A CENTURY of LABOUR
1825—1925

I

THE BEGINNINGS

LABOUR history begins in the eighteenth century, in the public-house. The odds are that, wherever you live, one of the nearest pubs. will be called the Masons' Arms, the Bricklayers' Arms, the Blacksmiths' Arms, the Three Jolly Painters, or some such title. And I have always suspected, though it is incapable of proof, that these names were not unconnected with the early unions. For every "trade club" of the eighteenth century, which can be traced, arose out of the social meeting of craftsmen at the local public-house. Sometimes it was the other way round, the public house gave its name to the union—the Crown Coachmakers, the Globe Coachmakers, the Phœnix Painters, the Running Horse Carpenters, the Marquis of Granby Carpenters, were all London clubs whose names give their origin away. The earliest date from the 1750's; by 1800 there are many of them.

If we had the privilege of being members of these trade clubs, we should probably be able to watch how their functions changed gradually from club to union. First of all, they were festive societies for beer-drinking and initiating apprentices by grotesque initiations, to protect the craft against strangers from other towns, and so in time to be real unions. Early minute books, like the Preston Joiners' or Manchester Plumbers', show traces of this change, where the saloon-bar atmosphere mingles with that of the committee room. "That each member do Pay 2d. per night for Ale," "To Committy Ale and Officers' Liquor, 15s.," "That all Members swearing be fined 1d.," "That James Metcalfe be fined 3d. for swearing, in consideration of the Nature of his oaths"—such entries show clearly enough the festive character of the old unions, while

with them mingle entries of payments to "turnouts" (strikers) which gradually increase and dominate the others.

These unions were not killed by the Combination Acts (1799—1825). They did not even, in most cases, have to work in secret. They had to lie fairly low, it is true, and if they took drastic action, were crushed brutally enough. But while they doddered on quietly they were often let alone. From 1807 to 1816, in the Preston Joiners' minutes, the oldest union record I know, there is an undisturbed record of a humdrum existence.

One of the reasons for this was that then the real strength of the workers was elsewhere. It would have needed a very keen-eyed investigator indeed to spot the forerunners of a great future in the few and bibulous members of the Marquis of Granby Carpenters' Society. The main body of the handicraftsmen, in these days when machines were only beginning to appear, supported, if they did anything, Tom Paine and his *Rights of Man*, and the vigorous agitation of the London Corresponding Society for the principles of the French Revolution. This Society, moreover, took the lead in educating the working class, in order that it might claim its rights. Mr. and Mrs. Horrabin, in their valuable book, tell how "in communication with the London Society were numerous local societies—in Sheffield, Manchester, Bristol, Nottingham, Coventry, Derby, Leicester, Norwich, Birmingham, Leeds, Newcastle, Edinburgh, etc., etc.—partly political groups, partly educational agencies. . . . Everywhere such societies were propagating what in the eyes of the ruling class were 'Jacobinical principles.'"*

But the immature and feeble political organisations of the workers could not yet bear the brunt of the fight, and they were utterly defeated and driven out of existence by Pitt in his famous persecutions. Not until after Waterloo did the Reform movement really revive, and then in a different world. Canals had been built, steam engines and power looms. The Luddites had fought and lost and been forgotten. Green England had given way to black; factories had taken the place of fields.

But still this proletariat, now fully a proletariat in the Marxian sense, followed middle-class leaders. It followed them after the final repeal of the Combination Acts in 1825—a well-known story—right up till the great deception of 1832, the Reform Bill. This famous Reform Bill, after years of fighting and suffering for "the People's Rights," enfranchised only the middle class and excluded the workers. Lord John Russell made it quite clear, moreover, that there would be no more extensions of the franchise, and got the name of "Finality Jack" for his speech.

* *Working-Class Education*, chap. i.

The working-class history of England, from this year 1832 to about 1850, is the history of the reaction and protest against the great deception of the Reform Bill. This protest, as seems to be inevitable in English history, swung from economic action to political in turn. First comes the period of economic action with Owen, and then political action with Chartism. If, indeed, we look over English working-class history as a whole, we find this monotonous alternation as its invariable theme. From the political Painites to the maddened "economic action" of the desperate Luddites; then the political reformers, Hunt and Cobbett; then Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trades Union; then the political Charter, which gives way to Applegarth's new unions with "no politics," which in their turn are shaken and defeated by Keir Hardie and John Burns with their demand for political action for the eight-hour day. From this rises the Labour Party, increasing up to the victory of 1906, until disillusionment at its lack of success follows and from 1911 onwards industrial Syndicalism appears.

Be that as it may, the Builders' Union, the first revolutionary union in this country, was formed in the actual year 1832, but it was not until 1833 that it became prominent. At one time it had 60,000 members. Proportionately to the population that would mean at least 100,000 to-day. Their object was unquestionably a revolution; in the methods that were to be used they accepted the teaching of Robert Owen. Indeed, they accepted it too implicitly. The workers of those days were not merely oppressed; they were puzzled. They desired enlightenment and education which would explain why they were oppressed and the way out, education that would be a weapon in their struggle. "Study to ascertain, we beseech you," ran a resolution addressed by the London Lodges of the Carpenters' Section of the Union, "the cause of our impoverishment and prosecute your inquiries till you have discovered the remedy." Owen, the first Socialist, offered them an explanation which they accepted as a whole. He pointed out that capitalist competition had ruined them, and that the only way out was to take over industry and run it on a co-operative basis. This could be done by overhauling the union machinery—which they did—by setting up a Guild of Producers directed by the Union, and striking against the private capitalist, for eight hours and for control of the job, until he was either forced under or absorbed in the Guild.

The same programme was adopted at the beginning of 1834 by the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, a monster union of all workers, which quickly reached half a million membership. The journals of the movement already began to discuss the system

(not unlike the Soviet system) which was to replace the House of Commons.

But this first attack of the workers was met by a well-arranged and devastating defence. The Government arrested and deported the union's organisers—the famous Dorchester Labourers. The union became entangled in innumerable petty strikes, which drained its funds, while its co-operative workshops were never properly under way. Finally the employers presented, up and down the country, the famous "document"—a renunciation of the union which every employee was required to sign. The struggle lasted through the summer; the Grand National and the other unions collapsed and crumpled up. In January, 1834, people believed and hoped that the union would knock the middle class off its perch. In January, 1835, the union was only a memory.

But this defeat only meant that the workers changed their weapons; they did not abandon the struggle. Scattered over the country were Radical clubs, disgruntled still at the great fraud of 1832, and one of these, the London Workingmen's Association, directed by Lovett the cabinet-maker, was working out the main lines of proposals which would give the workers political control. In 1837, in a petition, they worked out the famous Six Points—universal male suffrage, the ballot, no property qualifications for M.P.s, payment of members, equal electoral districts, and annual elections. These were elaborated into a Parliamentary Bill, which was presented to a great meeting at Newhall Hill in 1838, and received the name of the *Charter*.

It was like a match put to a rocket. The relatively comfortable and respectable associates of Lovett were astounded at the way their proposals shot like fire across the country and the strange, famished figures that appeared from the darkness to support them. In the north-eastern coalfields, in Yorkshire, Nottingham and South Wales the Charter was taken up avidly in the strange dialects of the colliers, who in those days lived apart from the rest of the world—and rather feared by it; in the great industrial belt of Lancashire, Derby and Yorkshire, in Scotland and in the Midlands, the women and men factory workers, who worked long hours for wages of a few shillings a week, without Factory Act protection, saw in it the first glimmer of hope. In Lancashire it brought some light even to 60,000 of the most miserable of human kind, the hand-loom weavers, who were dying out in a dreadful endeavour to compete by hand with the great power looms.

From the babel that arose then no clear message could be drawn. These workers still did not, and could not, select leaders of their own class. In Leicester there was Cooper, a reporter, in Bradford Bussey, a publican, in South Wales Frost, a draper, and nationally

their greatest leader was O'Connor, an Irish landlord. A petition to Parliament to enact the Charter was sent around ; in a few months it had a million and a quarter signatures. A Convention was summoned—this is the year 1839—to present it, and, if it was refused, to concert further measures. Here a division began to show itself, between Lovett's followers, who insisted on " moral force " methods only and agitation by constitutional means, and O'Connor's " physical force " men who believed a revolution by force would be needed.

The honourable and right honourable members of the House of Commons had decided that such a movement could be handled, and that they need not fear. They rejected the petition. Dissensions rent the Convention, which decided to call a Sacred Month—a month's general strike—but, finding it had no organisation, cancelled it, dissolved and faded away. The action that it would not take was taken by a hardier section. A plot—whose dimensions cannot now be known—was arranged for a national insurrection. The Welsh miners of Monmouth were to give the signal by the capture of Newport. The attempt miscarried, and after a short struggle the miners were beaten outside the Westgate Hotel. The Government rounded up the rest of the Chartist heads at its leisure, and gave them short terms in gaol.

In 1840 and 1841, as they came out of gaol again, the movement began to recover. O'Connor organised it properly in the National Charter Association, and he also pushed out respectable, whining Lovett and his friends. In his weekly newspaper, the *Northern Star*, he worked up a sale which not only provided a large income, but was an unrivalled source of propaganda. Again, they turned to a petition, and so marvellous was O'Connor's organisation that he secured 3,300,000 signatures by 1842, an unheard-of number, which I believe still holds the record for any petition in Europe. Once again the Commons rejected it.

O'Connor was saved in his dilemma by the action of the workers in Lancashire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire, who called a general strike for the Charter. They went round from town to town, knocking the plugs out of the boilers so that no one could work if he would. " Not a chimney smoking ; something great must come of this ! " cried the secretary of the National Charter Association as he left Manchester.

But what could come of it ? The strikers and masters faced each other in a starvation struggle, and it was clear who would starve first. The men were unable to follow up their strike by the further step of taking control. So the strike collapsed, and with it the last weapon of the Chartists. The movement was discouraged and disorganised.

Each section went its own way, O'Connor fastening on a worthless smallholders' scheme, until the Irish famine of '45 and the inrush of immigrants stung the people to action again. Chartist agitation revived, big meetings were held once again, and so great was the excitement that O'Connor actually captured Nottingham in the election of '47—by middle-class votes, of course.

But the strength of Chartism was already on the wane when the news of the 1848 revolutions reached London in March. In Paris, Berlin, Vienna, Buda-Pesth and Milan, kings had been overthrown or defeated. Was London alone to remain silent? Chartist passions were artificially fanned into a flame. A new petition was hurriedly sent round; it had six million signatures, said O'Connor; it was to be presented on April 10th; God help the Commons if they refused then! To many on both sides that date meant the date of the Revolution. London was packed with soldiers for the occasion. When O'Connor on the date met his followers on Kennington Common, he saw that any coup, if he had dreamed of it, was useless. He dismissed them, and the petition arrived at Westminster in a cab. Moreover, when it arrived, it was found to have less than two million signatures, including many forgeries, and highly indecorous ones at that.

The Chartist movement was covered with ignominy and ridicule. The groups which started to drill and arm were easily pounced on by the police. The shock of disappointment turned O'Connor's hair white; he wandered night and day, a shambling giant, about the narrow streets off the Strand, picking up fruit or books off the barrows and throwing them down with peals of pointless laughter. Soon his wild manner and senseless behaviour resolved all doubts; he was placed in a private asylum and there ended his days.

With him the Chartist movement passed away, despite the untiring efforts of his lieutenant, Ernest Jones. Its place was taken in due course by a more respectable and steadier movement—the old craft unionism, supplemented by the distributive co-operation whose roots are back in the forties. It did not die because of one ridiculous fiasco in 1848; if ridiculous incidents could kill, no movement would survive. It vanished because its economic roots were injured.

Real palliatives, partly just because of Chartism, were applied to the sufferings of the two main sections of Chartists—miners and factory workers—by the passing, and enforcement by inspectors, of Factory and Mines Acts. The handloom weavers, the third section, as far as can be seen, did in fact die out by starvation, as Professors of Political Economy said they should, which was very pleasing for Professors of Political Economy. Then, after the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, the prices of necessities, particularly food, fell, and so wages rose, though the nominal figure might be

the same. By craft unions and "co-ops" certain skilled workers gained also some security.

All these facts amount to this: British capitalism was sweeping the world. Gold in streams was pouring into the employers' pockets. They could, and did, afford to buy off the workers by financial concessions. Real wages rose: for British workers the words "You have nothing to lose but your chains" became untrue; and for that reason they became conservative.

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