

Revolt of the English Workers in the Nineteenth Century, The, Continued [Sep, 1889]

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III. THE REVOLT-(concluded).

A great deal of nonsense has been talked by middle-class economists and their disciples about the Luddite revolt against machinery. No doubt the destruction of labor-saving machines is in itself an unwise proceeding; but in this case it was probably the only protest in the power of the English workers against the sacrifice of men's lives to the mechanism that created wealth only for a class; a protest which would never have been necessary if the individuals who had gained this newly invented power over nature had been content to use it for the general good instead of merely to enrich themselves by exploiting the labor of the poor. The conduct of these individuals was a moral wrong to the whole community, a wrong which has resulted in the misery and degradation we see around us to-day. All honor to the machine-breakers that they felt and resented it. If they could have seized upon the machinery and used it for the public benefit, that would, of course, have been the wisest; but men only learn wisdom by the sharp lessons of experience, and even if the idea of Socialism had entered their minds they would have been powerless at that time to put it in practice.

It is not the blindness of the Luddite, revolt that has rendered middle-class opinion so bitter against it; but the fact that like all genuine popular movements it hit the nail on the head. It was an economic rebellion and one that went straight to the root of the privileges of the property-holders and, as such, it was terrible and hateful to the ruling-classes. If the people had been left at the beginning of this century to fight their own battle, probably they would have learned for themselves that something better might be done with machines than breaking them and we should now be nearer to social equality and justice than we are to-day

Unfortunately besides the workers there was another section of the population with a grievance in the England of the early nineteenth century, namely the owners of the machinery, the newly enriched middle-class. These "upstart tradesmen," as the older aristocracy called them, aspired to a direct share in the government, which they only swayed by indirect influence. Especially they craved it when, after the Peace of 1815, they began to discover that free trade was for their interest and not for that of the landed gentry. There was nothing for it but to

swallow their pride, make common cause with the people, and use their misery and despair as a lever to force the ruling oligarchy to allow a reform of parliament which would make that assembly a body really representative of the ruling interests of the country.

This the more energetic spirits of the middle class not only understood to be desirable, but actually succeeded in doing. They caught the economic revolt of the workers at the rebound and persuaded them to drop machine breaking and demand the franchise. In other words, to cease fighting for their own rights and become the cat's-paw of their masters.

Fine earnest fellows some of those early Radical Reformers were in their way; men honestly persuaded that representative government was the best means of securing freedom, peace and good will among classes divided by conflicting economic interests. For they were not able to imagine a society without classes, without rich and poor, masters and wage-slaves, where no government would be required to hold the balance between warring class interests. Accordingly Orator Hunt, W. Cobbett, Major Cartwright, Sir Francis Burdett, and their like, spared no pains to persuade the workers that bread and independence would be restored to them by a reformed parliament and that the one rational method of relieving the distress into which the great agricultural and industrial changes had plunged the people was a Reform Bill. A most excusable mistake for honest men when as yet representative government had had no fair trial; but what shall we say of those who are urging the same old political nostrums upon the discontented workers after fifty-seven years! experience of failure!

The assault of the middle-class and the workers combined upon the power of the ruling class was, of course, met by the most determined opposition. For fifteen years England was honey-combed with clubs and societies secret and open, Hampden clubs, Reform clubs, Spencean clubs; there were meetings, demonstrations, riots, dispersed with violence and bloodshed at Peterloo and elsewhere, talk of a universal uprising and considerable secret preparation for it. and then at last the landowners gave in, and admitted the capitalist class to a direct share in the government. Parliament was reformed in 1832, the middle classes were triumphant, but what of the economic deliverance of the workers that was to have followed? The chestnuts were pulled out of the fire; who was to eat them? Were they to be a meal for the starving or a dessert for those who had already dined?

There is no need to dwell on the result. The workers got the Poor Law and a Factory Act or so; the capital-monopolizers added power to their wealth and henceforth ruled society.

Yet after the first bitterness of disappointment was passed, the workers returned to the false hope that had been so persistently dinned into their ears by the middle-class when they needed their assistance; perhaps they saw no other. Still clinging to the hope of bettering their economic condition through political action, they returned to the demand for the extension of the franchise; but this time under the guidance of men like Ernest Jones, Bronterre O'Brien, and the like; men who by no means lost sight of the economic question, as the earlier Radical leaders had done, but who wrote and spoke openly against land monopoly and usury. With the political reforms of the Charter, the revolted workers took courage to avow such principles as the Workmen's Association had printed upon its card of membership: "The man who evades his share of useful labor diminishes the public wealth and throws his burden upon his neighbors."

In fact, the workers left to themselves were struggling back to the right road, the revolt against the monopoly of property and the exploitation of labor by the property-holders. Once more the revolt was becoming economic, and once more the middle-class "friends of the people" took bold of the rising agitation and turned it from a danger threatening the capitalist class into a

convenient engine for their own purposes. The radical manufacturers wished to extort free trade from their ancient foes the landed aristocracy, whom they had beaten but not crushed in 1832. The Chartist agitation was a convenient weapon. The more intelligent radicals handled it with skill. They encouraged the political side of the movement. Help us, they said, to extend the suffrage, to reform parliament, and we will give you bread; but be always constitutional; above all things no direct action, no "physical force," no outrage upon law and order. The old refrain that has rung in the ears of the workers so many times during this century that it is not surprising they grow a little tired of it now. But in 1845-48 they were still charmed by it. The middle class politicians who mingled in the Chartist movement persuaded a large section of the workers to disown the "physical force" or revolutionary party, to wait, to push the Charter first and foremost, to leave, the economic question to be settled after; they coquetted with parliamentary action and gained thereby what they wanted-time to dish Chartism, with Free Trade.

So ended the Second act of the Revolt of the English Workers in the Nineteenth Century, in the triumph of middle-class radicalism and the shelving of the economic wrongs of the people. Temporarily better times succeeded the stimulus to production and commerce and the cheaper food supplies, and for many years revolutionary agitation in England sunk beneath the surface, only re-appearing very occasionally in a Hyde Park riot, a monster political demonstration or a hard-fought strike. The profound continental movement which found expression in the International Working Men's Association and reached its climax in the insurrection of the Commune in 1871, only produced faint echoes in this island. For forty years English discontent has been almost inarticulate and yet it has never ceased to exist, the sense of wrong has never died out of the hearts of the people. The third act of the drama of Revolt during this century has yet to be played; to-day it is already upon the stage.

A late Royal Commission upon the State of Trade warned the workers of England in so many words that they have now reaped the full benefits which the capitalist system of production has to offer to it. wage-slaves. Any further demands on their part would wreck England in the competitive struggle. And yet misery is rather on the increase than the decline and the masses of our countrymen live the lives of beast-. Again we are awakening to the fact that we are confronted by an unsolved economic problem, one which no juggling Political tricks can do more than evade. Again the smoldering spirit of revolt is appearing among the people; and this time it is taking a more definite and rational form. It is reappearing as conscious Socialism.

Socialism, the common ownership of land, of the men= of production, by the workers, is no new thing in the world, not even in our particular corner of it. On the contrary such common ownership is historically the oldest form of the holding of wealth; an arrangement which has been in these days driven out of sight, underground as it were, by the triumph of the appropriators of private property, a form of ownership which is reappearing in theory, as it is certain to reappear sooner or later in practice; for it is the only system under which every worker can be a free man, with our highly developed and complex ways of working. A worker to be free, in say true sense, must be a man able to develop all his powers and to joy in his work and throw his best energy into it, feeling that he is giving his utmost for the common benefit, and will be able to take from the wealth of society what he requires to supply his needs in return. Personal, individual freedom is, as J. S. Mill says, the most passionate and intense of permanent human needs next to bread. A man cannot thus be free unless he is his own master: unless he is able to arrange his work as he likes with his fellow-workmen, having an equal right with them to make use of such land and tools and machines and workshops as he requires. But as long as these necessary

things are appropriated by some private individuals, no one can be free. All those who have no property must work as the property owners like, suffer for their mistakes and be thrown out of employment if the property-owner cannot make a profit out of their labor. Therefore the workers all over the civilized world are steadily making their way toward Socialism and preparing to revolt against the oppression of private property which denies them the justice of freedom.

The spirit of revolt rises, the agitation becomes more and more general, and here in its midst we find, as before, the politicians. Again they are appealing to the workers with their ancient nostrums. A little more voting, they cry, a little more reform of parliamentary institutions, and the time will come for the judicious consideration of the economic question; step by step we, the true friends of the people, will gain you all you want; only put your trust in us and do not frighten the electors by even talking about a revolution; support us at the polling-booths, demonstrate to our order in Hyde Park and you shall have Socialism as the lower middle-class understand it—Nationalization of land, to wit, and perhaps (for we are real Socialists, no mere followers of George) of a few big monopolies too and plenty of nice snug places for every one in managing these new state departments: almost as delightful as in France, where they say that one man in every seven electors is some sort of a functionary exercising authority.

Are we going to be fooled a third time in one hundred years? Not if we learn in time to keep our eyes open and think for Ourselves.

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