

## LETTER VII

It matters little, brethren, in what terms Lord Brougham<sup>13</sup> and his colleagues pronounce your Union to be illegal, or what statutes they may devise to establish that illegality. He dare not assert that your Union is unjust – that it is not completely within the limits of the strictest equity. For what was it instituted but for the defence and enforcement of your just rights – your just and indispensable interests – the interests of your only property, your labour? If ever a Union was legal, your Union, brethren, is most pre-eminently so, or else legality is a farce, and the boasted laws were made for rogues against the claims of honest men! The Chancellor knows this well enough, but the master-archy and the profit-mongers are besetting the poor Whigs, and threatening to call in the gallant Duke and the Tories unless something is done to put your Unions down; and so these unfortunate ministers are compelled to get up a case against you, and to put on a very threatening aspect in denouncing even your burial processions. Old Eldon<sup>14</sup> swears that if he were Chancellor he would do terrible things; and accordingly Brougham feels the pride of his station touched, and cannot refrain from declaring that he, too, can, and will be, as severe as his predecessor.

The speech of Brougham, on Monday, April 28<sup>th</sup>, however, only tends to show, brethren, how just and how justifiable was your procession on the preceding Monday. That and your funeral processions have startled the lordlings; and Newcastle, Londonderry, and Eldon rose up with a cloud of words of no more meaning than there would be found in a cloud of dust from some old aristocratic mansion. The ministers, unhappy beings, were quite blinded and bewildered. Melbourne stammered out a hope that your public display “would die a natural death!” while Brougham was reduced to the necessity of talking big, without in reality meaning anything. He was obliged to acknowledge that public meetings are legal enough; but added that “it was not legal for men to assemble together in vast bodies disproportioned to the necessity of occasion!” This is such absolute nonsense, that it is not worth while to ask by what rule, either moral or political, he would frame a law to adapt the numbers of a public meeting to the importance of the occasion. A public meeting is, even with respect to its numbers, an expression of public sentiment; and who is it that shall venture, in England, to limit, by a penal statute, this silent but eloquent testimony of the feelings of the people, on any occasion whatever, by the hundred or even the thousand?

But I leave the Chancellor to discover the legislative means of adapting public meetings to public occasions, while I turn to another and far more important subject. On the presentation of some Union petitions in behalf of the Dorchester victims, in the House of Commons, your conduct, brethren, underwent the remarks of various members, and you were charged by several, some of whom pretend to be friendly to your principles and motives, with “tyranny over your fellow workmen:” and this charge was seized upon by the Times, and made the topic of violent article against you. Let us investigate this charge.

No one will pretend to deny that, in the present state of society, labour is your property, and that you have a right to get as high a price for it as you can by fair means obtain.

The purchasers of this your only commodity, combine together in order to compel you to dispose of your

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13 Henry Peter Brougham, 1778-1868, first Baron Brougham and Vaux, who at this date was Lord Chancellor.

14 John Scott, John, first earl of Eldon, 1751–1838, an early-nineteenth-century Tory Lord Chancellor.

labour at the lowest possible price. You consequently form your Trades' Union, which is a general combination, to keep up the price of labour.

The purchasers are comparatively few: they can meet without any public display, and take their measures against you in secrecy, and with a unity of purpose, which has on every occasion secured to them a victory over you. They have a close instinctive sense of their interest, and even should there be such a refractory member among them, as a man willing to give higher wages than other masters in the same trade, his ruin is certain to be sure and severe, although there would be no noise made about it.

Your Union, Brethren, great as it is, does not possess the completeness of the combination of the master. You do not move as a whole so perfectly as they do. You have, therefore, not so much power to keep up the price of your labour, as they have to depreciate and keep down your wages.

It may be asked, why the unity of the labourers is not so general or so strict as that of the employers? The labourers have undoubtedly all the same interest in keeping up the price of labour at its highest disposable value; but unhappily they have but recently discovered the importance of acting upon the principle of unity; nor is that principle so well understood and reduced to practice among the sellers, as it is among the purchasers of labour. Many circumstances, in the present state of society, have a tendency to impede that consolidation of union, without which the market for labour will always be against the sellers, and in favour of the buyers. Let us consider the subject in detail. These circumstances are,

1. Want of general information relative to the proper position of the labouring class in the scale of society.
2. The absolute necessity of an immediate and constant market for labour.

The position of the labouring class has hitherto been that of the lowest degradation, and it is even now mentioned by the terms, the lower order, or the lower orders. Compelled to sell their time for the purpose of labour, in order to subsist, at the very lowest price they can obtain, they have none left for those mental improvements by which men are principally distinguished from the inferior animals; and thus individuals in our condition, brethren, have been too frequently in the habit of forgetting to respect themselves. Many have lost their own self-esteem, and they sink into an abject course of conduct. I am an earnest advocate for every man's obtaining as much book-knowledge as his time and opportunities will allow him to acquire; but there is a great deal of useful knowledge to be acquired by observation and attention, without the aid books. At the present day, thank God, very few of us can possibly be unable to read and write; and yet there is little use in reading and writing, if a man will not look about him and think. The want of that habit of thinking and of considering the proper means of benefiting his condition, is the chief reason that there are any among the working classes who still refrain from joining our Union. It is certain that, as knowledge extends, the habit of thinking and of acting with the majority of the class to which we belong, extends also in a still greater ratio. When a man has acquired a habit of reflecting, he cannot help perceiving that all those who have secured most certain and permanent benefits for themselves, have acted in concert with others. The churchmen act as a body; the lawyers, however they may occasionally be individually opposed, have their societies, their unions, to act for the general benefit; and a lawyer who should have conscience enough to act against the principles of the legal body, would be persecuted by his brethren, and shortly ruined. It is the same with all professions, they act upon a principle of general interest in the first instance, and they find their personal interests best preserved

by adhering to the interests of the body. We have not a word in our language which accurately expresses this principle of unity, which has hitherto, Brethren, been exerted so constantly and so resolutely against us. The French term it *esprit du corps*, which means the mind of the whole body. As intelligence spreads, this feeling of the necessity of men who have the same interests acting with one mind, spreads also; and we, the beings who stand most in need of this unity of mind, have, through the want of information and from neglecting our natural powers of reflection, been the most without it. We know it now, and many thousands among us are acting upon it. The numbers of those who are sensible that the disposers of labour can secure no permanent benefit, unless they act for the good of the whole, daily increase. Thousands have joined the Union in the course of last week; and I have not the smallest doubt that in a very short time every operative in the kingdom, let his avocation be what it may, will become a Unionist!

That such a unity of the labourers – of the productive class (which in the United Kingdom, comprehending the agricultural labourers, comprises more than three-fourths of the whole population) – must effect a very great change in the community is certain; but it is a change, without which the word “community” has long been to us, Brethren, and must remain, a word of insult. We, the most numerous, the most industrious, and the most productive class, have been thrust beneath the other classes, and our community of interest with them has been denied, because we have till lately been the least intelligent and the least united.

Seeing, then, the absolute necessity of a close and resolute unity among ourselves; looking at the conduct of the buyers of our labour and their dependents; sensible of the importance of our cause, not to ourselves, as individuals, but to each of us in his connection with his fellow-workmen of every description, who is it that dares to accuse us of tyranny, if we say to the operatives who refuse to join our Union, “We will not work with you; and we will take every justifiable means to prevent your injuring us, either by your folly or your servility. We do not wish to injure you; on the contrary, we have convinced ourselves, by the knowledge we have acquired, by the thought we have exercised, and by the benevolent intentions that have determined our conduct, that we can do no good to ourselves without extending that good to you; but you must not, you shall not, for an immediate and temporary subsistence upon the humble wages offered to your necessities, injure both us and yourselves. We have, in most instances, raised funds out of our own humble earnings for the support of those who may, by their adherence to the common cause, be reduced to extreme distress; but you must reflect that our contention against the profit-mongers and capitalists, though a bloodless one, is not without its suffering and its severe deprivations. We are certain of ultimate success; but at this period, when the contention is at its height, we cannot but feel that you, who must benefit with us in our ultimate victory, are acting ignorantly, if not perversely, against us; and although it is with painful reluctance that we look upon you and treat you as foes, it is impossible for us to do otherwise, with regard to the great principle of general benefit, upon which we are most advisedly, and after well considering its result, most determinately acting. We call upon you, most earnestly, most affectionately, not to oppose yourselves to the great brotherhood of labour! We urge you, by everything that is sacred between men that have a common interest, not to be traitors to yourselves and to your children; for in acting as traitors to the great united family of productive labours, what are you but traitors to your own families? And what can you expect but our present enmity, and the future reproach of your own children? Look at your boys; are they to grow up to be the half-paid labour-sellers to insolent and tyrannical profit-mongers? And are your daughters to be the miserable starving drudges of a mill or a work-

shop? For shame! But the advocates of false humanity tax us with tyranny and cruelty, when we reprove you for doing all that lies in your power to prevent our beneficial success! You have a right, they say, to sell your labour at your own price! No; you have no such right; you can not have a right to injure the community to which you inseparably belong. While by your ignorance or your stupid willfulness you depress, as far as in your power, the general interests of the great community to which you, by nature and situation, belong, you are a disease, which tends to weaken the whole body; and it is our duty to take the most effective means of curing such morbid and corrupt members. Common sense, mere instinct, ought to be sufficient to make you, and those gentlemen legislators who talk so sentimentally about our tyranny, sensible that if you continue to be under-workers of the profit-mongers, to our detriment, and to the injury of our important design, we must, in our own defence, treat you not only as enemies, but as the worst enemies! This however, cannot long be necessary! We observe with joy, that weekly, that daily, you are thronging to enter the fraternal bond of Union; that your wives, and your daughters, and your sons, are encouraging your resolution; and that you participate in our anticipation of the success of a cause, which will render the great family of productive labour the rightful enjoyers of their due share of the plenty they produce!

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