in the name of King Lud. The workers in the different districts were more or less allies of the Luddites, who were giving expression to their own feelings.

The possessing classes and their government could not, of course, regard the Luddite movement with indifference, and a law of 1812 imposed the death penalty on those found guilty of destroying machinery.

It was during the parliamentary debates on this law that the poet, Lord Byron, made his impassioned speech against the Bill (February 27th, 1812) :

“ During the short time I recently passed in Nottinghamshire, not twelve hours elapsed without some fresh act of violence ; and on the day I left the county I was informed that forty frames had been broken the preceding evening, as usual, without resistance and without detection. . . . But whilst these outrages must be admitted to exist to an alarming extent, it cannot be denied that they have arisen from circumstances of the most unparalleled distress : The perseverance of these miserable men in their proceedings, tends to prove that nothing but absolute want could have driven a large, and once honest and industrious, body of the people, into the commission of excesses so hazardous to

themselves, their families, and the community. At the time to which I allude, the town and county were burthened with large detachments of the military ; the police was in motion, the magistrates assembled, yet all the movements civil and military had led to—nothing. . . . The rejected workmen . . . in the foolishness of their hearts . . . imagined, that the maintenance and the well-doing of the industrious poor, were objects of greater consequence than the enrichment of a few individuals. . . . You call these men a mob, desperate, dangerous, and ignorant ; and seem to think that the only way to quiet the *bellua multorum capitum* is to lop off a few of its superfluous heads. . . . Are we aware of our obligations to a mob ? It is the mob that labour in your fields and serve in your houses—that man your navy and recruit your army—that have enabled you to defy all the world, and can also defy you when neglect and calamity have driven them to despair. You may call the people a mob, but do not forget that a mob too often speaks the sentiments of the people. And here I must remark with what alacrity you are accustomed to fly to the succour of your distressed allies, leaving the distressed of your own country to the care of Providence or—the Parish. . . . A much less sum, a tithe of the bounty bestowed on Portugal . . . would have rendered unnecessary the tender mercies of the bayonet and the gibbet. . . . I have traversed the seat of war in the Peninsula, I have been in some of the most oppressed provinces of Turkey, but never under the most despotic of infidel governments did I behold such squalid wretchedness as I have seen since my return in the very heart of a Christian country. And what are your remedies ? After months of inaction, and months of action worse than inactivity, at length comes forth the grand specific, the never-failing nostrum of all State physicians from the days of

Draco to the present time . . . [the] death [penalty]. . . . Setting aside the palpable injustice and the certain inefficiency of the Bill, are there not capital punishments sufficient in your statutes? Is there not blood enough upon your penal code that more must be poured forth to ascend to Heaven and testify against you? . . . Are these the remedies for a starving and desperate populace?"

Of course the law was passed. Troops were despatched against the machine wreckers, the death penalty imposed,<sup>1</sup> spies sent among the working men. The movement was crushed, but it revived again some years later.

The Luddite movement was not revolutionary in the proletarian meaning of the word. It was an outbreak of despair among the petty bourgeois masses ruined by the industrial revolution, whose blind hatred was turned against the most obvious enemy, the machine. The Luddites wanted to go back to the "good old times," not thinking of any struggle for a new order of society, or against the capitalist regime as such.

#### THE REFORM OF 1832—THE BOURGEOISIE EXPLOIT THE LABOUR MOVEMENT

The destruction of machinery was not the road to the emancipation of the workers, who therefore turned more and more to other methods of struggle—to strikes and the organisation of trade unions. Prolonged and bitter battles had to be fought before the English workers won the right to organise in trade unions. These struggles were particularly acute in the period from 1815 to 1822, during the crisis which followed the Napoleonic wars.

Then for a decade the bourgeoisie found means to

<sup>1</sup> In York in 1813, eighteen Luddites were hanged.



use the awakening labour movement for their own purposes. At that time they were fighting for a reform of the old franchise, which gave them a parliamentary representation not nearly so great as their economic importance warranted. Parliament was simply the tool of the landed and the colonial interests. The new towns that grew up with the industrial revolution were not represented; but rural areas, at one time thickly populated but by the early nineteenth century almost completely uninhabited, exercised the vote. Some election meetings were held in the presence of a single voter, who opened the meeting and duly elected himself Member of Parliament. In order to force the landlords' parliament to reform the franchise, the bourgeoisie tried to win the support of the workers, particularly the trade unions, which had in 1825 won the right of legal existence. The unions for a time joined forces with the political movement, the "union of the working and middle classes." These political unions, strongly influenced by the revolution of July 1830 in Paris, were set up in London, Birmingham, and many other towns. We should note, however, that even then a small minority of the working class were opposed to this alliance with the bourgeoisie. This radical minority was grouped about the London newspaper, *The Poor Man's Guardian*, published from 1831 to 1835, one of the first "unstamped" English papers. (A law of 1819 had provided for a high stamp tax on newspapers, which made the press almost inaccessible to the workers; *The Poor Man's Guardian* refused to pay the tax and each number (issued at 1d.) appeared with the inscription: "Published illegally, to measure the power of right against the power of might.")

In 1832 the bourgeoisie, with the help of the workers, forced the landed aristocracy to grant parliamentary reform. Many of the rural constituencies to which we referred above were disfranchised and the new factory districts were given representation. But the vote was

granted only to urban inhabitants paying a rent of not less than £10 per annum.<sup>1</sup> The total number of new voters was only 130,000. The workers, who had played a decisive part in the struggle for parliamentary reform, got nothing out of it. What is more, the bourgeoisie hastened to make use of their victory to pass the Poor Law of 1834, which enormously reduced the public relief previously granted to the distressed domestic workers and the poor generally.<sup>2</sup> By such means the bourgeoisie hastened the expropriation of the small producers, depriving domestic workers of their last chance of working at their own looms, driving them into the factories which were then greatly in need of more labour power. The new Poor Law provided for the establishment of workhouses in which the "people were to be brought to work." In these workhouses children were separated from their parents, husbands from their wives.

The results of the 1832 reform bitterly disappointed the workers. For many years following they rejected the idea of parliamentary action and political struggle generally, placing their hopes on direct economic action—trade unions, co-operatives, strikes. From that time dates the great influence which Robert Owen's ideas exercised over the proletariat.

#### ROBERT OWEN

Robert Owen, the son of a saddler, was born in 1771. At an early age he was apprenticed to a large manufacturing concern; he subsequently became a commercial traveller, and later a partner in a textile machinery factory. At the age of 19 he had become director of a Manchester cotton mill, and in 1795 an independent manufacturer.

<sup>1</sup> This figure represents a much higher purchasing power than a similar sum to-day.

<sup>2</sup> Expenditure on public relief fell from 6.5 million pounds in 1831 to 4.5 million pounds in 1841.



Briefly, Owen's ideas may be formulated thus: character depends upon the environment. If we wish to improve men, we must improve their conditions of life. Since education has the greatest influence on man, every attention must be paid to the educational system. When, in 1800, Owen became the owner of a factory in New Lanark, he began to put his ideas into practice. Instead of the old, crowded huts in which the workers lived, he had new broad streets laid out in New Lanark, and built clean, roomy houses. Instead of the customary 14-hour working day, Owen introduced the 10½-hour day and partly abolished child labour. For the workers' children (from the age of two) kindergarten schools were established. True to his theory, Owen banished mere book-learning from his schools and introduced in its place the method of study by observation. Rewards and punishment were also abolished. Factory consumers' co-operatives were set up in New Lanark which, buying their supplies wholesale, could sell the workers good quality commodities at a low price.

During the crisis of 1806, when thousands of workers were starving, Owen was forced to close down his mill, but instead of dismissing his workers, as other employers did, he continued to pay them their wages. It is significant that all Owen's reforms, to the great astonishment of employers generally, had no bad effects on his profits, produced by better-fed and healthier workers.

His reforms in New Lanark spurred Owen on to public social activities. From the year 1812 he began to work for the reform of schools and factory legislation. In 1813 he became a socialist. In that year he published his *New View of Society*, in which he subjected the results of the industrial revolution to thorough criticism. Religion, property, and the indissolubility of marriage formed, in his opinion, the trinity of evils which had to be annihilated. "Private property," he said, "makes men into devils, and the world into hell." Owen

pointed out the crying contradictions in capitalist society ; the disproportion between consumption and production ; the tremendous growth in the forces of production accompanied by a fall in the standard of life of the masses ; the great overhead costs of trade. He suggested a plan for the society of the future, in which the distinction between town and village would be abolished ; in Owen's settlements industrial labour was to be bound up with agricultural, the latter playing the dominant part. Co-operation formed the basis of the Owenite communes. It should be pointed out, however, that Owen, although he understood very well the social misery that machinery had brought in its train, nevertheless based his future society on recognition of the factory system.

" Hand labour cannot compete with machinery," he wrote. " To denounce machinery would be a return to barbarism . . . machines must be placed in the service of human labour, instead of superseding it, which it does at present."

Marx said that Owen " not only set out from the factory system in his experiments, but declared this system to be, so far as theory was concerned, the starting-point of the social revolution." (*Capital*, p. 544.)

Owen began with the idea of organising settlements of unity and co-operation, but later his demands broadened into the entire transformation of society into a league of communist villages. Two features are characteristic of all Owen's plans ; first, like all other Utopians, he hoped to reach his goal by peaceful means, by the power of example (as in the case of the New Harmony colony set up in America in 1824). Secondly, again like other Utopians, Owen did not believe in the proletariat as the force that was going to transform society. He appealed without distinction to all sections of society, including the ruling classes, sending his plans and proposals to princes and ministers. His theory of

education was equally Utopian. He argued that, "Correct education could make the children of one class the adults of another class; children could be taught to believe in things, to die for things, to consider noble and good what their parents held to be false and vicious."

For a long time the workers remained strangers to the ideas of Owen. Then, in 1824, the beginnings of a co-operative movement grew up in London; but it was only after 1832, in consequence of the apathetic anti-political sentiments which had arisen among the English proletariat, that the workers paid more attention to Owen's teachings, for these also ignored the political struggle. Owen's plans of co-operation began to make considerable headway among the workers, more especially among the small producers ruined by capitalism. It should not be forgotten that Owen is rightly regarded as the "father of co-operation." About 1830 co-operative societies began to grow up, and also "exchange bazaars," "communal labour banks," by means of which Owen hoped to secure the "just exchange" of the products of labour produced by the members. It is not surprising that these exchange banks collapsed very quickly.<sup>1</sup> But it is another aspect of this movement which is of real interest to us; the services rendered by the "exchange bazaars" could be utilised only by small groups of fairly prosperous workers, semi-craftsmen who could still hope to work themselves up into independent masters. In this connection the following quotation, from a co-operative newspaper of the time, is significant: "If the co-operative is successful, its members will be raised from the class of workers into the class of possessors." It is true that Owen also wanted to found producers' co-operatives of the unemployed.

At that time, when the workers were turning away

<sup>1</sup> See Marx on Owenite "Labour Money" in vol. i of *Capital*, p. 71.



from political action, the popularity of the trade unions increased greatly; on these, too, Owen exercised a great influence. In 1834 the Grand National Consolidated Trades' Union was established, which set up as its goal the transformation of society along communist lines by the methods of co-operation. The idea arose among the workers that capitalism could be abolished without a parliamentary struggle—in which they had already been deceived once—merely by the strength of the trade unions. The trade unions were to buy land and establish agricultural co-operatives; they were also to set up industrial productive co-operatives, consumers' associations, and educational establishments. Thus Owen dreamed of peaceful revolution, of the reconciliation of classes; but the workers' movement outgrew Owen. Disputes soon arose between him and the trade unions, particularly the left syndicalist wing. The Grand National collapsed in the very year of its foundation, its break-up hastened by lockouts and class justice. Owen became more and more alienated from the labour movement. During the development of Chartism he often opposed that movement sharply, accusing the Chartists of "sowing hatred and enmity against the rich, thereby delaying the coming of the empire of socialism, for the empire of love and justice cannot be reached through the gateway of hatred."<sup>1</sup>

## II. THE CHARTIST MOVEMENT

The workers' indifference to politics, like their disappointment at the failure of the Owenite experiments, could not last very long. They became more and more convinced of the inadequacy of merely syndicalist methods. The lessons of the parliamentary reform of 1832, however, showed them clearly that they had to take an independent road, a road of political struggle apart from the bourgeoisie. In 1836 a group of London

<sup>1</sup> Owen died in 1858. An excellent account of his work is given by Engels in *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*.

artisans and workers, led by Lovett, founded the London Workingmen's Association, whose goal was the political emancipation of the proletariat. Shortly afterwards it drew up its programme, containing the following six points: 1. Universal manhood suffrage from 21 years; 2. Annual parliaments; 3. Secret ballot; 4. Equal electoral districts; 5. Salaries for members of Parliament; 6. Abolition of property qualification for members of parliament. This programme, then for the first time called the "People's Charter," represented the beginning of that great movement of the English proletariat which became famous as Chartism. It is true that the programme was deficient in many respects; it did not demand the vote for women; it did not demand a republic or a single-chamber parliament; it contained no social or economic demands. But it represented all the same great progress in the direction of political proletarian action on a class basis, independent of the bourgeoisie.

The year 1837 can be taken as the beginning of the Chartist movement. The struggle for the Charter was introduced by an agitation throughout the country, and in the years that followed many great demonstrations and meetings were held. In appearance they were often very impressive. The men marched in their working clothes, spreading a blood-red glow with their torches.<sup>1</sup> The demand for the people to arm was openly expressed, many attending meetings already armed. The skulls painted on the banners carried at the head of the procession left no doubt as to the determination of the workers. Quotations from revolutionary poets and speeches were mingled with such slogans as: "More pigs, fewer priests." "Fight to the knife for child and wife." "Universal suffrage or universal

<sup>1</sup> In 1838 torchlight meetings were expressly declared illegal. The law permitted only local associations to be formed. Consequently organisation on a national scale was illegal, and was from time to time the subject of charges of high treason.

revenge." The form of address usually employed at Chartist meetings was: "Working Men!"

Towards the end of 1838, at a huge meeting held in Manchester attended by about 100,000 persons, it was decided to send a national petition to parliament. This meeting also elected the first delegates to the Chartist Convention, which met in London early in 1839, composed of delegates from all over the United Kingdom.

#### THE PARTY OF MORAL FORCE AND THE PARTY OF PHYSICAL FORCE

The Chartist convention itself became the scene of struggles between the different tendencies represented there. We should remember that the most varied elements took part in the Chartist movement, for in the first half of the nineteenth century the proletariat of England was the proletariat of a transition period. The movement was composed of the industrial workers of the north, "with fustian jackets and blistered hands," and also of impoverished home-workers, artisans, agricultural labourers, petty bourgeois elements in great number. In addition to representatives of the labour aristocracy, supporters of trade unionism, Irish intellectuals like O'Connor took a part in the movement; to some extent these expressed the feelings of the small tenant farmer of Ireland, whose position was very bad indeed. In its early stages the Chartist movement also attracted some members of the petty and middle bourgeoisie, who wished to use the workers' movement to abolish the Corn Laws, which imposed high tariff duties on the import of wheat.

At first the bourgeois radicals and the labour aristocracy played a leading part in the movement. The tactics of their organisation, the London Workingmen's Association, were most moderate. "We do not need guns, but education," said Lovett, the leader of the right wing, the party of moral force. It was Lovett, too,



who said that the aim of the Association "was to win equal political and social rights for all classes of society by the use of all legal means."

In 1848 Lovett advised the insurrectionary French workers to make their enemies into friends by peaceful, gentle, and conciliatory treatment. Lovett's adherents thought that they could attain their object only by an alliance with the bourgeois radicals, and in order to win these latter to Chartism the Lovettists limited their programme to purely political demands. Resolutions, petitions, and other methods of exercising moral influence over the ruling classes—such were the tactics of the party of moral force.

Even conservative writers, like Disraeli, realised the internal contradictions of these moral force tactics. In his novel, *Sybil*, which deals with the Chartist movement, a worker says :

"I should first of all like the capitalists to try a little moral force—then we would see how things would go on. If the capitalists give up their redcoats, I shall become an adherent of moral force to-morrow."

The party of physical force formed the left wing of the movement. They were led by O'Connor and O'Brien, and later by Ernest Jones and Harney, who advocated the application of revolutionary tactics and political struggle on a strictly class basis.

"Don't believe those who tell you that the middle and working classes have one and the same interest," said O'Brien. "It is a damnable delusion. Hell is not more remote from Heaven, nor fire more averse to water, than are the interests of the middle to those of the productive classes." (*Poor Man's Guardian*, 17, viii. 1833.)

London and Birmingham were the chief strongholds of the party of moral force, while the left wing had their main strength in the industrial districts of the north.

## THE CHARTIST CONVENTION

On February 4th, 1839, fifty-three delegates assembled in London for the Chartist convention. With intervals, it lasted until September of the same year. The party of physical force had some confused idea of setting up their own people's parliament in opposition to the existing parliament of landlords and financiers. The party of moral force, which, together with the bourgeois radicals, held the majority in the convention (Lovett was secretary), defeated the proposals for revolutionary procedure. However, in answer to a veiled attack in the speech from the throne when parliament was opened on February 5th, the convention issued the following address to the people :

“ Should we be compelled to resort to self-defence, we shall not hesitate to use the most extreme methods, preferring to meet death on the scaffold as free men, rather than live in the untroubled peace of slaves. The appeal to force, however, depends not upon us, but upon the government.”

Signatures were collected for the petition to parliament. Harney, then 22 years old, asked the convention what it proposed to do should parliament, as was most probable, refuse to grant the charter. The majority decided that this question should not be discussed, and further prohibited members of the convention, travelling into the provinces to collect signatures, from making incendiary speeches or proposing revolutionary measures. On the other hand, the convention fully endorsed the right of the people to bear arms and to use them, saying that this question was too clear to require discussion. Although the party of moral force held the upper hand, some bourgeois radicals were dissatisfied with the revolutionary tone of the speeches made by the left wing, and left the convention, thus making it, from the social point of view, a more homogeneous and unified body. But the antagonism be-

tween the two wings of the movement became more acute. The left wing urged, and obtained, the removal of the convention to Birmingham, which took place on May 13th. The choice can scarcely be called a happy one. A rich banker and member of parliament, Thomas Attwood, enjoyed great popularity among the independent craftsmen and labour aristocracy of Birmingham. Attwood opposed the government because of its financial policy, and although he declared himself in favour of the general strike, at heart he would have nothing to do with revolutionary methods of struggle—merely wishing to use the workers' movement to bring about financial reform.

At Birmingham the convention decided upon the steps to be taken in the event of the petition being rejected. Even the advocates of physical force were fearful of revolution. O'Brien declared: "Up to the present the convention was not in a position to recommend energetic measures. Should it do so now, it would mean bringing the people into danger. To recommend more than that (i.e. the revolution) would mean condemning ourselves to failure."

The convention urged that, should the petition be refused, rent and taxes should not be paid, deposits should be withdrawn from the savings banks and gold withdrawn from the banks in exchange for paper money; these steps were to be taken all over the country on the same day; the workers were also to refrain from alcoholic drinks, which were taxed, and to declare a general strike. In vain Harney criticised this programme; he pointed out that the workers had no deposits at the banks, and that their only weapon was the general strike, which must develop into armed insurrection. It is true that the convention also acknowledged the general strike (the "sacred month") but only as the last and most desperate resort. Harney alone evinced any clear understanding of the general strike and armed insurrection.



Having worked out its peaceful measures for enforcing the Charter, the convention adjourned until July 1st, and began to organise mass meetings in the interval. These meetings were everywhere extraordinarily successful. No sooner, however, did the convention reassemble, than the government began to take repressive steps. Meetings were forbidden, the police broke up workers' demonstrations, arrests were numerous. In Birmingham martial law was proclaimed and the action of the government provoked the workers there to such an extent that on July 15th the houses of well-known enemies of the Chartists were burned down. For two or three days the city was practically in the hands of the people. The news of the events there, and of the action taken by the government, aroused great excitement among the workers all over the country. At this decisive moment the convention, which on July 10th had again transferred its seat to London, gave evidence of its complete powerlessness. It did not issue the call for armed insurrection and kept strictly to peaceful measures, merely passing a resolution of protest against the action of the authorities.

On July 12th, 1839, in parliament, the ruling classes rejected the petition, with its 1½ million signatures, by 235 votes to 46. The convention was incapable of taking up the challenge. Its original plan of a general strike—the sacred month to begin on August 12th—was turned down, the general strike commission reporting: "We are unanimously of the opinion that the masses are not prepared." In its place they declared a demonstrative strike for two or three days; this, too, was a failure. Conscious of its helplessness, the convention dissolved on September 14th. The government intensified its attacks. John Frost, a Newport draper and justice of the peace, who had thrown in his lot with the Chartists, led a forcible attempt to release Henry Vincent, who was undergoing a year's imprisonment in Newport gaol for taking part in riotous assemblies. At

the head of a thousand men Frost marched on Newport, but was met by the musket fire of the military, which killed ten and wounded fifty of his followers. This "insurrection" gave the government the excuse to proceed to still further measures of repression. Within four months about 450 men were arrested. O'Connor, O'Brien, Frost, and many others were charged with high treason. In the period of economic prosperity which was then setting in, the disunited leadership of the movement, based solely upon local organisations, resulted in the ebbing of the first wave of Chartism.

#### THE SECOND PERIOD OF THE CHARTIST MOVEMENT

It was not long before the tide turned: a new economic crisis and growing unemployment and distress soon had their effect and gave a powerful impulse to the struggle of the proletariat. In July 1840 a National Chartist Association was formed at Manchester, whose object was to amalgamate all Chartist groups in the country (an object contrary to law) in order to achieve a radical reform of the House of Commons by "peaceful and constitutional means." By 1842 the Association had about 400 local sections with a total membership of 40,000. It was a real labour party, with an executive committee, regular congresses, membership contributions, and cards. It offers an excellent refutation of the contention put forward even to-day that there can be no political mass party of the proletariat in England. The National Chartist Association, amid severe struggles, and in defiance of the law, succeeded in building up a national workers' organisation, developing within a short time into a political workers' party. This marked the highest point of the Chartist movement. The executive committee set about drawing up a second petition, to parliament. The first petition had contained no social or economic demands; but the second petition, in addition to the six points, de-

voted considerable space to the economic demands of the workers :

“ That in England, Ireland, Scotland and Wales, thousands of people are dying from actual want ; and your petitioners, while sensible that poverty is the great exciting cause of crime, view with mingled astonishment and alarm the ill provision made for the poor, the aged and infirm ; and likewise perceive, with feelings of indignation, the determination of your honourable House to continue the Poor Law Bill in operation, notwithstanding the many proofs which have been afforded by sad experience of the unconstitutional principle, of its unchristian character and of the cruel and murderous effects produced upon the wages of working men, and the lives of the subjects of this realm. . . .

“ That notwithstanding the wretched and unparalleled condition of the people, your honourable House has manifested no disposition to curtail the expenses of the State, to diminish taxation, or promote general prosperity. . . .

“ That your petitioners complain that the hours of labour, particularly of the factory workers, are protracted beyond the limits of human endurance, and that the wages earned, after unnatural application to toil in heated and unhealthy workshops, are inadequate to sustain the bodily strength, and supply those comforts which are so imperative after an excessive waste of physical energy.

“ That your petitioners also direct the attention of your honourable House to the starvation wages of the agricultural labourer, and view with horror and indignation the paltry income of those whose toil gives being to the staple food of this people.

“ Your petitioners deeply regret the existence of monopolies in this country and utterly condemn the taxation of commodities which are consumed chiefly



by the working classes. They are of the opinion that the repeal of the corn laws will not free the workers from their chains until the people possess that power which can abolish all monopolies and oppression. Your petitioners refer to the existing monopoly of the franchise ; paper currency, the possession of machinery and the land, the monopoly of the press, religious privileges, the monopoly in means of communication and a host of others too great to be enumerated. All these monopolies are created by class legislation. . . .”

This petition unequivocally demanded the abolition of the Poor Law and the demand for the promotion of factory legislation, as well as emphasising the necessity of the transference of power to the masses. More than 331,000 signatures were collected. On August 2nd it was submitted to parliament and rejected. “ We might as well appeal to the Rocks of Gibraltar as to this parliament,” said a radical member of the House of Commons. Lord Macaulay declared on this occasion :

“ It would be dangerous to place the supreme power of the State in the hands of a class that would undoubtedly make widespread and systematic attacks on the security of property.”

The Chartists had to struggle against an unwanted ally which forced itself upon them—the bourgeois Anti-Corn Law League. The sponsors of this wealthy organisation tried to win over the working class by holding out the prospect of cheap bread and a rise in the standard of life which would, they argued, result from the repeal of the corn laws. By this means the bourgeoisie hoped to divert the workers’ attention from Chartism ; but their designs were obvious. Cheap bread would mean lower wages, and the workers did not fall into the trap. The bourgeoisie therefore tried to exercise pressure upon the masses in another way.

Lockouts were organised, in order to provoke strikes, and in 1842 strikes did indeed break out, though they took a course which the bourgeoisie had not foreseen ; the demand for the Charter was now bound up with economic demands, and the strikes brought the Chartists and the trade unions into closer association with each other. For a time, the former exercised a radical influence on the unions, which themselves stood aside from the struggle for the Charter. The idea of a general strike again occupied the thoughts of the workers.

William Benbow, shoemaker and book-dealer, is regarded as the father of the idea of the general strike. In 1831 he had published a pamphlet on the general strike, the *Sacred Month*, which was taken up by the *Poor Man's Guardian*. During 1838 Benbow held meetings all over Lancashire. In August 1839 he was arrested. Between 1838 and 1842 his pamphlet exercised a widespread influence. Benbow's main ideas can be seen in the answer which he gave to the question : How can the workers free themselves ?

“ By proclaiming a month of rest, by ceasing work. We are told that we are suffering from over-production. Good! Do not let us produce any more. Then the masters will soon see that an abundance of economic goods is no evil. We are told that we are suffering from over-population. Good! Let us count and we shall see how great is the army of labour and how few in number is the privileged minority. When the masses cease to work they will become conscious of their power, they will realise the importance of united action. If it is to be of use to the workers, the month of rest must be a month of congress, a month of the people, in which the national convention will draw up the social balance, and will triumph over and banish tyranny.”

The strike movement arose spontaneously. The initiative was not taken by the Chartists ; to a large extent events took them by surprise. The strike spread from Manchester ; the Chartist executive took up the

slogan of the sacred month and called upon all English workers to declare a general strike. The appeal aroused a lively response although no real general strike occurred, for while the north came out bravely, the southern and central counties remained inactive.

The events of August 1842 gave rise to great anxiety among the ruling classes. Four years later Sir James Graham, the Home Secretary, admitted in Parliament :

“ We had the painful and lamentable experience of 1842—a year of the greatest distress, and now that it is passed, I may say, of the utmost danger. What were the circumstances of 1842? Allow me just to glance at them. We had in this metropolis, at midnight, Chartist meetings assembled in Lincoln’s Inn Fields. Immense masses of people, greatly discontented and acting in a spirit dangerous to the public peace. . . . What was the condition of Lancashire? . . . All the machinery was stopped. . . . It was my painful duty to consult with the Horse Guards almost daily as to the precautions that were necessary for the maintenance of the public peace. For some time troops were continually called on, in different parts of the manufacturing districts, to maintain public tranquillity. . . . For three months the anxiety which I and my colleagues experienced was greater than we ever felt before with reference to public affairs. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

When the strike died down—its leader, Feargus O’Connor, had fled from the scene of action and left the movement to itself—the government made more than 1,500 arrests. In October 1841, 651 of the arrested were charged in the courts.

The failure of the sacred month greatly disorganised the movement. The Chartist Association rapidly lost members; only three or four thousand were left in

<sup>1</sup> Hansard, *Parliamentary Debates*, February 1846, vol. lxxxiii, p. 718. Quoted in Beer’s *History of British Socialism*, vol. ii, p. 150.



1843. The decline of the movement was accelerated by the period of industrial advance which lasted from 1843 to 1846. The disappointed workers again turned away from the political struggle and gave their energies to the trade union and co-operative movement. It was at this period that there developed the tendency in Chartism which called the workers "back to the land."

#### THE CHARTIST SOCIAL PROGRAMME

We have indicated how varied were the elements mingled together in the Chartist movement; this lack of uniformity was visible not only in the disputes concerning tactics, but also in the differences of opinion about the Chartist programme. Their social programme was confused and immature, among both the right and the left wing. Nevertheless it would be a great error to believe that the strength of Chartism lay in its political programme alone, and consequently to consider it as a bourgeois-radical movement, the attitude adopted for a long time by bourgeois historians.

It would be equally false to take up the contrary position of the Webbs, who regard Chartism as an unimportant economic movement estranged from politics. To the factory workers of the north, Chartism, as Stephens put it, was a knife-and-fork question. The Charter meant good food, a good house, good wages, and a short working day. Engels said of Chartism:

"The Six Points [of the Chartist programme] . . . are for the proletariat a mere means to further ends. 'Political power our means, social happiness our end' is now the clearly formulated war-cry of the Chartists."<sup>1</sup>

The general platform of the movement was universal suffrage. But what was to be done after that had been obtained? What social order was to be established?

<sup>1</sup> *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, p. 235.

These questions received different answers from the different sections of the movement.

Lovett, strongly influenced by Owen, believed that socialism could be established only by the co-operation of classes. O'Brien, another leader of the left wing (1805-64), was also influenced by the Utopians, and particularly by a book dealing with Babeuf, which he had translated into English. In the Chartist struggle O'Brien saw the struggle to abolish capitalism altogether. His remarks on the class nature of government are extremely interesting :

“. . . The government is made by the profit-men to protect them in their exorbitant profits, rents, and impositions on the people who labour. . . . The government is their watchman and the people who labour are the oppressed. . . . In England the government is made for the upper and middle classes, i.e. for those who live by robbery and violence. So long as the government remains in their hands . . . we shall not succeed in putting through even the smallest practical reform.”

O'Brien's conception of socialism was mixed up with ideas of "labour money" and "exchange bazaars" or warehouses, where each worker delivered the produce of his labour and received in return the goods he required. He lacked an understanding of the historical rôle of capitalism and the proletariat. Apart from that, however, it is enough to compare the courageous revolutionary speeches of O'Brien quoted above with the honeyed and peaceful utterances of, for example, Ramsay MacDonald, to grasp the profound difference between the proletarian leaders of Chartism and the leaders of the Labour Party to-day who, behind pious masks, protect the interests of the British bourgeoisie.

A clearer view of the connection between socialism as the goal of the Chartist movement and the political struggle of the proletariat was held by George Julian

Harney. For him the franchise was only a means of obtaining "general equality in the conditions of life." His adherents, however, formed but a small group, and their tactics (not petitions but armed insurrection) were far in advance of the workers' ideas at that time. Harney, later a friend of Marx and Engels, was a member of the First International.

The most popular and influential leader of the masses was O'Connor, editor and publisher of the *Northern Star*, the Chartist central organ. He was not a socialist. "I am no socialist and no communist," he declared. He considered smallholdings in land to be useful and necessary. Only if he were a smallholder could the worker have the possibility of employing "his labour and his capital with the greatest advantage and to his own use." O'Connor's ideal was two acres of land for everybody, with a small house and the requisite instruments in addition.

As Chartism declined after the failure of the sacred month, O'Connor put forward his plan of dividing the land among the workers by founding co-operative agricultural colonies. The plan was adopted by the Chartist congress and for a time even took precedence of the Charter itself. Shares were taken up by about 75,000 people. The slogan "back to the land" obtained great popularity. It undoubtedly attracted the domestic workers and handicraftsmen and workers only recently separated from the soil, who still dreamed of the return of days past; but O'Connor's reactionary and petty-bourgeois Utopia also found many adherents among the factory workers. The explanation of this lies in the fact that some sections of the factory proletariat, not yet completely transformed by capitalism (there were not many of them in the industrial north), shared these illusions about a return to the land; moreover, the highly qualified workers, the labour aristocracy of the time, believed that O'Connor's land reform would mean higher wages for those who con-



tinued to work in the factories. In 1848 O'Connor's land organisation collapsed financially; his private fortune was also lost in this scheme.

Writing in 1850, Marx said of O'Connor :

“ By his very nature, he is conservative, and bears a most determined hatred towards industrial progress and the revolution. All his ideals are thoroughly patriarchal and petty-bourgeois.”

#### THE THIRD PERIOD OF THE CHARTIST MOVEMENT

The commercial crisis and the parliamentary elections of 1847, the Irish famine, and, above all, the revolution of February 1848 in France, gave a new impulse to the Chartist movement. The unemployed in England grew restless, their slogan “ bread or revolution ”; the militancy of the masses rose steadily higher. Many congratulatory messages were sent to the French revolutionaries.

At O'Connor's suggestion, a Chartist convention decided on April 3rd, 1848, to present another petition to parliament, similar to that of 1842. 1,975,000 signatures were collected, although at first the Chartists claimed that there were more than five and a half million. It was agreed that, in the event of its rejection, a national assembly should be convened, to sit in permanence until the Charter became the law of the land. A giant meeting was organised for April 10th on Kennington Green, to proceed thence to parliament in support of the petition.

The government greatly exaggerated the importance of this meeting, 170,000 special constables were sworn in for that day and equipped with truncheons. 2,000 civil servants were armed and 700,000 soldiers and sailors concentrated in London. Artillery was posted at various points of the city and several steamers were held ready for the transport of troops. Churches were transformed into barracks and all open-air meetings,

for whatever purpose, were forbidden. The shops and smaller factories of London were closed on April 10th, the streets were filled with armed men. All these arrangements were made by the order and under the immediate supervision of Wellington, the 79-year-old Iron Duke. At ten in the morning the delegates to the Chartist convention met at Kennington Green, where the workers had assembled. At the head of the procession was a carriage drawn by four horses and decorated with flags, which was to bear the petition to parliament.

But the meeting was a failure. Not more than thirty to forty thousand people were present and the demonstration to parliament, prohibited by the government, was called off by the Chartist leaders themselves. O'Connor urged the workers to disperse quietly, to gain their victory by prudence and circumspection. For the third time parliament derisively rejected the petition. On April 12th a law was passed for the security of the throne and the government, providing imprisonment for inflammatory speeches. On May 13th the government dissolved the convention, which since May 1st had designated itself the National Assembly. From May to October the terror of class justice swept over England; ninety prominent Chartists were imprisoned, O'Connor's land scheme broke down, while in Paris, Berlin, and Vienna, reaction triumphed. The defeat of April 10th undoubtedly dealt a severe blow to the revolutionary movement on the continent; Wellington's actions helped Cavaignac to crush the rising of the Paris proletariat in June.

Chartism could not recover from the blow, although several attempts were made to bring it once more to life (e.g. a "small charter" was put forward by some Chartists in association with the radicals). After the *Northern Star* had ceased publication, Ernest Jones founded the *People's Paper* (1852-4). In 1855 O'Connor died, in 1858 Robert Owen. The last effective Chartist organisations broke up in 1854.

## III. THE HISTORICAL RÔLE OF CHARTISM AND THE CAUSES OF ITS DEFEAT

We have seen how closely the periods of progress and decline in the Chartist movement coincided with periods of industrial crisis and industrial prosperity. After the crisis of 1847, which fanned the last flames of Chartism, England entered upon twenty-five years of industrial advance. The 1848 revolutions in France and Germany crippled the industry of those countries and helped the British capitalists to push their competitors out of the Asiatic and American markets. The victory of free trade (with the repeal of the corn laws in 1846) signified the triumph of the industrial bourgeoisie; for England, with her industrial superiority, free trade was of advantage, since it secured to her pre-dominance in the competitive struggle for foreign markets, by guaranteeing cheap raw materials and food.

During this period of industrial prosperity, when wages rose steadily, the English proletariat became more and more "bourgeois." Writing to Marx on October 7th, 1858, Engels said :

"The English proletariat is becoming more and more bourgeois, so that it seems as if this most bourgeois of all countries wants to possess a bourgeois aristocracy and bourgeois proletariat in addition to the bourgeoisie itself. In a country which exploits the whole world, that is to a certain extent justified.

"During the period of England's industrial monopoly, the English working class have, to a certain extent, shared in the benefits of the monopoly. . . . And that is the reason why, since the dying-out of Owenism, there has been no Socialism in England." (Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class*. Preface to 1892 edition.)

The British bourgeoisie, enjoying the fruits of industrial progress, and of their dominant position on the



world market, could afford to throw large crumbs to the workers, and thus to keep them quiet. On the other hand, emigration (between 1848 and 1854 two and a half million persons left England), which increased in extent after the discovery of gold in Australia, took away the most energetic elements of the labour movement, and at the same time helped to raise the wages of the workers who remained at home.

Narrow craft trade unionism ("pure" trade unionism), which was unfriendly to the political struggle and preached harmony of interests between employers and employed, took on new life. For many years the workers' movement lost its revolutionary character; the law fixing the ten-hour working day passed in 1847 with the help of the conservatives "to get their own back on the bourgeoisie," also worked in the same direction.

Some conservatives, like the Rev. J. R. Stephens and Oastler, were inside the Chartist movement, and actually on its left wing. They represented the ideas of the old-fashioned landowner, driven into the arms of the Chartists in protest against capitalism, which was destroying "merry England." Oastler was an excellent representative of this group. "I am a faithful subject of the Queen," he said. "I am a friend of the aristocracy. I honour and respect the National Church. But when these institutions cease to be the protectors of the people I am ready to cry with their worst enemies: Down with them, down! Let no trace of them remain!"

The Chartists completely ignored the most important demand of the working class, the demand for the ten-hour day, although the realisation of that demand, in a sense, saved the country, that is the bourgeoisie, from the revolution which threatened to break out in 1848.

In examining the causes of the breakdown of Chartism, we should not forget the internal nature of the

movement itself—the variety of tendencies that took part in it, the differences of opinion between them, its organisational weakness (although meetings were attended by hundreds of thousands, they were not organised). In addition, there was inadequate contact between the Chartists and the trade unions, which developed independently and frequently opposed the Chartist movement.

We have seen that Chartism lacked a clear social and economic programme. Socialism among the Chartists, as Engels pointed out, was only in an embryonic stage. It was only at the time of its final collapse that Chartism approximated to the socialism of such of its leaders as Ernest Jones and Harney. A London Chartist conference convened in 1851 declared that a change in political conditions, unless accompanied by social change, would never produce the desired result. Harney raised the slogan of the “democratic and social republic.” Jones and Harney represent the transition stage from Chartism to scientific socialism. In the fifties Harney published the first English translation of the Communist Manifesto. The two men were in personal touch with the founders of scientific socialism. But the Chartist movement as a whole had no clear socialist programme based on scientific analysis. The proletariat of the first half of the nineteenth century was not yet ripe for such a programme. Nevertheless, the historical significance of Chartism is very great indeed. It was the first independent revolutionary movement of the proletariat as a class.

“But in Chartism it is the whole working class which arises against the bourgeoisie, and attacks, first of all, the political power, the legislative rampart with which the bourgeoisie has surrounded itself. . . . From this moment Chartism was purely a working-man’s cause, freed from all bourgeois elements.”  
(*Condition of the Working Class*, pp. 228 and 234.)

The Chartists were the first to show the workers of the world "how it should be done," how the proletariat conducts the struggle for its independent aims. The Chartist movement incontestably refutes the reformist legend, still widely believed, that in England as in the United States the working-class movement develops along peaceful and purely economic lines far removed from political struggle. Chartism was a frankly political, revolutionary movement of the English proletariat, which failed because of the growing strength of British capitalism. But that advance did not endure for ever. England's industrial monopoly crumbled away, and the capitalist system in England, as in the rest of the world, began to decline. In 1926 England was shaken by the general strike. It was betrayed by the leaders of the trade unions and the Labour Party, but it demonstrated that in England to-day the basis for a revolutionary movement of the proletarian masses is incomparably broader than at the time of revolutionary Chartism; to-day the capitalist system is breaking down. The Communist Party of Great Britain has taken over the revolutionary traditions of Chartism.

On the experiences of Chartism, the first independent party of the proletariat, Marx and Engels built up their theory of the class struggle. From the Chartist example the working class learned the importance of the seizure of political power as the way to establish "social well-being," that is, the transformation of society on new foundations. From the Chartist example the proletariat learned the importance of the organisation of mass working-class action. The Chartists neglected to organise the revolutionary activity of the masses. O'Connor said: "Four million stand by our cause; that is the guarantee of our victory." But where was the organised consolidation of those millions? From the experience of Chartism the proletariat learned to recognise the importance of immediate demands, learned to dispense with Utopian theories, like



O'Connor's land reform, and realised the importance of an independent class party of the proletariat.

Finally, it was the Chartists who laid the ideological and organisational foundation stone of international solidarity; they took up the cause of Ireland and Canada, they extended the warmest sympathy to the struggle of the Polish people against Tsarism; a number of Chartist leaders, like Harney and Jones, were members of the international organisation, the Fraternal Democrats, and of the First International, whose object was the propaganda of international solidarity of the revolutionary democracy.

Despite the immaturity of the Chartist programme, the founders of scientific socialism saw in the Chartists the true representatives of the proletariat. To amalgamate socialism as a scientific theory with Chartism, as the mass movement of the proletariat was, for them, the most important of all tasks.

#### IV. TEST QUESTIONS

1. What were the sources of primary accumulation in England, as contrasted with the sources of socialist accumulation in the U.S.S.R.?
2. What were the effects of the industrial revolution in England?
3. Why did the industrial revolution take place earlier in England than in any other country?
4. What were the principal tendencies in the Chartist movement?
5. Why did the Chartist movement suffer defeat?
6. Estimate the debt of the international labour movement to Chartism, in the realm both of theory and of practice.

7. Compare Chartism with the English labour movement at the time of the general strike.

Some books to read :

The best introduction to the history of Chartism is given in Engels' *Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*. Chartism itself is dealt with briefly in Chapter VIII, "Labour Movements," but the book as a whole describes in detail, on the basis of Engels' own observation and printed sources, the position of the English workers at that time. In addition, the introductory chapter describes the industrial revolution and its effects.

The industrial revolution and the position of the factory worker in the first half of the nineteenth century are also treated by Marx in the first volume of *Capital*, sections entitled: "English Factory Legislation from 1833 to 1864" (p. 283), and "Primary Accumulation" (p. 790).

A description of the course of events in the history of Chartism and an analysis of the ideas and struggles of the movement is given in Th. Rothstein's very readable book: *From Chartism to Labourism* (see review, *Labour Monthly*, Feb. 1930).

The most complete Marxist account of the Chartist movement, from its earliest beginnings to its last manifestations, is given in the monograph of Hermann Schlueter; *Die Chartistenbewegung, ein Beitrag zur Sozialpolitischen Geschichte Englands*. The basic ideas of this work were already contained in a pamphlet published anonymously by Schlueter in collaboration with Engels: *Die Chartistenbewegung in England*.

The history of English trade unions is most thoroughly given, but from a Fabian viewpoint and therefore with omissions and a class collaborationist bias, in *History of British Trade Unionism*, by Sidney and Beatrice Webb. The origins of trade unionism are dealt with in *A New View of Society*—Robert Owen.

On Owen, his own *Life* should be read, as well as G. D. H. Cole's *Life of Robert Owen*.

Interesting passages are to be found in *A History of British Socialism*, by Max Beer.

A parallel between primitive accumulation and Soviet economy is drawn by Stalin in *Problems of Leninism*.

R. W. Postgate's *Revolution: 1789 to 1906* contains reprints of a number of valuable documents.

J. L. and Barbara Hammond in *England in the Age of the Chartists* give a number of facts about the social conditions of the period. This book is not quite so good as their *Village Labourer*, *Town Labourer*, and *Skilled Labourer*, which all contain certain illustrative material, but are all vitiated by the sentimental and liberal outlook of the authors.

*The Economic History of England*, by Charlotte M. Waters, is useful in giving an outline of the economic development of the period. A more complicated book which is written from the very conservative point of view, but which contains many facts about capitalist development, is J. H. Clapham's *Economic History of Modern Britain—The Early Railway Age*.



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