



The general strike 1842

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One hundred and fifty years ago the first prolonged general strike of the British working class was at its peak. Tens of thousands of workers in Lancashire, Staffordshire and Yorkshire mounted flying pickets, seized control of whole towns and organised armed militias. To the horror of the employers and aristocrats they transformed their strike from a wage struggle to a struggle for political power. Paul Morris tells the story of this key event in working class history.

In the year year 1842 British capitalism had been in existence for well over half a century. But conditions for the workers in the 'hungry forties' were no less barbaric than in the earliest years of the industrial revolution.

Describing his family's subsistence on eight shillings a week, John Daniels, a Stockport silk weaver told Poor Law commissioners:

'We make our breakfast for seven of us of a cupful of oatmeal made into thin porridge, together with some bread: at dinner we have about six pounds of potatoes, with salt and bread, and at supper it is the same as breakfast . . . this and the ten pence a week we have to pay for coal makes up the eight shillings nearly.'

Men women and children worked twelve and fourteen hours a day, lived in crowded slum dwellings and died young. Repeated recessions meant immediate unemployment for thousands, without any form of benefits, and wage cuts for the rest.

The general strike of 1842 began in response to such a recession. The textile and coal manufacturers of the industrial north demanded wage reductions of between ten and twenty seven percent and massive lay-offs.

But the volatility and revolutionary potential of the strike did not spring merely from the privations the bosses were attempting to force on the workers. The strike came in the midst of a period of mass agitation for political democracy by the working class.

Wrested

In 1832 the rising class of factory owners and bankers wrested a considerable chunk of political power out of the hands of the landed capitalists of the old aristocracy through the Reform Act, which gave the middle class the vote.

The Reform Act was won only after mass, insurrectionary demonstrations by the working class. But, having secured their own majority in Parliament, the bosses quickly dumped the workers. They denied them any rights to vote, banned the trade unions, set about constructing a police force and the notorious workhouse system of forced labour for the unemployed.

In response the Chartist movement sprang up. The first People's Charter was drawn up by the London Working Men's Association in 1838. The plan was to present a massive petition for democracy to parliament.

The Charter demanded votes for all adult men, a secret ballot to prevent vote rigging, annual elections, equal sized electoral districts, the payment of MPs and the abolition of the 'property qualification' for MPs, so that workers could stand for parliament.

From the beginning it was clear that no bosses' parliament would ever accept the Charter. The movement immediately divided over the method of winning the Charter. The so called 'moral force' Chartists, who retained a majority within

the movement initially, refused to countenance any violent struggle. They limited the movement to a mass protest designed to back up radical MPs in parliament.

The 'physical force' wing of Chartism, led by radical democrats like Feargus O'Connor, realised that there would have to be mass struggle and eventually violent insurrection to achieve the Charter. They were not socialists in the modern sense, but they saw working class methods of struggle, in particular the general strike, as the key to winning democracy.

When parliament rejected the Charter in 1839 the 'moral force' strategy won out. Police attacked a mass meeting at the Chartist convention in Birmingham. A half hearted call for a general strike met with a patchy response. Seizing its chance the government responded with mass repression and over 500 Chartist leaders were thrown into jail.

With the first phase of the Chartist movement over, and a class differentiation taking place amongst its battered remnants, the working class turned again to the economic struggle.

The 1842 general strike began with a walk out of coal miners in Stafford, quickly followed by a series of textile workers' walk outs in South East Lancashire, all aimed at preventing forced pay cuts by the bosses. Everywhere workers were forced to create new organisations of struggle, to become leaders themselves overnight. And in many places it was Chartist activists who took the lead.

All the basics of militant trade unionism were learned overnight by tens of thousands of workers. Democratic mass meetings involving thousands of workers adopted resolutions for a walk out by show of hands. Workers on strike marched from one factory to the next 'turning out' other workers by persuasion and encouraging the few whose resolution wavered with sticks and stones.

After two weeks of sporadic walkouts in Lancashire and Cheshire mills a mass meeting on Mottram Moor, near Stalybridge, resolved to call the general strike from Monday 8 August.

As had already happened at smaller strike meetings, the workers' leaders linked the wages question to the question of political democracy, and the masses eagerly agreed. William Muirhouse, the chair of the Mottram Moor meeting told the thousands of workers assembled:

'I must inform you we are not here for a wage question, or for a religious question, it is a national question . . . at 've o'clock in the morning we will proceed from factory to factory, and all hands that will not willingly come out we will turn them out. And friends, when we are out, we will remain out until the Charter, which is the only guarantee you have for your wages, becomes the law of the land.'

Powerless

Throughout the next week the strike spread from the mill towns to the city of Manchester itself. Factory after factory came out. Despite mobilising special constables and cavalry regiments the authorities were powerless to stop mass demonstrations entering Manchester.

By 15 August the whole of the Lancashire, Cheshire and Yorkshire cotton industry was on strike, along with miners from Staffordshire to Lanarkshire—some 250, 000 workers in all. However, as the strike spread the army and local constabulary repeatedly 'red on unarmed crowds, killing and wounding strikers.

The question of political power was being posed point blank, revealing the revolutionary potential and significance of the general strike weapon. The workers themselves were assembling all the elements of the answer to that question. But at the decisive moments they lacked the political leadership and scientific socialist strategy to resolve it in a revolutionary way.

A National Delegate Trades Conference had been called for 15 August in Manchester. and was preceded by over 25 local public trades conferences of workers organised on a sectoral basis. These mass meetings elected delegates to the national conference. Amendments limiting the aims of the general strike to the wages question were debated and

defeated, and the Conference resolved to call the whole country out on a general strike for the Charter.

One day later the political leadership of the Chartist movement met in Manchester and endorsed their call for a general strike. This was the point where the strike turned from a regional, semi-spontaneous general strike to a national political one: by the end of August half a million workers were on strike, and the movement had spread to London, producing 'riotous assemblies' in all the main working class districts.

Meanwhile, the local meetings had developed into permanently sitting bodies, organising the strike and trying to feed the families of the strikers. In embryo local organs of working class power were springing up. Local strike committees authorised exemptions from the strike for essential work. Women played a full role in the strike, not merely by carrying stones in their aprons during the battles with the military, but also through their own organisations such as the Lodge of Industrious Females.

Faced with the solidity of the strike, the bosses' first attempts to mobilise irregular forces to crush it failed. In response the government mobilised the army. As the guards marched to the railway stations from their London barracks they were surrounded by vast crowds of workers who booed and jostled them. But once in the northern industrial towns the military machine of the British Empire began to prove more than a match for the unarmed crowds of workers.

At the same time the lack of a revolutionary strategy and centralised leadership took its toll on the strike movement. Having resolved to stay out 'for the Charter' workers could not see how the Charter was to be won. Meanwhile they were starving. So gradually the economic demands of the strike began to be negotiated with individual mill owners, many of whom caved in on wages to avert the threat of revolution.

As the strike petered out, the state responded with mass repression. Literally thousands of workers were arrested in September and October—not only on picketing charges, but lined up for mass conspiracy trials.

The political leadership of the strike never planned or organised for a confrontation with the state, let alone to seize the insurrectionary opportunity the strike represented. Even the 'physical force' Chartists were confused and hesitant about leading the strikers into a real battle for power.

Confusion

One of the most militant leaders, McDouall, summed up the confusion. He urged peace and order on the strikers on the grounds that 'when a universal holiday prevails . . . then of what use will bayonets be against public opinion?' The general strike, without an insurrection, he believed, would be enough to win.

Taking the strike forward to the insurrection for the seizure of power was a link that the leaders proved unable to make. The general strike poses the question of power, of who rules. But the insurrection decides the answer. Chartism in 1842 was not a sufficiently developed and homogeneous movement to understand this link.

Today school history lessons reduce the strike, and the whole physical force wing of Chartism, to the status of a doomed experiment at revolution amid a struggle for political reform. The leaders of the Labour and trade union movement tell us that violence and revolution have never been part of the British working class tradition.

This is why they won't be celebrating the anniversary of that glorious August and September of 1842, when the British working class demonstrated a revolutionary spirit and a will to act.

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