

1. The origins of the Labour Party - myths and reality

by W. Hunter

Histories of the Labour Party can perform a very specific function. They can 'legitimise' woolliness, lack of theory, class-collaboration and opportunism as a natural and beneficial product of British conditions and as being in line with the superiority of British institutions to those of other countries. The argument goes that the British Labour Party arose from advantages unique to Britain, advantages not in the possession of 'lesser breeds without the law'.

Typical is Francis Williams in his Fifty Years' March, published to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of the Labour Party, with a foreword by Clement Attlee, the party leader at that time. Williams describes Fred Rogers, the first chairman of the Labour Representative Committee which in 1908 adopted the name Labour Party. He tells us that Rogers was 'indeed a practical Christian, of a kind which has fortunately been frequent in the British Labour Movement. . . Perhaps no man among them all could better have represented the qualities which have given the British Labour Movement its special character.' He also informs us that: 'Keir Hardie and the delegates to the conference showed their practical wisdom and their understanding of the British political character.' Here is his flowery description of that 'British political character'. It translates into two words - political opportunism.

That character thrives best in a constitutional framework which does not impose upon it the rigidity of a doctrinaire philosophy or even of a narrowly defined practical programme, but leaves instead sufficient freedom for the interpretation of events and needs of common sense application of fundamental philosophies according to the circumstances of the time.

The labour movement in general and the Labour Party in particular are thus peculiarly British. One final quote from Williams: "The Fabian Society gave British Socialism much of its intellectual content more rooted in British reality and natural attitude of mind of British people than Marxism." Here, of course, we are in the presence of one of the most widely spread of myths: that Marxism is something alien to the inimitable development of Britain. Today, it is true, there exist leaders of the Labour Party who will tell us that Marxism has made a 'contribution'. They are even prepared, like Wedgwood Benn, to name Marxism as one of the factors going to make up the Party. Michael Foot himself, has recently been found (Observer, January 10, 1982) to praise not only the contribution of Marx to socialism, but also of Trotsky - while, naturally, declaring himself against any of today's Trotskyists. But this type of acknowledgement of Marxism is grafted on to the doctrine of British exceptionalism - The importance of our movement is our Britishness and the labour movement has developed trying to resolve the problems of our nation.

MARXISM AND METHODISM

Mr Morgan Phillips, when he was General Secretary of the Labour Party, once said that the Labour Party owed more to Methodism than Marxism. Mr G.D.H. Cole in *A Short History of the British Working Class Movement* told us that the Independent Labour Party was the 'soul' of the movement, which brought about the Labour Party while the Fabian Society was its 'brain'. The ILP he described as 'humanitarian radicalism adopting a socialist policy as the means to a more equitable distribution of wealth and happiness'. Francis Williams, Morgan Phillips, G.D.H. Cole, and Wedgwood Benn - who directs us to look at the Bible as being part of the coalition of forces on which the Labour Party is built - this brigade sounds off from right to left about the practical Christianity, Fabian evolutionism or woolly ILP radicalism combining to form the Labour Party. We have to admit that, in one sense, they are absolutely correct. It is these ideas plus much more of what, from the point of view of socialism, can only be called backwardness, which have formed the official ideology, the ideology of Labour Party leaders. In *Where is Britain Going*, Trotsky summed them all up:

“The outlook of the leaders of the British Labour Party is a sort of amalgam of Conservatism and Liberalism, partly adapted to the requirements of the trade unions, or rather their top layers. All of them are ridden with the religion of 'gradualness'. In addition they acknowledge the religion of the Old and New Testaments. They all consider themselves to be highly civilised people, yet they believe that the Heavenly Father created mankind, only then, in his abundant love to curse it, and subsequently to try, through the crucifixion of his own son to straighten out this highly knotty affair a little. Out of the spirit of Christianity there have grown such national institutions as the trade union bureaucracy, MacDonald's first ministry and Mrs Snowden. “

When they told us that this 'coalition of forces' was the strength of the Labour Party as an instrument for socialism they were talking absolute and anti-working class nonsense. In fact, they were saying that opportunism is the prime strength of the British movement and thus giving to themselves the right to continue as opportunists. The real history of the Labour Party and the lessons from it are vital for workers today. For we with our fathers and grandfathers have paid a price for the Christian Socialism, woolly pacifism, wordy radicalism and Fabian reformism which came into the Labour Party from the capitalist class, and dominated it. History as told, has been stood on its head. In reality, it is not Marxism that came into the labour movement out of line with the development of the major historical force in Britain - the working class. Those who uphold Britishism as against Marxism cover the truth - that Marx and Engels and the group around Engels in the 1880s and 1890s, played a central role in the breaking of the working class from the capitalist parties, Those who fought consciously for an independent working class political movement in the latter half of the nineteenth century were Marx and Engels and the men and women influenced by them. The Marxists represented the essence of the movement of the British workers; it was the opportunists, the various brands of bourgeois radicals who grafted themselves on to it.

No historian who does not study the development of Marxism as a theory and as a movement in the 19th century can understand the development of the British working class or indeed that of the world working class. We are saying here not only that Marxism provides a method of analysing developments; but that Marxism, in this period developed its basic principles in close association with the working class movement and through practical intervention in it.

r To look at the last half of the 19th century in particular, and fail to see it, so to speak through the eyes of Marx and Engels, is to see only an inexplicable collection of events. It is incontrovertible that only Marx and Engels foretold the major developments in the working class and only Marx and Engels prepared for them. Their strength was that they saw the decline of capitalism inside its greatest expansion. They saw the centralisation and concentration of capital in the middle of the greatest apparent strength of Free Trade, competition and laissez faire. And, above all, after the collapse of Chartism they envisaged and fought for the rise of working class political independence. They represented 'the future in the present'. This came out of their understanding of the fundamentals of capitalism and of the laws of history. And any explanation of the development of the working class in this period has validity in proportion to what it owes to Marx and Engels

TRADITION OF CHARTISM

It was on February 27, 1900 that a conference in the Memorial Hall, Farringdon St., London) set up the Labour Representative Committee. This step towards a mass party of the British working class was taken 60 years after this class set up its first mass party - the National Charter Association. Not that the traditions of Chartism were raised at the conference, and certainly most of those present would know very little about them. National Charter Association and Labour Party were formed under decidedly different circumstances. The first came into being when British capitalism was in its youth. When the latter was formed, capitalism had begun its decline as a system. In that 60 years capitalism and working class consciousness had gone through great changes.

Chartism was the widespread movement of a working class which was being brutally forged by the rapid growth of capitalist manufacture. When Chartism took on the character of an independent working class movement in the 1830s, the working class had already been through three decades of spontaneous outbursts and brutal isolated struggles, including an agricultural revolt. It had passed through the bitter experience of betrayal by bourgeois reformers. The industrial capitalists had united with the working class in a campaign for an extension of parliamentary suffrage. But when they achieved the Reform Act of 1832 which extended the vote among property owners, they deserted their former allies. They used their new parliamentary strength to bring into being a Poor Law which set up the hated workhouses, which the poor called Bastilles, and legislated the persecution of the poor that was to drive ruined artisans and the agricultural dispossessed, into the factories. "The demands of the Charter" wrote Engels in Condition of the Working Class in England in "harmless as they seem are sufficient to overthrow the whole English Constitution, Queen and

Lards included”

In form the Chartist movement was a movement for political reform; in reality it was a class movement against the capitalist order.. Chartism collapsed at the end of the 1840s. Its last big rally was in 1848 on London's Kennington Common. It was the year of European revolutions. The Chartists were in sympathy with the struggle against absolutism in other countries. When the Kennington rally took place the Duke of Wellington, instructed by the Cabinet, prepared as if for a revolutionary uprising in London. Among other measures, no less than 170,000 special constables were enrolled. After the demonstration, hundreds of Chartists were arrested, imprisoned and transported. But it was the development of British capitalism which undermined Chartism. From the end of the 1840s to the depression of the middle of the 1870s was the 'Golden Age' of British capitalism. Its products moved freely throughout the world unequalled by those of any other nation. Engels wrote at that time that British capitalism was like an 'industrial sun' with all other countries as markets for her manufactured goods, supplying her in return with raw materials and food and revolving round her. At this time the British bourgeoisie were moving into complete political as well as economic dominance in Britain itself. Their representatives and the state began that long experience of using sections of the working class or their leaders in order to rule.

The organisations of the working class completely changed their nature from those of Chartist times. The old volatile organisations of struggle had gone. They had been intensely political then.. In their place came the 'New Model Unions' embracing a minority of workers. They were organised to protect the skilled workers through the control of the supply of labour and with a major purpose, the payment of benefits. They protected their trade with apprenticeship regulations, entrance requirements and high contributions. They were prepared to strike but the strike was solely a weapon of bargaining. Their motto was 'Defence not Defiance'. The leaders of these organisations had not the least desire to return to the type of struggles of the Chartist period. On the contrary, they were repelled by them, and many of them were thoroughly imbued with the ideas of expanding capitalism, that a man could rise with 'self help'. They sought political assistance to their organisations through an alliance with representatives of the ruling class, in particular the Liberals, although in the 1860s they were compelled because of legal chains on unions to go into political struggle for the vote.

RECURRING CRISES

Bourgeois economists saw the capitalist expansion as unlimited, and bourgeois leaders expressed overweening confidence in the capitalist system. Marx and Engels foresaw not only the recurring crises of overproduction but also the decay of the system itself, its gravediggers being the proletariat which must inevitably exert its independence. Great economic developments eventually forced forward independent politics among the working class. But it is not just a question of the prescience of Marx and Engels. They had based their practical activity on this and intervened to assist it. Marxism was thus part of that movement that brought that conference in

1900,.

All through the decades following the end of Chartism Marx and Engels worked to encourage any movement of workers to political independence from the capitalist parties. During the 'Golden Age' of British capitalism they knew very well the problems of developing the British working class, which was part of a nation 'which exploits the whole world'. In October 1858, Engels had written to Marx declaring 'the English proletariat is becoming more and more bourgeois'. But the conclusion that the two socialist fighters drew from this, was not to write off this class. Their scientific opinion was that certain historical processes would have to be gone through before the inevitable rise of the class would take place in new forms. In this letter to Marx, Engels wrote:

One is really driven to believe that the English proletarian movement in its old traditional Chartist form, must perish completely before it can develop itself in a new form capable of life. And yet one cannot foresee what this new form will look like.

That there would be a new proletarian movement was not an issue for Engels, despite the working class becoming 'more and more bourgeois'. The only question was: what form would the new movement take? He and Marx in preparation for that movement. From 1864 till 1871 - the time of the Paris Commune - they collaborated with leaders of the British trade unions on the General Council of the International Workingmen's Association (the First International) and sought to influence any step toward class independence.

This was not a case of Marx just discussing occasionally with a coterie of trade union leaders, in isolation. The General Council of the First International had very real links with the mass of workers in Europe. Its minutes are full of discussions of assistance to workers struggling in Britain and other countries.. At a period when British employers frequently attempted to use foreign workers as strike breakers, the General Council had continuous appeals from groups of British workers .3

The Council was linked with trade union branches and the London Trades Council. During this latter half of the 1860s it was a 'mighty engine' as Marx called it, with its roots in the British labour movement.. Even the conservative union leaders were being compelled to demand legal rights for their organisations. The demand for Parliamentary reform began to take hold again. For these new trade unionists, however, it had not the same content as the demands had for the Chartists - a change of social system.

But it was a move to independent working class action and Marx and Engels were there in the centre of it. The National Reform League, which had been formed by Chartist Bronterre O'Brien, in 1849 affiliated to the International Workingmen's Association, and brought in a number of working class leaders who were socialists.

Marx played the major part in levering into action the campaign of agitation and massive working class demonstrations that resulted in an extension of the franchise in 1867. The Reform Act gave the vote to the majority of working class males in the towns.

THE FIRST INTERNATIONAL

Demonstrations had taken place all over the country. Big meetings were held in Trafalgar Square and on July 25 a huge demonstration in Hyde Park. The park gates were closed by order of the Cabinet and meetings there declared illegal. Thousands of demonstrators stormed the park from Bayswater Road. Despite the presence of great numbers of police and troops they tore up a hundred yards of railings up to Marble Arch. The police attacked and the demonstrators proceeded to tear up railings all the way to Hyde Park Corner. 'Here (in London)' wrote Marx to Engels, 'the government has nearly produced a rising.' Three weeks before he had told Engels.

“The workers' demonstrations in London, which are marvellous compared with anything we have seen in England since 1849, are purely the work of the 'International'. Mr Lucraft, for instance, the leader of Trafalgar Square, is one of our Council. This shows the difference between working behind the scenes and disappearing in public and the Democrats' way of making oneself important in public and doing nothing. {The emphasis is that of Marx.

Marx refers again in another letter--to Kugelmann - about his keeping 'behind the scenes'. He was not imposing dogmas on the labour movement but working through the reality of its own contradictions to set going independent class action. The movement fell back in the 1870s. The trade union went to their limits, safeguarding their organisations. They achieved a greater degree of legal protection in the early 1870s. They were repelled by the Paris Commune. After the Reform Act of 1867, the Reform League faded.

The next movement to independent politics was at the end of the century, and it was this that produced the Labour Party. It is significant that a part in preparing that movement was played by the campaign for the legal eight hour day, the very demand which Marx and Engels saw in the middle of the century, as central to the development of the working class!

The demand for the legal eight hour day was a demand of the international working class. The chapter on 'The Working Day' in Volume 1 of Marx's Capital (which was published in 1867) brings out the importance of this demand. A reading of this chapter will show how it was rooted historically in the consciousness of Britain's oppressed. Marx relates that from the fourteenth century, that is from around the time of the Black Death, until well into the middle of the eighteenth century, the Labour Statutes in England were designed to increase the working day compulsorily..

“The establishment of a normal working day is the outcome of centuries of struggle between capitalist and workers. Centuries must pass ere the 'free' worker under stress of the developed method of capitalist production voluntarily agrees (i.e. is compelled by social conditions) to sell the whole of his active life, his very capacity for labour, his birthright for a mess of pottage.”

\He ends the chapter on the working day ,by declaring:

For protection against the worm gnawing at their vitals, the workers must put their heads together, and must as a class compel the passing of a law, the erection of an all powerful social barrier, which will compel the workers themselves from entering into a free contract with capital when by the terms of that contract they and their race are condemned to death or sold into slavery. In place of the pompous catalogue of the 'inalienable rights of man', they put forward the modest Magna Carta of a legally limited working day - a charter which shall at length make it clear when the time 'which the worker sells is ended, and when his own begins'. What a change in the picture!

Hours of work, particularly among the mass of unorganised and unskilled workers, remained a burning issue throughout the century. Dona Torr in Tom Mann and his Times

described hours worked in the mid- 1880s when Tom Mann, a follower of Marx and Engels, wrote his popular pamphlet on 'What a Compulsory Eight Hour Working Day means to the Workers'.

“The majority of skilled men had gained the sixty-hour week by 1860 and the fifty-four hour week by the early 'seventies (though it was not always retained), but the working day for tramwaymen was sixteen hours or more, for railwaymen from sixteen to twenty hours; bakers, chemical workers and gas-stokers worked twelve hour shifts and sometimes more. Among unionists Scottish miners still worked twelve hours; in other mining districts all but the privileged aristocracy, the hewers (whose representatives in Parliament voted against the Miners' Eight Hour Bill in 1888) worked anything up to eleven hours. Shop assistants under eighteen were granted a seventy-four hour week by the Shop Hours Regulation Act of 1887, which, for lack of inspectors, was never operated. The unpaid overtime of clerical workers, the limitless hours in the sweated home industries (clothing, furnishing, etc) will never be computed.

Marx calls the agitation for an eight hour day, the 'first fruit of the Civil War' in America. He describes it as 'a movement which ran with express speed from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from New England to California.'. At the same time the Geneva Congress of the First International had called for the eight hour day, and said that without it, 'all further attempts at improvement or emancipation must prove abortive'.

In the 1870s, an old member of the First International and personal friend of Karl Marx - Adam Weiler - continually raised the question at the Trades Union Congress (which came together first in 1868). In 1878 he read a paper to the Bristol Congress advocating legislation to limit the hours of labour. A vote in favour was carried in 1883 but no action followed.

This fight for the eight hour day was an intensely political fight against all the conservatism and sectionalism, all the bourgeois ideology in the trade unions. The compulsory eight hour day was a question which posed the uniting of the whole of

the class as a political force against the ruling class. As such it was hotly and stubbornly resisted by the leaders of the trade unions. They refused to make the hoursof work a political issue. They and their supporters among the skilled rank and file argued that the issue should be settled by sectional strength and bargaining. The mass of workers who were unorganised and not able to bargain with their skill, did not concern them. They would use the Liberal arguments about free relationships between workers and employers without interference.

EPOCH OF IMPERIALISM

But just as great economic forces were at work in the 1840s which broke up Chartism, so the whole economic base of the 'New Model' unionism was being undermined. The monopoly of British capitalism was breaking up and the 'new forces' which Marx and Engels foretold began to emerge. Capitalism developed in Europe and America. Free competition was giving way to monopoly; free trade and laissez faire to state assistance and to imperialism. The great overproduction crisis of the seventies spurred forward the epoch of imperialism. Capitalist rulers in a number of countries began dividing up the world for raw materials, areas of investment, and spheres of influence.

To be sure Britain developed for another few decades as the fore\most imperialist nation. By the end of the century it had annexed a third of the world. But it was a system in decline, protecting itself against the very productive forces it was its historical task to intro\duce. The force which capitalism created, the working class, began to move again towards its independence.

Writing in February 1885 an article entitled 'England in 1845 and 1885', Engels had this to say:

The truth is this: during the period of England's industrial monopoly the English working class have to a certain extent shared in the benefits of the monopoly. These benefits were very unequally parcelled out among them; the privileged minority pocketed most. But even the great mass had a temporary share now and then. And that is the reason why since the dying out of Owenism there has been no Socialism in England. With the breakdown of that monopoly the English working class will lose that privileged position; it will find itself generally - the privileged and leading minority not excepted - on a level with its fellow workers abroad. And that is the reason why there will be Socialjsm again in England.

It was the most exploited sections that headed the new awakening of the British working class. Their movement began in the East End of London and spread rapidly throughout the country. In 1888 six hundred match girls at Bryant and Mays struck against intolerable conditions and with widespread support won concessions after a fortnight's strike. In 1889, 800 gasworkers in East Ham formed a union with a single aim of demanding an eight hour day. Within a fortnight, there were 3,000 members. By June it had been registered as The National Union of Gas Workers and General Labourers of Great Britain and Ireland. (It became the main body forming the

General and Municipal Workers Union.) By the end of July it had 20,000 members and it had begun to spread throughout the country. In the next year it reached 100,000. Will Thorne, a member of the SDF, and who was taught to read and write by Eleanor Marx, became General Secretary. Eleanor Marx, who helped to form the union was unanimously elected to its Executive at its first conference..

In August 1889, dock labourers in South-West India docks went on strike for sixpence an hour, the abolition of sub-contract and piece work, extra pay for, and a minimum engagement of four hours. So began the famous strike for the dockers' tanner. Within three days, ten thousand dockers were out, supported by the Stevedores Union.. In a week practically all the riverside workers had joined the strike. By this time the 30,000 dockers on strike comprised less than half of the men out. Massive demonstrations and rallies were held during the strike. It had widespread support among the working class. In total £330,000 was remitted by telegraph to the Strike Committee from Australia. The Chartists who had been transported or who had emigrated there were taking their revenge.

Two members of the SDF – John Burns and Tom Mann, opposed to the sectarianism of Hyndman and other leaders - were prominent leaders of the strike. Eleanor Marx assisted the committee in organising the relief of the strikers, and was a speaker at the mass meetings. On Sunday September 1 she spoke to a meeting of 100,000 in Hyde Park. On the advice of Engels, she and her husband - Edward Aveling - had for some time been working in the working men's Radical Club in the East End. She and Aveling had drafted its constitution.

Inside this new mass ferment of the British working class was Marxist yeast. We are underlining that Marxism is not alien to the British working class but was an indispensable part of every movement to class independence. Engels was filled with boundless enthusiasm for events in Britain. In the same year as the formation of the Gasworkers union and the great dockers strike - 1899 -- the foundation congress of the Second International took place. It decided to call an international May Day demonstration around the demand, which had been stressed by Marx and Engels - the eight hour day

In London on May 4, 1890 there was a march of 100,000 to Hyde Park in support of the eight hour day in accordance with the International's resolution. The whole demonstration was a triumph of the new union movement and of a movement to politics over the old craft unions represented by the London Trades Council who supported the eight hour day demand, only if it was gained by "free agreement" and not by legislation.

Engels underlined the historic meaning of the May Day demonstration as the English proletariat again entering the movement of its class. He saw the 'long winter's sleep' of the British working class as being ended at last. In 'The Fourth of May in London' published in the Vienna Arbeiterzeitung, he wrote:

“And I consider this the grandest and most important part of the whole May Day festival, that on 4th of May 1890, the English proletariat, newly awakened from its forty years winter sleep, again entered the movement of its class”.

It was a class movement which naturally linked with the international movement that he and Marx had fought for. He wrote of the 'new unionists' that,

“ while they are not yet socialists to a man, they insist nevertheless on being led only by socialists. But socialist propaganda had already been going on for years in the East End, where it was above all Mrs E. Marx Aveling and her husband, Edward Aveling, who had four years earlier discovered the best propaganda field in the "Radical Clubs" consisting almost exclusively of workers, and had worked upon them steadily and, as is evident now, with the best of success. During the dock workers' strike Mrs Aveling was one of three women in charge of the distribution of relief, and this earned them a slanderous statement from Mr. Hyndman, the runaway of Trafalgar Square, who alleged that they had had a weekly three pounds sterling paid to them from the strike fund.'

We shall return to Mr Hyndman when we deal with the role of radicalism in the formation of the Labour Party. Out of the ferment of this time a mass party was posed. At the end of 1892 a 'unity' conference was held at Bradford. Out of this came the Independent Labour Party. But before we deal with this conference we must discuss the Fabian Society and the Social Democratic Federation.

To be continued

REFERENCES

- 1 The Charter demands were: Universal manhood suffrage; annual parliaments; vote by ballot; payment of MPs and equal electoral districts.
- 2 The International Workingmen's Association was formed from a meeting of London trade unionists called in support of workers in Poland.
- 3 As one example - Minutes of General Council meeting of October 9, 1866 record a deputation from the 'Hairdressers' Early Closing Association'. They read: 'The deputation stated that their trade was engaged in struggle for early closing on Saturday afternoons. Several middle sized employers were bringing over men from Paris to fill the places of those men who had been called out of the recalcitrant shops. The deputation prayed the Council use its influence at Paris to frustrate the evil designs of these masters. Carter, Marx and Lawrence spoke in response, pleading the Council to use its best efforts in the direction mentioned.' The Documents of the First International Vol II
- 4 'Between the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1825 and the trade union legislation of 1871-5 the existence of trade unions had been allowed, but practically everything they did could be declared illegal under the laws covering conspiracy, contracts etc., and as the unions became more powerful these old laws were increasingly used against them.' Tom Mann and his Times Donator.
- 5 The power of the International is shown in that at one time Cobden (the leader, with Bright, of the radical wing of the industrial bourgeoisie) approached the General Council to bring the working class behind them in a campaign for universal suffrage.

They have 'arrived at the realisation that they are incapable of setting the ball a-rolling' wrote Marx to Engels. In this letter dated February 1st 1885, he outlines the tactics worked out by himself and agreed by the General Council.

6 The picture of the terrible, brutalising and physically destroying hours that were worked at this time is best brought out by the example that Marx gives of an errand drivers hours. The extract assumes added importance as showing the roots of engine drivers stubbornness in protecting their hours today. Marx quotes Reynolds Newspaper for January 1866. 'Week after week', he writes, 'in this same paper under the sensational headings of 'fearful and fatal accidents', 'appalling tragedies', etc., we read a long list of fresh railway catastrophes. Concerning these a railwayman working on the North Staffordshire line com-

ments: "Everyone knows the consequences that may occur if the driver and firemen of a locomotive engine are not continually on the look-out. How can that be expected from a man who has been at such work for 29 or 30 hours, exposed to the weather and without rest." ' He then gives a week's shifts starting at various times and which amounted to 88 hours and 40 minutes.

? In his chapter on the working day he quotes the resolution carried at the general convention of the National Labour Union held at Baltimore on August 16, 1868. 'The first and great necessity of the present, to free the labour of this country from capitalistic slavery, is the passing of a law by which 8 hours shall be the normal working day in all states of the American Union.'

B The proposal which was carried was put to the Congress by the General Council and declared that 'a limitation of the working day is a preliminary condition without which all further attempts at improvement or emancipation must prove abortive... The Congress proposes eight hours as the legal limit of the working day'.

She was secretary of the Silvertown Women's branch which she formed out of the Silvertown rubber workers strike which she led. At the Gasworkers conference she was elected unanimously by acclaim, to the Executive Committee and as a delegate to the TUC. The old TUC leaders would not allow her to sit as a delegate as she was not a 'bona-fide worker'. Thorne, who in later life became a right wing Labour leader declared that had she lived, 'Eleanor ... would have been a greater woman's leader than the greatest of contemporary women'. (Quoted in Eleanor Marx by Yvonne Kapp.)

10 The American workers had inaugurated May Day to demand eight hours of work in 1886.

~Marx and Engels on Britain.

12 Thorne made the point: 'It was this spirit of the "New Unionism" that made international working class solidarity a reality, and strange to say the historians hardly notice the revolution we created.' Quoted in Eleanor Marx by Yvonne Kapp.

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The Rise and Fall of the Labour Party (2)

The bourgeois radicals

Bill Hunter

Engels wrote to Bebel in January 1884 commenting that, 'since 1870, American and German competition have been putting an end to British monopoly on the world market'. He continued: 'Now we seem, both here and in America, to be standing on the verge of a new crisis which in England has not been preceded by a period of prosperity.' This was the secret of the sudden emergence of a socialist movement in Britain, he told Bebel.

So far the organised workers - trade unions - remain quite remote from it, the movement is proceeding among 'educated' elements sprang from it, the bourgeoisie, who here and there come into contact with the masses and in places find it. These people are of varying moral and intellectual value, and it will take some time until they sort themselves out and the thing becomes clarified. But that it will all go to sleep again is hardly likely.

Engels was referring to the Democratic Federation - which became the Social Democratic Federation in 1884 - and the individuals who formed the Fabian Society in that year. It will be noted that his opinion was qualified and his caution about this 'socialist movement' is in contrast to the great enthusiasm with which he greeted the workers' movement at the end of the decade. Both these developments came out of the decline of capitalism. However, while the 'New Unionism' came out of the working class, the Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society came out of bourgeois radicalism.

What were the historical conditions which gave strength to this bourgeois radicalism? At the end of 1688 King James II fled the country after attempting to return to the divine right of kings and the old regime of Charles I. The ruling landed families of England brought in William of Orange to occupy the throne. The 'Glorious Revolution' showed capitalist relations firmly established in the foundations of economic life. But the manufacturing capitalists, set to inherit the fruits of the destruction of feudalism, did not inherit political domination. Even as industrial expansion surged forward, the big landowning families continued to run the government. In his 1892 special introduction to the English edition of *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, Engels wrote:

The political spoils of 'pelf and place' were left to the great landowning families, provided the economic interests of the financial, manufacturing and commercial middle class were sufficiently attended to. And these economic interests were at that time powerful enough to determine the general policy of the nation. There might be squabbles about matters of detail, but, on the whole, the aristocratic oligarchy knew

too well that its own economic prosperity was irretrievably bound up with that of the industrial and commercial middle class.

Since the suppression of the Levellers, who were the left wing of the revolution of 1640-49, compromise among the exploiting classes - even the acceptance of the Stuart restoration - was cemented by a common fear of the lower orders. But in its 'squabbles' with the aristocratic oligarchy, the growing bourgeoisie was not above, at times, using the 'mob' although it was a use within limits, with the bourgeoisie casting a nervous eye over its shoulder.

In 1832, when the bourgeoisie won electoral reform, which gave the vote to them as owners of property, there was still widespread corruption and bribery surrounding Parliamentary affairs, and widely unequal electoral districts continued. There had developed among the artisans and small producers a radical and dissenting tradition. For much of the nineteenth century, the radical movement was quite large, particularly in London and Birmingham, a town of small manufacturers. This was the basis of that wing of the Chartist movement that supported 'moral force', while the majority wing of the movement, the 'physical forecists', were supported by the mass of the working class. After bringing Britain to the brink of revolution, Chartism declined after its last great demonstration in 1848. Until the end of the century, the radical wing of the Liberal Party helped to hold sections of the working class to the bourgeoisie, encouraging Lib-labourism among many of the 'New Union' leaders, who organised around 10% of workers.

Radical philosophy based on individual rights and freedom for a brief period had a flowering during British capitalism's 'Golden Age'. Free trade meant a pacific foreign policy when capitalist interests could be ensured in the world by Britain's economic dominance. There were reforms at home based on super profits abroad. The growth of imperialism broke up the old foreign policy. No British government driven by British capitalist interests could carry on a pacific foreign policy as Britain lost its world monopoly towards the end of the century. The centralisation and concentration of capital in the epoch of imperialism, broke up the soil of bourgeois radicalism and its free-trade and *laissez faire* policies. The evolution of working class parties on the Continent made all the more plain to the bourgeoisie the danger of spreading radical demands among the masses.

There was no longer the same division as in the past between British capitalist and landowning aristocrat. Big manufacturers were leaving the Liberal Party. Joseph Chamberlain and the Liberal Imperialists eventually split off, and the most powerful sections of the ruling class united around the Tory Party.

The last burst of life of the old foreign policy in the Liberal Party was in opposition to the Boer War. After that, bourgeois pacifism (which teaches that wars are the result of mistakes of foreign policy and not of capitalist relations) found its home in the Labour Party. By this time the depression of the 1880s brought out sharply the fundamental and irreversible changes in British capitalism. Radicalism in the Liberal Party began to lose its means of holding the working class. The suffering of the workers could less easily be ascribed to the lack of electoral rights, and a further extension of the franchise, free trade, and Popular Education were still the only social

and economic panaceas that the Liberal Party had to offer. Its ideology had become a radicalism of empty words. In face of a movement of workers driven to organise themselves, it was radical *phraseology* - demagoguery. It conjured up one side of the past struggle for rights, posing all-class movements working through Parliamentary institutions. While the working class was gathering together experiences that would explode in independent class action.

It was at this time, that there came into the labour movement a section of upper and middle class radical patronisers of workers. Some of them formed the Fabian society, which brought into the Labour movement a faith in Anglo-Saxon 'civilisation' and the 'inevitability of gradualness'¹. Others formed the Democratic Federation which later became the Social Democratic Federation. The latter was formed by N.M. Hyndman and his friends, who were dogmatic 'Marxists', and sworn enemies of Engels. The Fabians openly agreed with the Liberal imperialists. One historian writes:

For the past fifteen years [before 1900 - B.H.] the Fabian group had preached a Socialism from which the romantic dreams of a revolutionary Utopia were rigorously excluded. Its two leaders, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, were in close relations with a group of Liberal Imperialists ... Early in 1900 the faithful ally of the Webbs, the dramatist, Bernard Shaw, heralded their imperialist propaganda by a speech in which he declared war on the doctrine that small nations had the right to determine their own government. His Socialism repudiated such national individualism . . . 'The world is to the big and powerful states by necessity: and the little ones must come within their borders or be crushed out of existence.

The Fabian Society were contemptuous of the working class and developed an organisation openly hostile to Marxism. They consciously restricted their society to a middle class membership. They sought to help forward the inevitable, gradual evolution of society by permeating its institutions with 'socialist' ideas. They were opposed to the 'inefficiencies' of capitalism.

They repudiated the labour theory of value and based themselves on the marginal utility theory of the non-classical bourgeois economists whom Marx flayed in *Capital*. Thus they were naturally opposed to class struggle and were, until the formation of the Labour Party (when they decided to 'permeate' it) opposed to the formation of an independent party of the working class. They played no part in fighting for it.

Hyndman and the leaders of the SDF were dogmatic propagandists. They dismissed and denounced the trade unions. It was despite them that members of the SDF intervened in the upsurge of the working class at the end of the eighties. The dock strike of 1889 was boycotted by the SDF, and SDF members on the strike committee - Tom Mann, Thorne and Burns - were attacked by Hyndman because the Red Flag was not carried in front of demonstrations. Interviewed by the *Daily Chronicle* (July 1, 1893) Engels said:

The English Social Democratic Federation is, and acts, only like a small sect. It is an exclusive body. It has not understood how to take the lead of the working class

generally, and to direct it towards socialism. It has turned into an orthodoxy. Thus it insisted upon John Burns unfurling the red flag at the dock strike, and, instead of gaining over the dockers, would have driven them back into the arms of the capitalists. We don't do this. Yet our programme is a purely socialist one. Our first plank is the socialisation of all the means and instruments of production.

Hyndman was also an English chauvinist who, as Eleanor Marx said, tried to set English workers against all 'foreigners'. In the decade before the First World War he launched a campaign for a bigger British navy to prepare for the conflict with German capitalism. The majority of the SDF did not support him and during the war he and his group split off to form the National Socialist Party in 1916. These 'educated elements from the bourgeoisie' had a deep contempt for the working class. As for Hyndman, he agreed with an opinion expressed to him by Clemenceau, the French bourgeois statesman - that the English working class 'were incapable of any high ideals for their own class'. He denounced workers as 'idiots'ⁱⁱ. The middle and upper class founders of the Social Democratic Federation grafted Marxism on to a fundamental radicalism.

Sectarianism and opportunism are closely interconnected.. they are two sides of the same coin. The sectarian Hyndman, in the election of 1885 had opportunistically accepted money from the Tories to put up SDF candidates. And, at the end of the decade, while denouncing work in the unions he united with the conservative leaders of the 'old' unions and with reformists to oppose the emergence of a mass independent movement of the working class under Marxist leadership.

The development of the British working class was closely linked to that of the International. The First International was a real factor in the life of British workers' organisations, and the natural movement of the new upsurge in the 1880s was toward international links. It actually showed itself first in the 'old' unions. Despite the resistance of the Parliamentary Committee (the precursor of the General Council) the Trades Union Congress sent delegates to international Congresses in 1883 and 1886. A Congress of 1866 instructed the Parliamentary Committee to summon an international congress in London for the following year. The Parliamentary Committee sabotaged this, but in 1887 they were instructed to proceed with a Congress and could only attempt to place on restrictions intended to exclude delegates from the German Social Democratic Party.

The International Congress was finally held in London in 1888. The Webb's report - in their *History of Trade Unionism* represents the view of the leaders and says: "Notwithstanding every precaution, a majority of representatives proved to be of socialist views".

The activities of Hyndman and the SDF were a scandal. Engels was seeking to bring British workers into the International and, in particular, into an alliance with the mass parties of French and German workers. This would have greatly assisted the development of the British working class. It was this that Hyndman fought, and fought viciously. He conducted a campaign to disrupt and sabotage these connections. First, he sought to undermine the influence of Engels and the group around him. *Justice* which was Hyndman's paper and his personal property, continually referred to

Engels as the 'Great Lama of Regents Park Rd' (Engels lived in Regents Park Rd) and to his group as a 'family clique'.

Engels was denounced as a man, whose personal influence was more baneful than his literary work had been useful to the Socialist movement.

He has been head of the Marxist clique - far more Marxist than Marx himself - which has never ceased to intrigue and work against and vilify any Social Democratic organisation not under its direct control.' (*Justice* February 1891)

Preparations for the international congress of 1891, to which Will Thorne and Eleanor Marx were elected unanimously by the Gasworkers Union Conference as delegates, were attacked as the manoeuvres of the 'Marxist clique'.

In 1889, Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation intrigued with the 'old' British trade union leaders and reformists (Possibilists) in France to refuse to attend the International Congress, called by Marxist leaders of the French Workers Party. It was this Congress that set up the Second International.

The SDF continued its alliance with the opportunist leaders of the unions in an attempt to prevent the May Day celebration in 1890 - decided on by the Second International Congress. In Engels' article 'May 4 in London' there is a full account of the struggle over this May Day. There were two demonstrations that day but the one which was brought about by Engels and his group was by far the largest and better organised with the four largest branches of the SDF joining in it, despite their leaders. Engels hailed it as the first international action of the working class.

Next year the demonstration was a united one. A Demonstration Committee had been formed by the 'Legal Eight Hours and International Labour League' and the London Trades Council. The Legal Eight Hours and International Labour League had been set up at a conference in July 1890. The conference was called by the May Day Committee which had organised the demonstration that year supporting the International Congress resolution.

Aveling was elected chairman of the League and the programme adopted was: 1) the legal enforcement of the Paris Congress decisions on the eight hour day; 2) acceptance of measures to be worked out by the society for the full emancipation of the workers; 3) the organisation of an independent Labour Party with its own candidates at elections wherever there was a chance of success.

The SDF leaders tried to break up the Demonstration Committee before the 1891 demonstration. This time, they swung to adventurism. They moved to hold the demonstration on May 1st, instead of the following Sunday. In 1891, that would have meant the mass of the newly organised workers, particularly dockers and gasworkers, would not have attended. It would have been a small rally, primarily consisting of the socialist groups. When their proposition was rejected, the SDF walked out of the committee.

The demonstration, however, was an enormous success. Estimates of numbers present vary from a quarter to half a million people. The resolution on the eight hour day was carried with acclaim by the crowds surrounding every platform.

The SDF was not just a party which had a few sectarian aberrations but which, on the whole, did a useful propaganda job. It was a weapon against the development of the working class in the eighties and nineties. Hundreds of workers were repelled by the SDF. Engels, in a letter to Lafargue at the time of the fourteenth conference of the SDF (August 1894), made the following estimates:

'It has 4,500 members. Last year there were 7,000 names on its membership list, so it has lost 2,500. But what of it? asks Hyndman. In, the 14 years of its existence, the SDF has seen a million people pass through its ranks ... Out of one million 999,500 have hopped it, but - 4,500 have stayed!'

The SDF left a legacy in the working class movement of combining academic and abstract 'Marxism' with opportunist practice; of combining dogmas and exceedingly revolutionary phrases with reactionary deeds and reactionary ideas. But it did more than that. Hyndman played a crucial role in assisting the forces opposed to the emergence of a mass party of the British working class under Marxist leadership. Hyndman's campaign against Engels and his group reached the utmost depths of scandal and slander. As the possibilities for Marxism grew, so did its unscrupulousness.

In September 1892, the Glasgow Trade Union Congress carried a resolution, submitted by the Bradford Trades Council declaring the time had come to form a new political party, independent, and pledged to make the conditions of labour the paramount question in British politics. The decision was a reflection of the class movements that had already taken place and which had resulted. in the birth of the new unions and the expansion of the 'old'. However, there was already the beginning of a slump in trade'. It would hit worst of all the mass of casual labourers and most exploited workers who had burst out into organisation at the end of the eighties. The Webbs declare:

The unskilled labourers once more largely fell away from the Trade Union ranks . . . The older unions retained a large part, at any rate, of the two hundred thousand members added to their ranks between 1887 and 1891.'

The Parliamentary Committee did not take any action on the resolution of 1892 on the formation of a labour party, although the upsurge had effected a political development in the craft unions. *The Times* reported that the 'Socialist Party' was supreme in the Trades Union Congress of 1893. It adopted resolutions including nationalisation of the land and other means of production and distribution. But the conservative trade union leaders resisted. The bureaucracy was strengthened by the slump and the attacks which were mounted- by the employers. The Parliamentary Committee continued to do nothing about the resolutions they disagreed with.

In January 1893, 120 delegates met in Bradford and formed the Independent Labour Party. It had the support of groups of workers in northern England and Scotland. There was big support for independent working class representation in Bradford and

other northern towns. In Bradford a strong Labour Union had been formed, after a lock-out in 1890, when the Riot Act was read and troops occupied the streets. The Labour Union already had councillors on Bradford City Council. After the conference, Engels wrote to Sorge (January 18, 1893):

And as the mass of the membership is certainly very good, as the centre of gravity lies in the provinces and not in London, the home of cliques, and as the main point of the programme is ours, Aveling was right to join and accept a seat on the executive. The fact that here too, people like Keir Hardie, Shaw, Maxwell and others are pursuing all sorts of secondary aims of personal ambition is, of course obvious. But the danger arising from this becomes less according to the degree in which the party itself becomes stronger and gets more of a mass character, and it is already diminished by the necessity of exposing the weakness of the competing sects. Socialism has penetrated the masses in the industrial districts in the last years and I'm counting on these masses to keep the leaders in order.

Engels' optimism was not justified. In the following years there was an ebb in the mass movement, but that was not the decisive thing. There was the lack of a Marxist cadre able to develop the theoretical firmness to both penetrate the masses and combat opportunism.

In 1892, at the General Election, Keir Hardie had been elected MP for South West Ham, John Burns for Battersea and Havelock Wilson for Middlesborough. All of them had stood as independent labour or socialist candidates. In 1895 all twenty seven of the ILP candidates were defeated. Keir Hardie lost his seat. In that year the old guard of the Trades Union Congress scored a victory. New Standing Orders were decreed, introducing the block vote and excluding Trades Council delegates and any delegate not working at a recognised job or who were not trade union officials. All these measures were meant to reduce the number of socialists at the Congress. With the complexities and difficulties in these years in the middle of the decade, opportunism moved to the fore. Inability to struggle for theory led some who had fought beside Engels and Eleanor Marx to succumb to opportunist pressure. Hardie headed back to Non-conformism and picked up ethical socialism. Burns began his journey to the right which ended in a seat in a Liberal Cabinet.

In 1897, Tom Mann resigned as national secretary of the ILP. MacDonald, Glasier and Snowden, middle class 'evolutionary' socialists, took over the leadership with Hardie. The ILP developed its characteristic eclectic mixture of ethical, evolutionary socialism, revolutionary socialism, pacifism, 'Marxism' and religion. Into it were swept all the bourgeois radical left-over ideas. Their strength grew with the ebb of that movement.

The employers used the drop in trade for an offensive against the unions. The 1890s saw them developing their organisation. The National Free Labour Association was formed in 1893 - it organised the systematic importation of blackleg labour and supplied strike- breakers.

In 1896, the Engineering Employers' Associations formed a Federation 'to protect and defend the interests of employers against combinations of workmen'. The

Employers' Parliamentary Council was established in 1898. These bodies spearheaded an attack on trade union rights established in the seventies. The rights of picketing and of striking were being shattered under a legal barrage in the courts. The famous Taff Vale decisions of 1901 which placed a punitive fine on the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants for a strike, was but the culminating point of this legal offensive.

At the end of the decade, in all trade unions there growing demands for the trade unions to organise independent political representation to fight the employers' attacks. At the 1899 TUC, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants moved a successful resolution for the calling of a conference on independent workers' representation in Parliament.

On February 27, 1900, that conference, meeting in the Memorial Hall, Farringdon St, set up the Labour Representation Committee. The bulk of the delegates were from trade unions representing some 400,000 members - being less than half of the membership of the Trades Union Congress at that time. Other delegates were from the Social Democratic Federation (9,000 members), the Independent Labour Party (13,000 members) and the Fabian Society (861 members).

Thus the British working class entered the twentieth century with a historic move towards a mass party independent of the capitalist parties. The SDF moved a resolution that:

The representatives of the working class movement in the House of Commons shall form there a distinct party, based upon the recognition of the class war, and having for its ultimate object the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange.

The Independent Labour Party delegates moved an amendment. This declared that a "distinct Labour Group' in Parliament should be set up which shall have their own whips and agree upon their policy, which must embrace a readiness to cooperate with any Party which, for the time being, may be engaged in promoting legislation in the direct interest of Labour"

The amendment was carried by 53 votes to 39 with about a fourth of the delegates abstaining! So reports H.W. Lee who was secretary of the SDF.

The conference came into being as a result of the British working class asserting its independence. The opportunist socialists of the ILP jumped in to ensure it stated no class policy or sharp break with the Liberals. The conference thus repudiated its own birth. And the policy of the opportunists in the previous decade had encouraged what remained the backward side of British trade unionism - the opposition to theory. Over a quarter of the trade union delegates abstained! For them it was - what do the words matter, let's get on with doing it.

References.

'The creation of the British trade unions was to a large extent the result of the influence of the French Revolution on the labouring masses of Britain... The triumph of reaction on the Continent ... led in 1815 to ... the introduction of the

Corn Laws in Britain. The July Revolution of 1830 in France gave an impetus to the first Electoral Reform Bill of 1831 in Britain. The defeat of the revolutionary movement on the Continent in 1848 not only meant the decline of the Chartist movement but put a brake on the democratisation of the British Parliament for a long time afterwards. The electoral reform of 1867 was preceded by the Civil War in the United States ... The defeat of the 1848 revolution had weakened the British workers but the Russian Revolution of 1905 immediately strengthened them . . . ' Where is Britain Going

Discussing the question why a mass Marxist party did not develop in Britain, G.D.H. Cole informed us that this was because of two reasons. The first (of course) was the British political character. The secondary reason was that Marx and Engels did not assist the development of such a party because they had a personal dislike for Hyndman! The source he draws on is Hyndman himself. Hyndman justifies the publication of his book *England for All* where he plagiarised Marx without making any attribution to Marx or even any mention of him. What he does not relate is that earlier, in the autumn of 1880, he visited Marx several times. Marx gave him information about the prospects of the revolutionary movement on the Continent. Hyndman then wrote an article in the *Nineteenth Century* in which Marx' information was made use of in an anti-revolutionary way. (See Max Beer's *History of British Socialism*). It was, of course, Hyndman who conducted a vicious 'personal' struggle. And his sneers at Engels contrast sharply with his kindly references in his reminiscences to his many friends among the ruling class statesmen. It seems to be a 'characteristic' of lefts in Britain who flirt with Marxism, that they proudly maintain relations with members of the ruling class and love to be shown off and discuss in their salons. Hyndman went to Disraeli, Chamberlain, Clemenceau and others to give them the benefit of his intelligence. Harold Laski had his relationships with Churchill. Aneurin Bevan frequented the Beaverbrook salons.

'The Metropolitan Liberal and Radical Federation, the Fulham liberal Club, the radical Clubs of Herne Hill, Mildmay, Chiswick, Woolwich and East Finsbury, the

London Patriotic Club and the Scottish Labour Party were represented side by side with the trade unions of gasworkers, railwaymen, women, clerks, farriers, cement makers, photographic cabinet makers, and the National Federation of all Trades and Industries. 'Eleanor Marx Vol 11, Yvonne Kapp.

The eleven principal societies in the shipbuilding and metal trades increased from 115,000 in 1889 to 155,000 in 1891. The ten largest in the building trade increased from 57,000 to 94,000. The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants rose from 12,000 to 30,000.

i Trotsky comments: 'From Britain's past political history the Fabians have borrowed only the spiritual dependence of the proletariat on the bourgeoisie. History has turned RS backside on these gentlemen and the inscriptions they read there have become their programme.' *Where is Britain Going*..New Park Publications. 1978

ii *The Record of an Adventurous Life*, M.H. Hyndman. He further writes: 'So far, several of the more energetic of the working class, when they have obtained their education from the well-to-do Socialists who have been sacrificing themselves for their sake, have hastened to sell out to the dominant minority, and most of the workers, in Great Britain at any rate, have applauded their sagacity, and have voted for the successful turncoats at the polls.'

These documents go a long way to showing why the Labour party never consistently fought for socialism and why any struggle that was forced on the leadership from below was never carried forward to a point where it would challenge the existing balance of forces between the classes. The only Labour government that carried out any socialist measures, that of 1945, did so under immense pressure from below. This pressure came from the worldwide upsurge of the masses which was only contained by the Soviet Unions' Stalinist policy of 'peaceful coexistence', which derailed this upsurge sufficiently for imperialism to survive by the skin of its teeth despite being forced into retreat on many fronts. The immense prestige that the Soviet Union had gained worldwide by its destruction of the nazi war machine and its lightning liberation of Manchuria, victories made possible by the social relations established by the October revolution, made it possible for this revolutionary wave to be contained: testimony to the contradictory nature of the Soviet Union. These measures, nevertheless together with the upsurge of workers struggles, and the council house building program, which was carried on by the Tories also, showing that this was a retreat of the ruling class, made a big difference to the living standards of many workers, but the gains were not made permanent as the ruling system of imperialism was not challenged, and left intact. When the reaction came in the seventies the Parliamentary Labour party caved in, and its capitulation to the IMF and its pact with the Liberals paved the way for the Thatcherite onslaught, the battle against which was betrayed by the trade union leaderships. Bills documents show clearly that our own workers tradition and practice is, at heart, socialist and internationalist, and gives ample warning against allying ourselves to opportunists. Any new party we build, to me needs to base itself on the problems facing the most oppressed sections of the class and recruit primarily in these sections. With a housing waiting list of five million and around six million on some form of zero hours contract we will not be short of a constituency. This does not mean of course that we do not concern ourselves with 'all the relations between all of the classes' as Lenin says, but it is in this most oppressed layer that we will find the best fighters. Above all we must adhere to socialist principles and resist the temptation to promote opportunist solutions.