1889: how the British workers arose from 40 years' depression

By Frederick Engels*

[IN 1845] ENGLAND STOOD face to face with a crisis, solvable to all appearances by force only. ... The working masses of the towns demanded their share of political power — the People's Charter. They were supported by the majority of the small trading class, and the only difference between the two was whether the Charter should be carried by physical or by moral force. Then came the commercial crash of 1847 and the Irish famine, and with both the prospect of revolution.

The French Revolution of 1848 saved the English middle-class. The Socialistic pronunciamentos of the victorious French workmen frightened the small middle-class of England and disorganised the narrower, but more matter-of-fact movement of the English working-class. At the very moment when Chartism was bound to assert itself in its full strength, it collapsed internally before even it collapsed externally on the 10th April 1848. The action of the working-class was thrust into the background. The capitalist class triumphed along the whole line.

The Reform Bill of 1831 had been the victory of the whole capitalist class over the landed aristocracy. The repeal of the Corn Laws was the victory of the manufacturing capitalists not only over the landed aristocracy, but over those sections of capitalists, too, whose interests were more or less bound up with the landed interest — bankers, stock-jobbers, fund-holders, etc. Free Trade meant the readjustment of the whole home and foreign, commercial and financial policy of England in accordance with the interests of the manufacturing capitalists — the class which now represented the nation. And they set about this task with a will. Every obstacle to industrial production was mercilessly removed. The tariff and the whole system of taxation were revolutionised. Everything was made subordinate to one end, but that end of the utmost importance to the manufacturing capitalist: the cheapening of all raw produce, and especially of the means of living of the working-class; the reduction of the cost of raw material, and the keeping down — if not as yet the *bringing down* — of wages. England was to become the "workshop of the world"; all other countries were to become for England what Ireland already was — markets for her manufactured goods, supplying her in return with raw materials and food. England, the great manufacturing centre of an agricultural world, with an ever-increasing number of corn and cotton-growing Irelands revolving around her, the industrial sun. What a glorious prospect!

The manufacturing capitalists set about the realisation of this their great object with that strong common sense and that contempt for traditional principles which has ever distinguished them from their more narrow-minded compeers on the Continent. Chartism was dying out. The revival of commercial prosperity, natural after the revulsion of 1847 had spent itself, was put down to the credit of Free Trade. Both these circumstances had turned the English working-class, politically, into the tail of the "great Liberal Party", the party led by the manufacturers.

... The effects of this domination of the manufacturing capitalists were at first startling. Trade revived and extended to a degree unheard of even in this cradle of modern industry; the previous astounding creations of steam and machinery dwindled into nothing compared with the immense mass of productions of the twenty years from 1850 to 1870, with the overwhelming figures of exports and imports, of wealth accumulated in the hands of capitalists and of human working power concentrated in the large towns. The progress was indeed interrupted, as before, by a crisis every ten years, in 1857 as well as in 1866; but these revulsion were now considered as natural inevitable events, which must be fatalistically submitted to, and which always set themselves right in the end.

And the condition of the working class in this period? There was temporary improvement even for the great mass. But this improvement always was reduced to the old level by the influx of the great body of the unemployed reserve, by the constant superseding of hands by new machinery, by the immigration of the agricultural population, now, too, more and more superseded by machines.

A permanent improvement [could] be recognised for two "protected" sections ▸

* FROM THE prefaces to the 1892 English and German editions of *The Condition of the Working Class in England.*

THE SO-CALLED "New Unionism" — the start of stable mass trade unionism in Britain — was launched by three great battles in East London in 1888-9. In July 1888, women match workers struck over unsafe conditions. In August 1889, gas workers won an eight-hour day; and then the dockers struck for a minimum wage of six-pence an hour.

The big general unions date from those battles — the TGWU from the dockers' strike, and the GMB from the gasworkers' efforts.

When the first proper TUC congress met in 1869, the trade unions and Trades Councils attending had represented only 250,000 workers in total. There was a brief upsurge of trade-union membership in the early 1870s, but the decisive lift-off was not until 1889-91. By 1892 union membership was 1,576,000.

The "new unionists" were different from the old in outlook. Eleanor Marx, the daughter of Karl Marx, was a leader of the gasworkers' union, and the union secretary, Will Thorne, was also a socialist. At the 1890 TUC, according to the socialist John Burns, "the 'old' unionists looked like respectable city gentlemen; wore very good coats, large watch chains, and high hats... Among the new delegates not a single one wore a tall hat. They looked workmen; they were workmen. They were not such sticklers for formality or court procedure, but were guided more by common sense."

The workforce in industry — transport, mines, building, manufacturing, utilities — had expanded fast. In 1851 it was 5 million; in 1891, 8.2 million.

1.1 million people worked in transport (including the docks); 1.4 million in textiles and 1.2 million in clothing (the majority women); 1.2 million in the various metalworking industries; and 900,000 in building and construction. Gas was a new industry: there were only 38,000 workers in gas, water, and electricity in 1891, though there would be 117,000 by 1911.

The overall average of real wages had risen about 59% between 1850 and 1889; but the research of Charles Booth, in 1889, discovered that fully one-third of all Londoners were living at starvation level.

FIGURES FROM B R Mitchell and Phyllis Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics,* and from Henry Pelling, *History of British Trade Unionism.*

only of the working-class. Firstly, the factory hands. The fixing by Act of Parliament of their working-day within relatively rational limits restored their physical constitution and endowed them with a moral superiority, enhanced by their local concentration. They [were] undoubtedly better off than before 1848. The best proof is that, out of ten strikes they [made], nine [were] provoked by the manufacturers in their own interests, as the only means of securing a reduced production. You can never get the masters to agree to work "short time", let manufactured goods be ever so unsaleable; but get the work-people to strike, and the masters shut their factories to a man.

Secondly, the great Trades Unions. They [were] the organisations of those trades in which the labour of *grown-up men* predominates, or is alone applicable. Here the competition neither of women and children nor of machinery [had] so far weakened their organised strength. The engineers, the carpenters and joiners, the bricklayers, [were] each of them a power, to that extent that, as in the case of the bricklayers and bricklayers' labourers, they [could] even successfully resist the introduction of machinery. That their condition [had] remarkably improved since 1848 there can be no doubt, and the best proof of this is in the fact that for more than fifteen years not only [were] their employers with them, but they with their employers, upon exceedingly good terms. They form[ed] an aristocracy among the working-class; they [had] succeeded in enforcing for themselves a relatively comfortable position, and they accepted it as final.

... But as to the great mass of working-people, the state of misery and insecurity in which they live now [was] as low as ever, if not lower. The East End of London [was] an ever-spreading pool of stagnant misery and desolation, of starvation when out of work, and degradation, physical and moral, when in work. And so in all other large towns — abstraction made of the privileged minority of the workers; and so in the smaller towns and in the agricultural districts.

... Today there is indeed 'Socialism again in England', and plenty of it — Socialism of all shades: Socialism conscious and unconscious, Socialism prosaic and poetic, Socialism of the working-class and of the middle-class, for verily, that abomination of abominations, Socialism, has not only become respectable, but has actually donned evening dress and lounges lazily on drawing-room *causeuses*. That shows the incurable fickleness of that terrible despot of 'society', middle-class public opinion, and once more justifies the contempt in which we Socialists of a past generation always held that public opinion. At the same time we have no reason to grumble at the symptom itself.

What I consider far more important than this momentary fashion among bourgeois circles of affecting a mild dilution of Socialism, and even more than the actual progress Socialism has made in England generally, that is the revival of the East End of London. That immense haunt of misery is no longer the stagnant pool it was six years ago. It has shaken off its torpid despair, has returned to life, and has become the home of what is called the 'New Unionism', that is to say, of the organisation of the great mass of 'unskilled' workers. This organisation may to a great extent adopt the form of the old Unions of 'skilled' workers but it essentially different in character. The old Unions preserve the traditions of the time when they were founded, and look upon the wages system as a once-for-all established, final fact, which they at best can modify in the interest of their members. The new Unions were founded at a time when the faith in the eternity of the wages system was severely shaken; their founders and promoters were Socialists either consciously or by feeling; the masses, whose adhesion gave them strength, were rough, neglected, looked down upon by the working-class aristocracy; but they had this immense advantage, that *their minds were virgin soil*, entirely free from the inherited 'respectable' bourgeois prejudices which hampered the brains of the better situated 'old' Unionists. And thus we see now these new Unions taking the lead of the working-class movement generally, and more and more taking in tow the rich and proud 'old' Unions.

Undoubtedly, the East Enders have committed colossal blunders: so have their predecessors, and so do the doctrinaire Socialists who pooh-pooh them. A large class, like a great nation, never learns better or quicker than by undergoing the consequences of its own mistakes. And for all the faults committed in past, present and future, the revival of the East End of London remains one of the greatest and most fruitful facts of this *fin de siècle*, and glad and proud I am to have lived to see it.

SINCE I wrote the above, six months ago, the English working-class movement has again made a big step forward. The parliamentary elections which took place the other day have given formal notice to both official parties, the Conservatives and the Liberals, that both of them would thereafter have to reckon with a third party, the workers' party. This workers' party is only just being formed; its elements are still occupied with casting off traditional prejudices of every sort — bourgeois, old trade-unionist and even doctrinaire-socialist — so that they may finally be able to get together on a basis common to all of them. And yet the instinct to unite which they followed was already so great that it produced election results hitherto unheard-of in England.

... In short, in a number of big city and industrial election districts the workers have definitely severed all ties with the two old parties and thus achieved direct or indirect successes beyond anything witnessed in any previous election. And boundless is the joy thereof among the working people. For the first time they have seen and felt what they can achieve by using their suffrage in the interest of their class. The spell which the superstitious belief in the 'great Liberal Party' cast over the English workers for almost 40 years is broken. They have seen by dint of striking examples that they, the workers, are the decisive power in England if they only want to and know what they want; and the elections of 1892 marked the beginning of such knowing and wanting.

Glossary

The Chartist movement, which flourished between 1838 and 1848, was the world's first distinctive political movement of the wage-working class. It was not explicitly socialist, though some of its leaders, like Bronterre O'Brien, were socialists, and many of its activists supported Robert Owen's version of socialism. It demanded, essentially, a voice in parliamentary democracy for the working class corresponding to its numbers.

By 1884, Tory and Liberal reforms had granted the vote to most male workers over 21 (though not to some two million men, nor to women); but in the Chartist heyday, before the British state had a solid system of checks and balances neutralising parliamentary democracy, the Chartists' demands were revolutionary. 10 April 1848 was the day when the Chartist leaders had promised to lead a mass demonstration to parliament to present a petition with their demands. Facing large forces of police, the leaders abandoned the march to parliament, and the movement fell apart.

The Corn Laws imposed a tax on imported corn. They were repealed in June 1846, after a seven-year mass campaign led by the representatives of the industrial capitalists. They wanted cheap corn in order to get cheap bread — and lower wages; they condemned the Corn Laws as protecting the landlord class. After 1846 Britain moved rapidly to comprehensive free trade, abolishing taxes on imports and exports.

The Famine in Ireland in 1845-8 killed one million people: the British government stood by, refusing all but tardy and meagre aid.

The working day in British factories in the early 19th century was often fourteen hours. In 1847 a law limited it to ten hours. The bosses quickly found loopholes, which were finally closed only in 1874. Trade unions had been legal since 1825, but any militant activity remained illegal until 1875.

Socialism in Britain declined drastically after 1848. Its revival dates from 1884, when the Social Democratic Federation became the first Marxist group in Britain.

1892 elections: Keir Hardie, Havelock Wilson, and John Burns were elected as independent Labour candidates (though Wilson and Burns cooperated with the Liberals once in parliament). The Independent Labour Party was set up in 1893, and the Labour Representation Committee, forerunner of the Labour Party, in 1900.