

The Forward March of Labour Halted?

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(This article was given as the 1978 Marx Memorial Lecture.)

It is my privilege to give the Marx Memorial Lecture of 1978 and I want to use it to survey some developments in the British working class during the past 100 years. It is a long-established habit, on these occasions, to take the texts of Marx and Engels as our starting-point, but I shall not do so for two reasons. In the first place, as it happens, neither Marx nor Engels said much about the British working class between the end of the First International and the 1880s, and to the best of my knowledge they said nothing whatever about it exactly one hundred years ago. In fact on this very day (March 17, 1878) there appeared in an American journal the middle one of a series of five articles by Engels on the European workers (*Werke* 19, 117-138). This mentioned numerous countries from Russia to Portugal, but contained not one word about Britain. He remained totally silent—no doubt regretfully silent—about the admittedly uninspiring labour scene in this country a century ago. In the second place, and more to the point, what I wish to underline is something which a marxist analysis alone will help us to understand, but which Marx's texts cannot; that the forward march of labour and the labour movement, which Marx predicted, appears to have come to a halt in this country about twenty-five to thirty years ago. Both the working class and the labour movement since then have been passing through a period of crisis, or, if you prefer to be mealy-mouthed about it, of adaptation to a new situation. Most of us, engaged in day-to-day struggle, have not paid as much attention as we ought to this crisis, though we can hardly fail to be aware of some of its aspects. My purpose is to see it in the long-term perspective of the changing structure of British capitalism and the proletariat in it. I see our task as marxists, and mine as the Marx Memorial Lecturer as applying Marx's methods and general analysis concretely to our own era, and I hope Marx himself would also have seen it that way.

A Working Class Majority

It was taken for granted in the 1870s that the great majority of the British people consisted of manual workers and their families—and this meant

manual workers outside agriculture. I need hardly add that the majority, even of the farming population consisted of proletarians, i.e. of wage-labourers. In both these respects Britain was then peculiar and probably unique: in the enormous size and percentage of its manual working classes and in the relatively small size and percentage of its agricultural population, and above all its insignificant peasantry. This had some significant political consequences, which are still in some ways felt. Whereas in most other states at that period the introduction of a democratic voting system would still have left the manual workers in a minority, in Britain, so it was believed, they would immediately constitute a majority. The statistician Dudley Baxter in 1867 estimated the non-agricultural manual workers at just under 70 per cent of the population. So, from the point of view of the ruling classes, it was absolutely essential to gain or maintain the political support of an important section of the working class in one way or another. They could not hope to offset an independent class conscious party of the proletariat by mobilising the majority of peasants, petty craftsmen and shopkeepers, etc., whether with or against the working class. They had to come to terms with the fact of a working class majority from the time of the Second Reform Act onwards.

Decline of Manual Occupations

I shall leave aside for the moment the question whether what was understood by "manual workers" in the 1860s and 1870s is what we would today call a working class or proletariat. However, whatever they were, they got their hands dirty, and for most of the past century the manual workers in this broad definition have not grown but declined. In 1911 they included about 75 per cent of the population, in 1931 about 70 per cent, in 1961 64 per cent and in 1976 a little over half.

This does not, of course, mean that the percentage of proletarians in the technical sense has gone down, i.e. of people who earn their living by selling their labour-power for wages, plus their dependents. On the contrary, in this sense proletarianisation has, as Marx predicted, continued to increase. We cannot accurately measure the per-

centage of “employers and proprietors” for the 19th century, but in 1911 it included less than 7 per cent of the occupied population and it has since gone down—after staying more or less stable until 1951—to something like $3\frac{1}{2}$ per cent in the middle 1960s. So we have, over this century, growing proletarianisation combined with the relative decline, within the wage-earning population, of the manual workers in the literal sense of the word.

This is a very general phenomenon in the industrial countries. However, in Britain the decline is particularly striking for a special historical reason. A hundred years ago the sector of white-collar work in the widest sense employed only a tiny number of wage-earners; probably relatively less than in other countries with a substantial bureaucracy, public and private. For instance, in 1871 “commercial occupations” as a whole occupied less than 200,000 out of about 12 millions, whereas by 1911 it already included about 900,000. By 1976 about 45 per cent of the occupied population could be classified as non-manual.

Here, then, is the first major development of the past hundred years. But let us look more closely at the manual workers. A hundred years ago industry depended on manual labour to an extent we find difficult to grasp today, since the technology of the Industrial Revolution which Britain pioneered, and which made this country into the “workshop of the world”, was, by modern standards, extremely undeveloped; it was in fact, as Raphael Samuel has recently reminded us, a “juxtaposition of hand and steam-powered technology”. It was, to use the modern term, enormously labour-intensive. Craft skills of the kind associated with the pre-industrial artisans, were no doubt to some extent supplemented or speeded up by power and machinery, but they were not yet to any extent replaced by it. Not until the end of the century were automatic machine-tools seriously introduced into British engineering workshops. Other operations, skilled or less skilled, relied almost entirely on manpower. Practically every ton of coal—which supplied the overwhelming bulk of power for all purposes—was got by men with picks and shovels.

Two Consequences

These characteristics of 19th century British production had two consequences. In the first place, growth of output was linked to an expansion in the workforce to an extent it is difficult to recall today. Thus between 1877 and 1914 the tonnage of coal produced in British pits just about doubled—and so did the number of coal-miners. On the eve of world war one something like one and a quarter million men (plus their families) were required simply to produce Britain’s coal. Today

the spectacularly larger energy requirements of Britain, including coal, oil, gas, electricity and nuclear power, do not require more than a fraction of this enormous labour force. The army of labour was constantly growing. But in the second place, the relative backwardness of mechanisation by 20th century standards gave the British worker whose manual skill and experience was indispensable—and this included others besides apprenticed craftsmen—considerable strength in collective bargaining. British trade unionism was therefore already strong or potentially strong, even in industries in which, elsewhere, it was notoriously weak, as in cotton-mills. Unionism was recognised by government a little more than a century ago, and—leaving aside particular areas and industries—no systematic and consistent attempt to smash it as a whole was made thereafter, or succeeded for any length of time. At the same time the peculiar structure of British trade unionism also reflected—and still reflects—this historic past.

Pattern of Union Organisation

Thus, unlike many other countries, our unions are not a small number of giants each covering in theory all workers within a specified industry. Though this pattern of industrial unionism was favoured, and at one time militantly advocated, by the socialists, it was not generally successful. Even on the railways, as we know, the rivalry between industrial and sectional unions has not been eliminated. Instead—or rather side by side with such industrial tendencies—we have the coexistence of craft unions and, a phenomenon peculiar on this scale to Britain, the great “general unions” which gradually absorbed those not eligible for, or wanted by craft unions, those too weak to form them, and a variety of others. Furthermore, in some ways this tendency, which was first established in the period of the great dock strike of 1889, continues to reassert itself. Smaller unions have increasingly tended to amalgamate into bigger ones; but while these amalgamations could be seen, in the first half of the present century, as steps towards a sort of industrial unionism, in the past twenty years they have looked increasingly like the formation of new conglomerates of the “general union” type—as with the merger of the AUEW with the foundrymen and the draughtsmen and the ETU with the plumbers. Conversely, the enormous potential strength of the “craftsman” type of worker continued to be felt in unionism, particularly in the great complex of metalworking, engineering and electrical industries which went on expanding as the old 19th century industries of mass employment, such as textiles, mining and transport, contracted. When mass unionism came to these industries in the 1930s and

during the war, it was initially through the craftsmen—often, as in the aircraft industry, men who still worked, and sometimes thought, in the old terms of craft pride. As late as 1939 the men at Harland and Shorts in Belfast still refused to accept piece-rates, as their grandfathers had done in the craft unions of Marx's day. These were the men who spread unionism into the motor industry; who kept the average engineering factory as a collection of separate craft unions, and, incidentally, who sent the women and the non-craftsmen to be organised by the T&GWU, which has thus become the majority union in the motor industry. And, incidentally, this persistence of multiple unionism in so many factories made rank-and-file inter-union co-ordination by such people as shop-stewards so formidable a force on the British industrial scene.

Historic Transformation

I have stressed these historic continuities. But they are combined with one major historic transformation. A century ago the working class was deeply stratified, though this did not prevent it from seeing itself as a class. The very people who were the backbone of trade unionism, perhaps with the exception of the miners, were, and were seen as, a labour aristocracy which looked down on the mass of those whom it regarded as unskilled, "mere labourers". But industrial change first threatened, and then eroded this superiority from three directions. In the first place the rise of tertiary employment—white-collar and professional employment—produced a new form of labour aristocracy which identified directly with the middle class. It is only since world war two—at least outside the public sector—that the white-collar workers and professional workers have organised as a mass in trade unions, and increasingly within the TUC, i.e. the conscious labour movement. In the second place modern technology increasingly created a stratum of professionals and technicians separately recruited from outside rather than promoted from those with workshop experience. So the gap between the labour aristocracy and the middle strata widened. On the other hand modern technology and industrial organisation threatened the privileged position of the labour aristocrat, by increasingly turning him into, or replacing him by, the less skilled process worker operating specialised machines, or carrying out specialised parts of an increasingly elaborate division of labour. In other words, as Marx had predicted and as the capitalists always intended, skill was increasingly transferred from men to machines or to the design of the flow of production. In fact the labour aristocracy was threatened with dilution. Thus the labour aristo-

crats were not only forced further away from the middle strata, but closer to the other strata of the working class, although their economic advantage (as distinct from their position in the social structure) was not seriously weakened before the first world war. They tended to be radicalised, especially in the great complex of industries in which mechanisation, mass production, and similar changes in the organisation of industry produced the most direct confrontation between the skilled worker and the new threats, in the growing complex of the metalworking industries.

Now I would like to note, in passing, that my explanation of this process is a little different from Engels', though it does not actually conflict with it. Engels, who wrote about these problems in the 1880s (notably in the new Prefaces to his *Condition of the Working Class*), stressed two things: the formation of a "relatively comfortable" and ideologically moderate labour aristocracy in Britain, and the world monopoly of British industrial capitalism which provided benefits for *all* British workers, though disproportionate ones for the labour aristocracy. But "even the great mass had, at least, a temporary share now and then" (Preface 1892, *Marx & Engels on Britain*, p. 31). He expected a radicalisation of the British working class as a result of the decline in the British world monopoly, but he did not foresee this happening among the labour aristocracy of the "old unions", but rather by the emergence of labour-organisation among the hitherto unorganised masses, whose minds were "free from the inherited 'respectable' prejudices which hampered the brains of the better situated 'old' Unionists" (p. 32). What he did not appreciate sufficiently were the developments in capitalist production which were to radicalise the former labour aristocracy itself, at any rate in the growth industries of the 20th century. But in the 1880s these were not yet very visible.

A Common Style of Proletarian Life

All this does not mean that the working class became a single homogeneous mass, although in many ways it was drawn more closely together, by a growing class consciousness, by political demands which united workers of all strata and sections—for instance, in the fields covered by local government, of education, of health and social security—by a common life-style and pattern, and, for a minority, of labour and socialist ideology. This common "style", if I may so call it, of British proletarian life, began to emerge just about a century ago, was formed in the 1880s and 1890s, and remained dominant until it began to be eroded in the 1950s. I am thinking not only of the rise of the socialist movement and the Labour Party as the mass party of British workers, the

changes in trade unionism, the enormous and unbroken increase in the number of co-op members from half a million in 1880 to three million in 1914, but of non-political aspects of working-class life; of the rise of football as a mass proletarian sport, of Blackpool as we still know it today, of the fish-and-chip shop—all products of the 1880s and 1890s, or at the earliest the 1870s; the famous cap immortalised by the Andy Capp cartoon, which is, broadly speaking, Edwardian; and a little later—they had hardly developed much before world war one—of the council flat or house, of the picture palace, of the *palais de danse*.

Changes in British Capitalism

At the same time the nature of British capitalism has changed profoundly, in four ways. *First*, as suggested, it has been transformed as a system of production by technology, mass production and the enormous concentration of the productive unit—i.e. the plant in which people work. In 1961 about half of all workers in manufacturing establishments worked in plants of more than 500 workers, about a quarter in establishments over 2,000, less than 10 per cent in units of 50 or under. *Second*, the rise of monopoly capitalism with a massive public sector has concentrated employment even more, and in particular created a huge sector of government and other public employees such as simply did not exist a century ago. Today something like 30 per cent of all people work in the public sector—as employees of government, local authorities, nationalised industries, etc., and the proportion is rising. That is to say, for every two people employed in the private sector (I omit employers and self-employed) there is now roughly one in the public sector. *Third*, it follows that the factors which determine the workers' conditions are no longer, to any major extent, those of capitalist competition. The capitalist sector is no longer one dominated by the free market, since it is largely monopolised; and the public sector, both as an employer, as the provider of all manner of social services and payments, and as the manager of the economy, very largely determines them, or at least the limits within which they are fixed. Political and not profit decisions determine it. And *fourth*, the actual standard of living of most workers has been revolutionised for the better. Several of these trends can be traced back to the period between Marx's death and world war one, but the really dramatic transformation has occurred since 1939.

This has implied a number of changes within the working class, quite apart from the growing division between a manual working class which increasingly tended to vote for its class party and

a white-collar stratum which, at least outside the public sector, was predominantly conservative, until in the last twenty years or so it has also begun to organise itself on trade unionist lines, and—perhaps to a lesser extent—to turn politically leftwards. I shall mention some of them.

Women Workers

First, the organised working class a hundred years ago was almost entirely masculine, as Engels himself noted; except in the textile industry. Insofar as women worked for wages which was primarily before and after marriage, for in 1914 only about 10 per cent of married women were so employed, they were regarded as unskilled and treated as cheap labour. The largest by far—44 per cent in 1881—in any case worked as servants. Even in 1911, when service had already begun to decline as an occupation, there were still a million and a half maids. That was the “Downstairs” of “Upstairs and Downstairs”. Though there was already a remarkable influx of women into industry, and even more into office work and shop work in the quarter-century before 1914, women continued to be, and still continue to be, treated only too often as a sort of second-class worker, and the demand for equal pay did not make any serious headway until after world war two. And though the employment for wages of married women increased a little between the wars—in 1931 13 per cent of all married women were so employed—the practice did not become normal until after world war two. Since 1951 the number of married women technically described as “occupied” has gone up from about one-fifth to about half. This is a major change in the composition of the working class.

Immigration and the Working Class

Geographically, the working class a century ago was, in spite of all migration and mobility, a collection of localised communities. It is still locally rooted to a much greater extent than the middle classes, as anyone can tell as soon as a trade unionist from Birmingham or Gateshead, not to mention Clydebank or Swansea, opens his or her mouth. But, on the whole, such local differences did not run counter to the sense of a single class consciousness, but were part of it. The differences between Lancashire and Yorkshire workers did not prevent—they may even have underlined—their common characteristics as workers. Even the growing differences—especially between the wars—between the old 19th century industrial areas of the North, of Scotland and Wales, and the new industrial areas of the Midlands and the Southeast, did not produce greater division of feeling and attitude. The one exception

to this was nationality (or in the case of the main immigrant group, the Irish, nationality-cum-religion). Here, as Marx himself had realised, there was a force which did deeply split the British working class, at least potentially, as witness the political history of Merseyside. And if the rivalries between the supporters of Sheffield United and Sheffield Wednesday, of Notts. County and Notts. Forest, did not so much divide as underline the basic unity of workers in those cities, we all know that the supporters of Rangers and Celtic, of Liverpool and Everton, of Hearts and Hibs., divided on national religious lines. Still, the striking thing about the British working classes is, how little—I would say how increasingly little—they were affected by such national splits until the 1950s, in spite of the very obvious fact that Scotsmen, Welshmen and Irishmen were proudly conscious of *not* being Englishmen; and the other way round. Unlike, say, the Poles in imperial Germany, the Irish in Britain, if organised at all, joined the all-British unions and supported the all-British party of their class, at all events after Ireland had become independent. Until the labour movement as a whole entered upon its present crisis, there was no significant mass base for nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, and until the mass immigration from the former empire after world war two one would have said that working-class racism was probably less significant in Britain than, say, in France—even allowing for anti-Irish, and from the early 1900s, some localised anti-Jewish feeling. If anything, it looked like being a declining force for three-quarters of a century after 1878. Here is another significant and unwelcome development of the past quarter of a century.

Sectional Differences

But there are other divisions within the working class.

A hundred years ago there were three main sectional differences within the working class: between industries and particular branches, firms or localities in an industry (e.g. Tyneside and the Southwest); between various grades and levels of workers (e.g. "craftsmen" and "labourers"); and between rival groups within the same level or grade, as between different groups of the skilled. As to the first, local and regional differentials were high and probably growing a hundred years ago; but have tended to diminish since 1900, though at times when some regions were relatively prosperous and others very depressed, as between the wars, they could remain very large in practice because of unemployment. In theory the rise of state monopoly capitalism and employment in the public sector has also tended to even them out. In practice things are more complicated. This is not

the place to discuss these problems in greater detail.

Demarcation

As to sectional differences between rival groups of the same level, these have a long history. They caused conflicts chiefly when groups tried to keep a monopoly of particular jobs for themselves against others, either because technical progress undermined their natural monopoly of long training and skill, or because in times of unemployment there was more pressure to fill a limited number of jobs. Thus bitter demarcation disputes in the Northeastern shipyards reached a peak in the 1890s, and this industry and area is still familiar with them. As the old division of labour became technologically obsolescent, such rival or potentially competing groups of specialised workers have often tended to amalgamate—e.g. by the merger of the boilermakers, shipwrights and blacksmiths—but this kind of sectionalism is far from dead. Indeed it has increased inasmuch as modern industrial development cuts across trade sectionalism and makes it possible for different industries or groups of workers to carry out what are essentially the same or alternative processes. Thus in 1878 there could be no overlap between, say, composers and journalists, but with modern technology which enables a journalist to type straight on to the press, there can and is. Containerisation produces potential and actual conflicts between dockers, lorry-drivers and railwaymen which simply did not and could not exist in 1878 or even much later. And so on. Some coalminers would prefer the shutting down of the nuclear power industry, but workers in that industry presumably would not. Hence I would suggest that this type of sectionalism, probably after a period when it tended to decline, has been on the increase since world war two, and this is a dangerous development.

Stratification

The third kind of sectionalism, stratification, was kept largely out of sight a hundred years ago, for two reasons. First, the favoured strata (such as the so-called labour aristocracy) were still rather successful at restricting entry to their trades or keeping themselves in a favoured position by being, on the whole, the only ones with access to effective organisation. In fact, there is little doubt that at that period unionism reinforced exclusiveness. Only in the period of socialist leadership, at first very slowly, but more rapidly from the great labour unrest before world war one, did trade unions come to be factors for evening out rather than for increasing local, trade and grade differentials. Second, a hundred years ago wages and con-

ditions were still largely fixed by custom and convention, and only partly by pure market calculation. The bourgeoisie paid as little as they could, but even when they could afford to, thought there ought to be a ceiling above which workers' wages should never rise, and they could think so because workers thought in terms of "a fair day's pay for a fair day's work", depending on the sort of workers they were. Their limit was a lot lower than the sky. Now neither of these observations is any longer true. The old hierarchies have been undermined by technological change and differentials have been eroded, particularly by the development of complex, not systematically planned, opaque and unpredictable changes in wage-payment, which no longer give an automatic advantage to skill—e.g. payment by results, systematic overtime, and some of the effects of productivity bargaining. And (especially in the great boom period after world war two) the workers learned that the limit of their demands is a lot nearer the sky than most of them ever imagined, and the employers were willing to make concessions they would have regarded as unthinkable earlier. These tendencies can, I think, be traced back to the Edwardian period, for they can be detected in some syndicalist arguments.

A Growth of Sectionalism

Now all this suggests that the old working class stratifications would lose their significance, and—with all the survivals of old divisions and tensions—common working class interests should increasingly prevail. And this probably happened in the first half of this century. But it would be a mistake to think that this has made the working class more homogeneous. On the contrary, it seems to me that we now see a growing division of workers into sections and groups, each pursuing its own economic interests irrespective of the rest. What is new here is that their ability to do so is no longer related to traditional criteria such as their technical qualifications and standing on, as it were, the social ladder. In fact it now often happens not only (as sometimes occurred even 100 years ago) that groups of workers strike, not minding the effect on the rest—e.g. skilled men on labourers—but that the strength of a group lies not in the amount of loss they can cause to the employer, but in the inconvenience they can cause to the public, i.e. to other workers (e.g. by power-blackouts or whatever). This is a natural consequence of a state-monopoly capitalist system in which the basic target of pressure is not the bank-account of private employers but, directly or indirectly, the political will of the government. In the nature of things such sectional forms of struggle not only create potential friction between

groups of workers, but risk weakening the hold of the labour movement as a whole. The sense of class solidarity may be further weakened by the fact that the real income of a family may no longer actually depend on a worker's own job alone, but even more on whether their wives or husbands also work and what sort of jobs they have, or on various other factors not directly determined by the union struggle. In short, though there are plenty of material and moral reasons for solidarity, and a few dramatic recent examples of it—as over the *Industrial Relations Act* in 1970-1 and the miners' strikes—there's not much doubt that sectionalism is on the increase.

The Poor

There is one final division within the working class, which in some ways recalls the divisions of a hundred years ago, though conditions are quite different. It is between those who could take full advantage of the great economic and social improvements of the post-war era and those who couldn't—if you like, those who would, a century ago, have been called "the poor". There are the people in persistently low-paid occupations virtually beyond the range of effective trade unions. There are the quarter of all households which get more than half their household income from social security and earn less than £40 a week; the people who live in private rented accommodation as against those who own houses and rent council housing: in 1975 17 per cent of unskilled workers were private tenants as against 11 per cent of skilled workers: the poor who live worse and pay more. And when we consider these, let us not forget that, by international standards British wages have fallen behind others, and the British social security system, of which we were so proud in the immediate post-war years, has probably fallen even further behind the social security systems of several other European countries. It is the poor who are disproportionately worse off, and whom the established modes of labour organisation help least directly. A hundred years ago the labour movement recommended its forms of struggle and organisation to everybody—trade unions, co-ops, etc. But it was then not *accessible* to everybody, but only to favoured strata of workers. Let us ask ourselves whether there isn't a similar complacency among some sections of the movement today.

Class Consciousness

Now how far does the development of class consciousness of the British working class reflect these trends? Let us take the most elementary index of it, trade unionism. This undoubtedly increased pretty steadily from a century ago, though

we haven't any comparable figures before the 1890s: say from 13 per cent of the labour force in 1900 to 45 per cent just after world war two (1948). But thereafter it remained stagnant for quite a bit, or even dropped a little, and though it grew in the 1960s and 1970s, it is now only a little higher (as a percentage) than in 1948—46 per cent. And—a point we don't often note—it is much lower than in Denmark, Sweden and Belgium, where it is around 70 per cent and actually a little lower than Italy. Now of course the composition of trade unionism has changed—there are a lot more women and white-collar workers—but the point I wish to note regretfully is that 35 per cent of the employed are not in any trade union, and that this percentage has not declined for thirty years. And also, that Britain, the home of mass trade unionism, has clearly fallen behind some other countries.

Declining Vote

If we look at the political expression of class consciousness, which means in practice, support for the Labour Party, the picture is even more troubling. The number and percentage of Labour voters (including Communist ones) grew without interruption (except for 1931) between 1900 and 1951 when it reached a peak of 14 millions or just under 49 per cent of all votes. After that it went down to 44 per cent in 1959 and 1964, rose again to just over 48 per cent in 1966 and then fell again. At the last elections it was well under 40 per cent. What is more, in *absolute* figures Labour (plus Communist) after 1951 barely ever got to within one million of its then vote, and in 1974 it polled about 2½ million less than in 1951, less than in *any* election since 1935. Of course this trend also affected the Conservatives who reached their all-time peak (13½ million) in 1959, but that is no consolation.

There is no equally simple way of measuring the highest degree of class consciousness, namely socialist consciousness, but if we are to take the active membership of all socialist organisations as a very rough criterion—as distinct from trade union activism—then I also suspect that from some time after the early 1950s there is a decline, perhaps broken in the late 1960s. However, a very high proportion of the *new* socialist activists inside and outside the CP and other marxist groups, in this most recent period, have probably been not manual workers, and especially not younger manual workers, but students and white-collar or professional workers. Of course we ought to note that until the 1950s very many, and perhaps most, of these new socialist activists, often from working class and white-collar families, would not have been able to go to colleges.

Marx and Engels

So it seems to me that for the first seventy years or so of the last century, Marx and Engels would have been neither very surprised nor very disappointed by the tendencies of development in the British working class. Not very surprised, because the tendencies were such as they predicted, or might have predicted, on the basis, e.g. of Marx's own analysis of the development of the factory system; though I think they would have been a bit surprised by the speed with which the tertiary sector developed, though perhaps not so much by the formation of a new conservative white-collar labour aristocracy. They would not have been very disappointed by, because they did not expect very much from the British working class beyond what actually looked like happening, the growth of a mass political party based on class consciousness, separate from the parties of the bourgeoisie, and increasingly if vaguely committed to replacing capitalism by socialism. Of course, like you and me, Marx and Engels might well have wanted the British working class to be a bit more revolutionary and, like you and me, they would have been pretty contemptuous of the Labour leadership, but things did look like moving in the right general direction. But in the past thirty years this movement seems to have got stuck, except for one trend: the "new" labour aristocracy of white-collar technical and professional workers has become unionised, and the students and intellectuals—from whom it is largely recruited—have also been radicalised to a greater extent than before.

The Crisis—Not Inevitable

I have already suggested some of the developments in the economic and social structure of the country and its working population which might explain this. But marxists are not economic and social determinists, and it simply won't do to say that this crisis of the working class and the socialist movement was "inevitable", i.e. that nothing could have been done about it. We have already seen that the halt in the forward march began even before the dramatic changes of the past twenty years; that even at the peak of the "affluent society" and the great capitalist boom, in the middle 1960s, there were signs of a real recovery of impetus and dynamism: the resumed growth of trade unions, not to mention the great labour struggles, the sharp rise in the Labour vote in 1966, the radicalisation of students, intellectuals and others in the late 1960s. If we are to explain the stagnation or crisis, we have to look at the Labour Party and the labour movement itself. The workers, and growing strata outside the manual workers, were looking to it for a lead and

a policy. They didn't get it. They got the Wilson years—and many of them lost faith and hope in the mass party of the working people.

Economist Militancy

At the same time the trade union movement became more militant. And yet this was, with the exception of the great struggles of 1970-4, an almost entirely *economist* militancy; and a movement is not necessarily less economist and narrow-minded because it is militant, or even led by the left. The periods of maximum strike activity since 1960—1970-2 and 1974—have been the ones when the percentage of pure wage strikes have been much the highest—over 90 per cent in 1971-2. And, as I have tried to suggest earlier, straight-forward economist trade union consciousness may at times actually set workers against each other rather than establish wider patterns of solidarity.

So my conclusion is that the development of the working class in the past generation has been such as to raise a number of very serious questions about its future and the future of its movement. What makes this all the more tragic is that we are today in a period of world crisis for capitalism, and, more specifically, of the crisis—one might almost say the breakdown—of the British capitalist society; i.e. at a moment when the working class and its movement should be in a position to provide a clear alternative and to lead the British peoples towards it.

Forward March Faltered

We cannot rely on a simple form of historical determinism to restore the forward march of British labour which began to falter thirty years ago. There is no evidence that it will do so automatically. On the other hand, as I have already stressed, there is no reason for automatic pessimism. Men, as Marx said (the German word means men and women), make their history in the circumstances that history has provided for them and within its limits—but it is they who *make* their history. But if the labour and socialist movement is to recover its soul, its dynamism, and its historical initiative, we, as marxists, must do what Marx would certainly have done: to recognise the novel situation in which we find ourselves, to analyse it realistically and concretely, to analyse the reasons, historical and otherwise, for the failures as well as the successes of the labour movement, and to formulate not only what we would want to do, but what can be done. We should have done this even while we were waiting for British capitalism to enter its period of dramatic crisis. We cannot afford not to do it now that it has.

METHUEN



THE RADICAL TRADITION

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RICHARD GOMBIN

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Early Communist Strategy for Britain: An Assessment

Monty Johnstone

(The following is an abridged version of a paper given to the Conference on the History of the Communist Party organised in London on May 20-21 by the Party's History Group.)

The Communist Party of Great Britain was born under the impetus of the great October Revolution and of the revolutionary wave which shook Europe at the end of the first world war and which, in 1919, brought into existence the Third—Communist—International. It was formed out of a fusion of a number of small revolutionary Marxist and semi-Marxist organisations, for whom the October Revolution ushered in a period of world socialist revolution that would bring the establishment of working class political power in Britain. They had been working over the years through thick and thin to win the British workers for such an objective. They now saw this, with an understandable surfeit of optimism, as already on the horizon.

National Convention

The National Convention to establish the Communist Party was summoned in 1920 by a joint provisional committee representing the British Socialist Party, the Communist Unity Group and the South Wales Communist Council. In its circular of invitation it specified three “fundamental bases of Communist unity: (a) The Dictatorship of the working class; (b) The Soviet System; (c) The Third International”. These had already been described by Lenin as the cardinal principles of the international Communist movement. In the call for a Communist Party that accompanied the invitation to the Unity Convention, there was emphasised the need for acceptance as an “essential principle” of the new party of “the Soviet idea as against Parliamentary democracy, i.e. a structure making provision for the participation in social administration only of those who render useful service to the community”.

All the Communist Parties that were formed during this period were similarly influenced by the Soviet form of organisation which had been the basis of the October Revolution as well as spreading to some other European countries and resulting in the establishment of short-lived Soviet republics in Bavaria and Hungary in 1919. Lenin and the Communist International had come to believe that Soviets were the “international form

of the struggle of the proletariat”. Such workers’ councils would be set up in opposition to the existing state apparatus with Parliament at its head in bourgeois democratic countries. They would constitute a form of dual power challenging that state apparatus and ultimately replacing it in a revolution led by the Communist Party. Their establishment as organs of state power would entail “the unification of the legislative and executive authorities” and “the substitution of production units, like the factories and works, for the territorial electoral constituencies”.¹ Until the second world war this remained our Party’s strategic aim. However, the degree of immediacy with which its realisation was posed differed from period to period.

Assessing the Labour Party

Whilst the Unity Convention of 1920 was unanimous in its acceptance of these fundamental principles there were two other issues which were seen at the time as of subsidiary tactical significance, but which, in fact, assumed an importance which gave them strategic status. The first was the question of participation in elections; the second was the problem, that is still with us today, of our relationship with and attitude to the Labour Party. On both these questions the advice of Lenin was of considerable importance in overcoming deep-rooted sectarian views in the young Communist Party, which flowed from the political background of some of the groups that formed the Party.

On elections the Convention decided by 186 votes to 19, as Lenin had recommended, to support parliamentary and electoral action as a valuable means of “propaganda and agitation towards revolution”, whilst regarding what they called the “reformist” view that a socialist revolution could be achieved through parliament as absolutely incorrect. It was a question of using the heightened political awareness at the time of elections the better to popularise the Communist pro-

¹ V. I. Lenin, *Selected Works* (Moscow/London, 1937), Volume 7, p. 232.