

Before we cast a general glance back at the discussion about Bernstein's book (1) in the party press, we still wish to treat individually some questions of detail which were particularly stressed in that discussion. This time, let us turn to the English trade union movement.

The catchphrase of the 'economic power' of the 'economic organisation' of the working class plays a great role amongst the supporters of Bernstein. "It is the task of the working class to create economic power for itself" writes Dr Woltmann in issue 93 of the Elberfelde "Freie Presse". In the same way, E. David (2) concludes his series of articles about Bernstein's book with the slogan "emancipation through economic organisation" ("Mainzer Volkszeitung", issue 96).

According to this conception — in line with Bernstein's theory — the trade union movement, allied with consumer associations, is to gradually transform the capitalist mode of production into the socialist mode. We have already pointed out (see the pamphlet 'Social Reform or Revolution' (3)) that such a notion is based on a total failure to recognise the economic nature and economic functions of both the trade unions and the co-operatives. This, however, can also be proven in a less abstract form by way of a tangible example.

Arrests, trials with draconian sentences, deportations, mass use of spies, police and the military on workers demonstrations, class justice, police arbitrariness. In a word — the first half century of the English labour movement offers us all the forms of brutally beating down the rising working class and its most modest demands for social reforms. The same state which already at that time, like today, had no militarism, no bureaucracy, no peasantry, nonetheless found abundant means to meet the working class with violent repression. If we can therefore see other methods of treating the working class in England from the middle of the century onwards, then this is not connected with these peculiarities of its political life, but with other circumstances which had emerged only in the course of time.

Around the fifties two important changes had indeed taken place in England's conditions, and in two respects. Above all, English industry achieved unshared rule in the world market around this time. Until the end of the forties English production very often had to suffer very frequent and violent stagnation; from the fifties onwards there begins a constant and strong upturn. This placed the entire English class of industrialists in the position in which an individual industrialist finds himself when business is flourishing: conflicts with the workers, permanent industrial warfare as had been the case formerly, became extremely inconvenient for them, and the interest in

Rosa Luxemburg on Britain

'Reform and Revolution' is one of Rosa Luxemburg's best-known works, her major contribution to the debate between Marxists and 'revisionists' at the turn of the century in Germany. In this previously untranslated article, which is in effect an appendix to 'Reform and Revolution', she takes issue with the praise of old-style British trade unionism by the leading German revisionist Eduard Bernstein. Bernstein had lived in Britain for some years, and based many of his ideas on the experience of the British labour movement at the

end of the 19th century.

Luxemburg's article is a brilliant examination of the relationship between socialism and trade unionism at a formative stage of the British labour movement's history. Soon after she wrote it the British working-class movement created its own independent political organisation, the Labour Party. Unfortunately, the Labour Party, like the trade union movement Rosa Luxemburg analyses here, remained, even in its best days, entirely on the ground of bourgeois politics. Even after it became formally socialist, in 1918, its essential business was that of bargaining with the capitalist system for concessions and reforms. Since the Wilson government of the mid-'60s, Labour Party reformism has been in a blind alley; since the late '70s it has been in deep crisis.

The translation is by Stan Crooke.

orderly relationships, in stability and 'social peace' became a pressing one.

Correspondingly, we see on the side of the industrialists an immediate about-turn in their methods of warfare. The conflicts with the workers change from questions of power into matters of negotiations, of agreement, of concessions. The golden era of industry makes the concessions to the workers as necessary in the interest of the undisturbed conduct of business as it renders them materially imperceptible. If in the first epoch the English bourgeoisie was represented by the most brutal quick-buck-merchants à la Stumm (5), their correct spokesperson in this epoch is that entrepreneur who says in 1860: "In strikes I see both the means of action and also the inevitable result of commercial negotiations about the purchase of labour".

On the other side and doubtlessly extremely closely connected with the above, an important transformation takes place as well in the labour movement itself. In the twenties, thirties and the beginning of the forties we see it enthusiastic about political and social reforms, about comprehensive plans, about socialist ideas. "On the Council they (the workers) are idealists who dream of a new heaven and a new earth, humanitarians, friends of education, socialists, moralists". Under the influence of Owen's doctrines (6), writes Francis Place (7), the trade unionists came to believe that it was possible to raise wages and reduce working hours through a general non-political federation of all wage-earners "to such a degree that in the not too distant future

the entire products of their labour would belong to them". The class movement in England at that time found palpable expression in the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union, which proved itself to be a thoroughly clumsy organisation in trades union struggle and also soon collapsed (8), but expressed the idea of *class* and its general unity for the common goal. In the Chartist movement we likewise see the English proletariat — here, through *political* action — strive after socialist goals (9).

This all changes with the beginning of the fifties. After the failure of Chartism and of the Owenite movement, the workers turn away from socialist goals and towards exclusively everyday demands. The class which was brought together — even if very incompletely — in the Grand Trade Union of Owen crumbles completely into individual trade unions, each of which take action on their own. In place of the emancipation of the working class there appears as the guiding star the most favourable shaping possible of the 'leasing-business', in place of struggle with the existing order, the striving to establish oneself comfortably on the ground of this order, in a word: in place of socialist class struggle, bourgeois struggle for a bourgeois existence.

The trade unions have achieved their success in two ways: through direct struggle with the industrialists and through pressure on the legislature. In both cases, however, they owe their success to the very *bourgeois ground* upon which they had placed themselves. As far as the strug-

gle with the industrialists was concerned, already in 1845 "a new method of trade union activity — the politics of *mediation and arbitration*" had been proclaimed by the general conference of the trade unions (10). But mediation and arbitration are only possible if a common ground exists in advance. And such common ground soon found palpable expression in the very widespread system of the sliding scales of wages, which, for its part, is economically based on the harmony of interests between the industrialist and the worker. Only because industrialists and workers alike stood on this common ground was it possible for there to occur the great extension of collective agreements, of conciliation offices, of arbitration tribunals, which we see until into the eighties. Thereby, however, the clashes and friction between labour and capital changed from class struggle into arguments between buyers and sellers, as occur with any commodity. If on the one hand the industrialists had come to the point of view that strikes were "inevitable in commercial negotiations about the purchase of labour", then on the other hand labour resigned itself to regarding itself as a mere object of "commercial negotiations". The trade unions accepted as the basis of the entire trade union struggle the doctrine of bourgeois economy of supply and demand being the only regulator of wages, and "it seemed a natural conclusion that the only means lying in their power to secure or improve their conditions was that of *reducing the supply*" (11).

Correspondingly, we see at that time as means of struggle of the trade unions the abolition of overtime, the limitation of the number of apprentices, and emigration (in industrial branches until into the eighties). That is to say, with the exception of the first point, purely guild methods.

The political side of the trade union movement adopted the same character. Two points of view in particular are characteristic of this. Above all, the English trade unionists' own attitude: until the middle of the eighties they were — and still are so today — by and large, thoroughgoing petty bourgeois, liberal or conservative in outlook. Furthermore, however, the methods and the means which they applied in their struggle for protective labour legislation were guildist. There was not anything like popular agitation, as was the case in Germany and other countries on the continent, but a completely peculiar and complicated system of working upon and influencing bourgeois parliamentarians without distinction of party affiliations, of horse-trading, of corridor conversations and back-room deals, completely lacking any principled or class character and which reached its fullest development in the case of the cotton spinners and weavers (12). The trade unions owe their greatest legislative successes to these very means. On the other hand, how much of an

obstacle a more class-conscious behaviour was for practical successes is shown by the difficulties with which the Miners' Federation had to fight.

In connection with the thus directed activity we see the structure and the entire character of the English trade unions change in the second half of this century. The leadership of the movement passes from the "irresponsible enthusiasts and agitators" to "a class of permanent, paid officials", who were even employed on occasion on the basis of a proper school-examination (13). From being a school of class solidarity and socialist morality the trade union movement becomes a business, the trade union becomes an extremely complicated work of art, a residence comfortably furnished for lasting existence, and in the entire world of labour of that epoch there reigns "*a spirit of careful, even if somewhat limited diplomacy*".

Part Two

As we saw in the first article, economically, politically and also morally the workers and the bourgeoisie had been standing on the same ground in England since the fifties. "They (the leaders of the trade unions) accepted in totally good faith the economic individualism of their bourgeois opponents and claimed only that freedom of combining, which the enlightened members of the latter class were ready to grant them... Their understanding for the mode of thought of the bourgeoisie and their appreciation of the actual difficulties of the situation protected them from being mere demagogues... The possession of good manners, although it may appear a minor triviality, was not the least of their merits. With an accomplished self-esteem and integrity they joined correctness of expression, completely irreproachable behaviour in private life, and a remarkable absence of everything which recalls the public bar".

It is only a logical consequence of these statesman-like, individualistic politics that just like the purely economic struggle, so too the struggle of the trade unions for protective labour legislation was not conducted in a unified manner through the totality of the trade unions and to the benefit of the working class, as was the case in Germany, in France and everywhere else, but in fragmented groups, by every trade union on their own, and sometimes in direct contradiction to one another (compare the conduct of the Durham and Northumberland representatives in Parliament (14) against the efforts of the Miners' Federation). The lack of common economic and political ground, of the *class point-of-*

view, the contradictions between great and small, skilled and unskilled, old and new trade unions, also condemned to fruitlessness and decay their common action, their general congresses and their Parliamentary Committee. (Evidence of this from recent times is the method of voting introduced at the Cardiff Trades Union Congress, which "quite clearly amounts to placing all power into the hands of the officials, and furthermore the officials of the few old and large trade unions.") Those who are of this opinion see only one side of the effect of public opinion on the workers: the material *support* provided by it. But they overlook the other side: the moral pressure exercised on the workers by it. English public opinion is not benevolent towards the labour movement in general, but towards the particular given labour movement which has taken shape in England: the movement which both economically and politically stands on the ground of bourgeois society. It does not support class struggle, for example; on the contrary, it pre-empted it. As is well known, during strikes and wage conflicts public opinion imperiously presses for arbitration tribunals and mediation procedures, it does not allow the struggle to become a test of strength, even if it would be advantageous precisely to the workers, and woe to the workers should they not wish to bow to the voice of the public. The English worker who is supported by English bourgeois society in the struggle with his employer is supported in his capacity as a member of bourgeois society, as a bourgeois politician, as a bourgeois voter and the support also makes him for his part into a more loyal member of this society.

The reasonable industrialist and the equally reasonable trade unionist, the correct capitalist and the correct worker, the generous bourgeois who is friendly to the workers and the narrow-minded proletarian who wears bourgeois blinkers have each other as their precondition, are merely correlates of one and the same relationship, the common ground of which was formed by the peculiar economic position of England since the middle of the century — the *stability* and the undivided rule of English industry in the world market.

The previously outlined conditions lasted in England until into the eighties. Since then, however, a far-reaching transformation has been occurring in all relationships, and furthermore in the basis of trade union development hitherto above all. The position of England in the world market was fundamentally shaken by the capitalist development of Russia, Germany and the United States. The rapid decline of England expresses itself not only in the loss of one market after another, but also in a very characteristic and important symptom of capitalist development: the decline of its *methods of production and trade*. The latter in particular always show the rise or decline of a

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capitalist industry earlier and more certainly than the export and import statistics themselves. Just as the capitalist class of a rising country is above all characterised by versatility and flexibility in techniques of production and trade (see England until into the sixties and seventies, and Germany at present), so too in an industrially declining country backwardness and crudity in production and trade always emerge as the first unmistakable symptom.

The latter is now the case in England and for some years complaints in British consular reports about the apathy and rigidity of English traders have been a constant theme (15). As far as the methods of production are concerned, England is now forced — until recently an unheard-of fact — by foreign competition and for the protection of its own native market to introduce modern production techniques. See, for example, the current transformation underway in the English tin-plate industry under the pressure of North American competition.

The shaky ground, the variability of the commercial situation, and the often bad state of business lead for their part to a change of fronts in both the behaviour of the English bourgeoisie and also of the English workers. The general depression in English industry is temporarily still compensated for and concealed by the demand for shipbuilding (16) created by international militarism and trade, which in turn supports a series of important branches, such as the metal industry. But in this too the competition of Germany soon threatens England.

If, in times of prosperity, the concessions to the workers were at no great cost for capital, now it is currently becoming ever more sensitive and touchy. The conciliation process becomes a source of discomfort for it, and it uses the arbitration of the conciliation tribunals for the purpose of "rejecting the higher demands of the workers", whereas at other times it makes "use of its strategic position in order to force workers to accept more unfavourable conditions than they are due according to the arbitration of the conciliation tribunals". On the other hand, the system of the sliding scales of wages, which previously ensured for workers a share of the industrial boom, now, with the decline of business affairs, results more and more frequently only in one body-blow after another for them. The trade unions decisively turn away from this wages system. With the dismissal of the sliding system of wages on the part of the workers, and with the systematic breaking of arbitration on the part of the industrialists, the basis disappears for the entire conciliation and arbitration procedure which accompanied the heyday of English trade unionism, and with it — the 'social peace'. This transformation was officially recognised some years ago by the abolition of the laws of 1867 and 1872, according to which all conflicts between

capital and labour were to be settled by a process of conciliation (17). At the same time as the constantly prospering business affairs and the stability in the situation of the worker disappeared, so too did the possibility of so ingeniously constructing the trade unions and of so regularly and smoothly making their complicated mechanism function as had been the case previously. This ingenious mechanism and specialised bureaucratism of the trade unions also becomes largely pointless with the collapse of the sliding scales of wages and the standing conciliation procedure.

All trade unions founded in the last decade and a half are distinguished from the older unions by a great simplicity of their organisation and functioning, and are thereby comparable to the trade unions of the continent (18). But as the amicable arbitration procedure becomes ever more ineffective, the conflicts between capital and labour become ever more *questions of power*, as we witnessed in the engineers' strike and the Welsh



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miners' strike. In England too the "social peace" falls back before the social war — *the class struggle*. The trade unions gradually change from being organisations for ensuring social peace into organisations of struggle in the pattern of the German, French and Austrian trade unions.

Two important symptoms from the most recent period show that both the English bourgeoisie and the English proletariat are conscious of the change and arming for serious conflict. In the case of the industrialists this is the league for combatting the parliamentary action of the trade unions (19), in the case of the workers, the re-emergence of the idea of a general workers' league (20), which is equally hated by the capitalists and trade unionists of the old school, the supporters of the "social peace", but which clearly betrays amongst the masses of the English proletariat the need for banding together, the awakening of *class consciousness* in the true sense of the word.

For the arguments with Bernstein and his supporters, three kinds of conclusions can be drawn from the history of English trade unionism which we have outlined in its general features.

Above all, the idea of the direct importance of the trade unions for socialism appears as completely wrong. It is exactly the English trade union movement, to which one turns for support for this argument, which largely owes the successes it has achieved in the past to its purely bourgeois character and its opposition to socialist "utopianism". The historians of trade unionism, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, themselves repeatedly and explicitly affirm that the trade union movement in England failed every time to the extent that it was permeated with socialist ideas, and, vice versa, achieved successes to the extent it narrowed its horizons, became shallow, and freed itself of socialism.

It is exactly English trade unionism, the classical representative of which appears as the sated, correct, narrow-minded and blinkered worker-gentleman who thinks and feels like a bourgeois, which therefore proves that the trade union movement in and of itself is still nothing at all socialist, indeed that under certain circumstances it can be a direct obstacle to the spread of socialist consciousness, just as, vice versa, under certain circumstances socialist consciousness can be an obstacle to purely trade union successes.

In Germany, as on the continent as a whole, trade unions arose from the outset on the ground of class struggle, and, furthermore, of socialist struggle, often directly as a creation, a child of social democracy (see Belgium and Austria). Here they are subordinate to the socialist movement in advance and can reckon on success — completely the opposite to England — only to the extent that they base themselves on the socialist class struggle and are sheltered by it (see the current social-democratic action in Germany to protect the right of coalition (21)). The trade unions of Germany (and of the continent in general) are, from this standpoint, from the standpoint of the emancipatory strivings of the proletariat, *more progressive* than the English ones, in spite of their weakness and partly in connection with this weakness. To point to the English example is tantamount to advising the German trade unions to leave the ground of socialist class struggle and to place themselves on bourgeois ground. In order to serve the cause of socialism, it is not the German trade unions who must follow in the footsteps of the English, but on the contrary, the English in the footsteps of the German trade unions. "English spectacles", therefore, do not fit Germany, not because the English conditions are *more progressive* but because — from the standpoint of class struggle — they are *more backward* than the German ones.

Moreover, when we turn away from the subjective importance of the trade unions for socialism, from their effect on *class consciousness*, to the "economic power" which the opportunist theory claims they place into the hands of the workers and

with which they are to break the power of capital, then this too turns out to be a fairy tale, and, what is more, "a fairy tale from olden times". In England itself the unshakeable economic power of the trade unions, quite apart from noting with what it was bought, largely belongs to the past. As we have seen, it is connected with a quite definite and indeed exceptional period of English capitalism, with its undivided rule in the world market. This period, which only through its stability and prosperity formed the basis of trade unionism in its actual heyday, will not repeat itself, however, either in England or in any other country.

Even if the German labour movement, following the advice of the opportunists, could and would desire to drop the "Fresslegende (22), i.e. its socialist character, for the sake of "economic power", and follow in the footsteps of English trade unionism, it would never be able to achieve the latter's former economic power. For one simple reason: because the economic basis of the old trade unionism cannot be artificially conjured up by any opportunism.

Taking everything together, what then do the "English spectacles" of Bernstein turn out to be? A concave mirror of his mode of perception in which all phenomena are turned on their heads. What he takes for the most powerful means of socialist struggle was, in truth, a straightforward obstacle to socialism, and what he regards as the future of German social-democracy is the constantly shrinking past of the English movement in the course of its development on the road to social democracy. ●

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All quotations in the text are taken from German translations of the works of Sidney and Beatrice Webb: *Geschichte der Gewerkvereine und Theorie und Praxis der Englischen Gewerkschaften und Geschichte der Britischen Trade Unions*.

1. See "Die Voraussetzungen des Sozialismus und die Aufgaben der Sozialdemokratie", Stuttgart 1899.

2. David was one of Bernstein's leading supporters in the revisionism debate and, in later years, a resolute supporter of German imperialism and opponent of the Spartakusbund led by Luxemburg and Liebknecht.

3. Social Reform or Revolution. Leipzig 1899.

4. August Bebel, an intimate friend of Luxemburg and one of the SPD's "elder statesmen", in particular attributed Bernstein's views to his stay in England.

5. Karl Freiherr von Stumm, a leading German industrialist who enjoyed the confidence of Wilhelm II, and co-founder with Arthur Graf von Posadowsky-Wehner of the Deutsche Reichspartei. Violently opposed to trade unionism and social democracy, he advocated the use of the most brutal methods to crush the

working class. Hence Luxemburg's reference to "the era of Stumm-Posadowsky" in the opening paragraph of "Reform or Revolution?"

6. A pre-Marxist Utopian Socialist. One of the founding members of the co-operative movement and the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union. He believed in the possibility of a peaceful transition from capitalism to socialism through the transformation of trade unions into co-operative productive societies.

7. A middle-class reformer who worked in Parliament to the benefit of the trade unions but never lost sight of his own class-interests. He worked for the repeal of the Combination Acts, but also believed that legal trade unionism would be ineffective due to the "Iron Law of Wages" of which he was an adherent.

8. The GNCTU was set up in 1833 and wound up in August of the following year. Owen's goal was that it should unite the working classes for a short and peaceful struggle for socialism, which was to be achieved within a matter of months. But the four main unions of the period did not agree to join. At the time of the Tolpuddle Martyrs, many of the GNCTU's statements took on an increasingly militant tone, to the alarm of Owen, who consequently took the initiative to dissolve it.

9. See introduction

10. From 1845 onwards the National Association of United Trades for the Protection of Labour, set up in March of that year, pressed for legislation to establish "Boards of Trade" for the purposes of arbitration and conciliation. By the end of the 1850s a number of employers were prepared to accept such methods, though the majority remained hostile to any interference in their "freedom" to fix wages as they chose. The "new model unions", given their general aversion to strikes, added further weight to the call for the use of arbitration and conciliation.

11. Cf bookbinders' leader TJ Dunning in "Trade Unions and Strikes" (1860): "It is superfluous to say that the price of labour, like that of everything else, is determined by the quantity or supply of it permanently in the market; when the supply of it permanently much exceeds its demand, nothing can prevent the reduction of wages...In all bargains, the buyer wishes to buy as cheap, and the seller to sell as dear, as he can...all things being equal, their interest is not one of opposition, but of mutual interest."

12. The cotton operatives received substantial legislative concessions from the Tories in the period referred to by Luxemburg. Divided fairly evenly in their political sympathies between Liberals and Conservatives, the operatives received such concessions by way of pressure from Tory MPs anxious to hold on to the constituencies in which the operatives lived. But the tactic of lobbying bourgeois parliamentarians for legislative reform remained a feature of the TUC's Political Committee through to the end of the century.

13. This was especially the case in the cotton industry, where the highly complicated piece price-lists led to a premium being placed on arithmetical skills, assessed by examinations for aspiring union officials.

14. It was members of the Durham and Northumberland district organisations who, as Members of Parliament, spoke up in Parliament in opposition to a bill for an eight-hour working day for miners. Such opposition was based on a fear that the eight-hour working-

day would lead to labour shortages in the pits (the hewers worked a seven-hour shift "bank to bank", while transit hands had to work ten-hour shifts, even as late as 1908) and that the rising costs entailed by a shorter working-day would undermine competition in the export market. Opposition to the eight-hour working day, along with support for the sliding scale of wages, was central to the post-1889 divisions between the Miners' Federation and the National Miners' Union, controlled by the Durham and Northumberland districts. Not until the passing of the Eight Hour Act in 1908 did this cease to be an issue. Moreover it was miner MPs who were the most committed to Lib-Lab politics (at the height of Lib-Lab politics, half of the Lib-Lab MPs returned were miners) and consequently the most opposed to the creation of a party of labour based on the trade union movement.

15. The inferiority of British methods of trading was a cause of particular concern to economists and the government alike in this period.

16. Cf Luxemburg's article "Changes in Shipbuilding", in which she wrote: "The upturn (in shipbuilding) reveals itself most strikingly, of course, in the feverish activity of the English yards, which are the suppliers of the entire world."

17. It is not clear what Luxemburg is referring to here. In the aftermath of the so-called "Sheffield Outrages" (1866) and the Criminal Law Amendment Act (1871) the focal point of debate in labour legislation had not been the question of arbitration but the rights and immunities of trade unions, subsequently confirmed by the Employers and Workmen Act (1875) and a brief amending Act (1876) to the 1871 Act. The 1890s, in fact, saw an extension of legislation concerning arbitration and conciliation. The 1896 Conciliation Act authorised the Board of Trade to intervene in disputes for the purpose of arbitration and conciliation, but subsequent attempts by Ritchie, President of the Board of Trade, to establish a system of conciliation boards found little favour amongst employers.

18. Cf. Engels: "These unskilled are very different chaps from the fossilised brothers of the old trade unions; not a trace of the old formalist spirit, of the craft exclusiveness of the engineers, for instance; on the contrary, a general cry for the organisation of all trade unions in one fraternity and for a direct struggle against capital."

19. Presumably a reference to the Employers' Parliamentary Council.

20. Presumably a reference to the General Federation of Trade Unions, set up in 1899. It was conceived of, and functioned, as a mutual insurance society, rather than a "general workers' league".

21. In December of 1897 Posadowsky-Wehner, in his capacity of Secretary of State of the Imperial Office of the Interior, had written to the governments of the individual German states asking for suggestions for legal measures against the right of coalition and the right to strike. The document sent by Posadowsky was published in the SPD's "Vorwärts" in January of 1898. Speaking in Oeynhausen in September of the same year Wilhelm II announced that a new bill would be introduced into the Reichstag the following year providing for heavy prison penalties for organising and carrying out strikes. The bill was subsequently defeated.

22. Literally, "legend of gobbling up".