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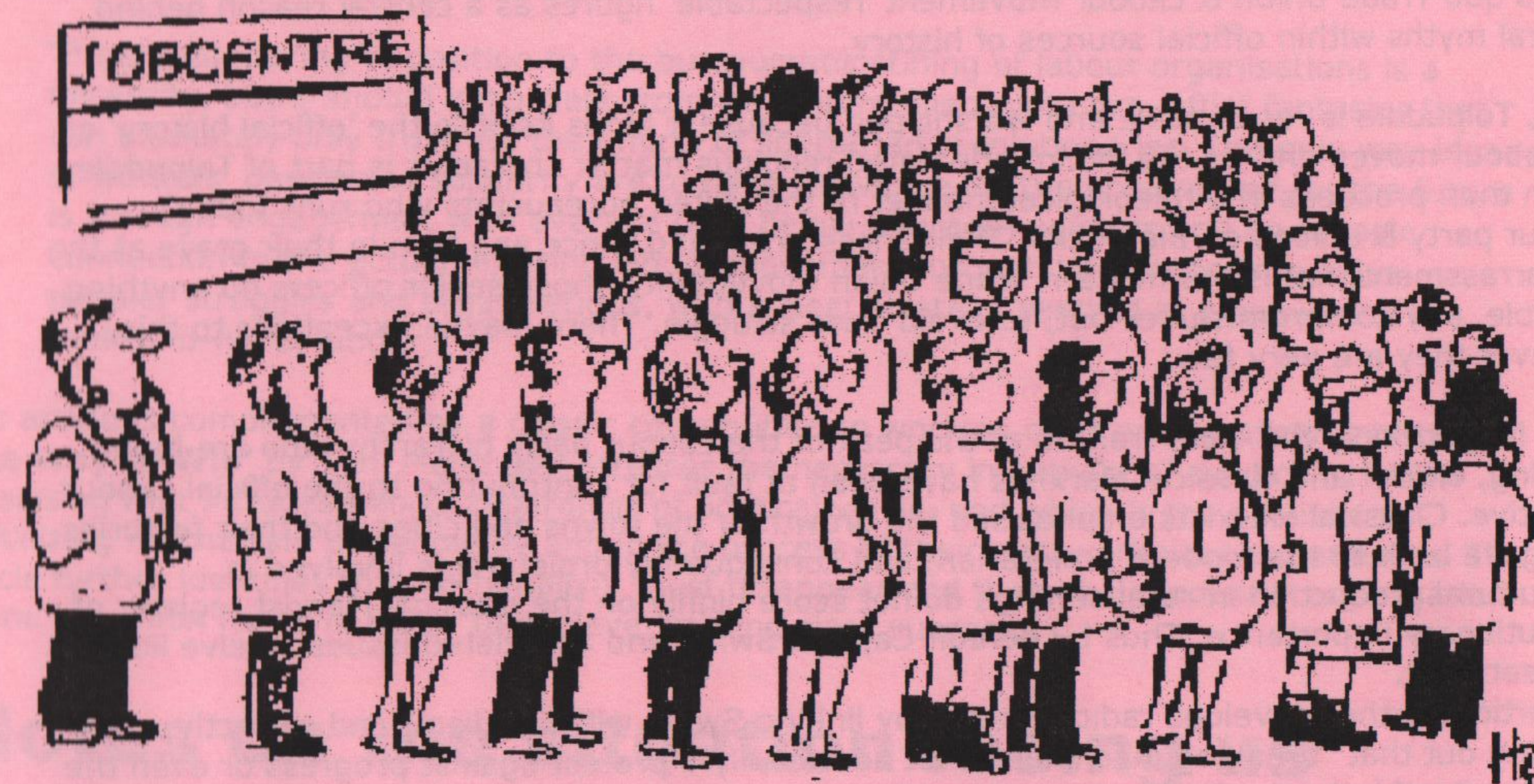
# Mayday <sup>12245</sup> #5 <sup>M</sup>

Summer 2010

£2

ISSN 2402-0706

## Labour isn't Working



## 'Cos of Tory Cuts!

Red Anarchism; Notes on the Situation facing us – class struggle today; Tolpuddle and Swing by Roger, Bristol Radical History Group – The British Marxist Historians, & other labour movement myths; Revolutionary Unionism, Yesterday, Today Tomorrow by Dan Jackpovich; The Way to Win by Tom Mann

# Red Anarchism

Friends, Romans, Country people, lend us your ear.

Mayday 5, like Mayday 4, kicks and struggles and grapples with the events of our time, and continues to try to ride the waves of history. We suggested that Mayday 5 would have a **Red anarchist theme** and it has, but not exactly as imagined. It was thought that there would be more political anarchism and Marxism, and hybrids of, in this issue, but that will have to wait.

Instead, we have an examination of class struggle in the form of 2 articles in the **syndicalist tradition**, & the politics and economics of our time in **Notes on the Situation Facing Us**. In particular it is vital that clear working class understanding of the need to resist the cuts is spread and that means destroying the argument that it is because of debt that the workers have to suffer. So **Mayday 5** explores the deficit/debt issue, and of course, the rich NEVER suffer. The article on Captain Swing is a very interesting discussion of the contours of hegemonic discourse surrounding popular memory, and analysis of the politics contained within. This much-needed discussion within anarchist circles has been overdue for way too long already. The analysis starts from very understandable problematics and develops the ideological issues, identifying the 'need for a victim orientated narrative' by those institutional status quo Trade Union & Labour movement 'respectable' figures as a central reason behind several myths within official sources of history.

Thus, Tolpuddle is respectable and worshipped because it lends itself to the 'official history' of the labour movement, as the victim orientated religious martyr character is part of Tolpuddle, which then proceeds in a teleological manner to the suited bureaucrats who runs today's labour party & unions on big bucks. Their ancestors would wince and turn in their grave at the embarrassment that is the modern Trade Union movement, whose senior officers do anything possible, any compromise/sell out, to avoid class struggle. There maybe exceptions to this, however they are very few.

Also, it is not only the class traitors at the peak of the Labour party hierarchy who are found wanting, official and classical Marxists have been at fault for contributing to the official Labour narrative. Classical Marxists emphasised the growth of the towns and cities and their factories that gave birth to the modern proletariat, and consequently proletarians involved in agricultural production in rural settings do not score highly on the classical Marxist register of revolutionary importance. Thus by default Captain Swing and associated issues receive little or no treatment.

The article further develops radical theory by linking Swing with Luddism, and correctly pointing out that "breaking machines is not necessarily a protest against progress or even the machine itself but actually *an attempt to alter or oppose the economic (and ultimately I would argue political) power relations within which the machine is introduced.*" Overall, this fantastic contribution to historiography has;

"shown the Swing rising represented an antithesis of the Tolpuddle narrative in that it was massive, complicated and filled with a mix of 'pre-industrial' forms of sometimes violent collective direct action. Its acceleration and unpredictability was its strength, the fear of incendiarism and the portentous Swing letters sending shudders down the spines of the landowning gentry. The tricolours flying over villages in the autumn of 1830 and the seditious handbills of the radicals distributed amongst the Swing rioters frightened the ruling classes on a national level. No wonder it was buried by the Whigs, and later by the reformist labour historians for 130 years, to be rediscovered by the British Marxist school of historians under the pressure of the New Left ideological shift in the

1960s. Also I hope I have shown that Hobsbawm and Rudé's analysis of Swing although ground-breaking and absolutely necessary, contains within it the ideological clues to why it took so long for the 'revolutionary' left to acknowledge it. The fetters of the classical Marxist stagist theory of history upon class consciousness, allied with Marx's disdain for the rural and its proletariat plus the rigid Leninist doctrines concerning the validity of self-organisation and spontaneity put Swing and other similar waves of class struggle in the 'dustbin of history' for too long."

The Bristol Radical History group <http://www.brh.org.uk/> has been making great contributions for years already, and their excellent treatment of the elections recently (April 2010) and *the fight for the vote* are fantastic contributions to our movement.

## Syndicalism

Next, **Revolutionary Unionism, Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow** by Dan Jackpovich & the discussion of the history of syndicalism and the politics is a very useful contribution to the political moment that faces many activists. Who are trying to rethink the mistakes of the past, and those in the present that bang their head against the wall of the modern bureaucratic and tightly controlled trade union. Time and again, activists become frustrated with the conservative practices of the Trade Union bureaucracy, and this article intends to give people who think about issues like this some hope whilst not falling into the Ultra Left delusions, sentiments with which Mayday totally concurs;

"Principled, daring opposition to the bureaucratic stifling of labour organisations is a necessity, but it should keep clear from well-intentioned, yet ultra-leftist fantasies that can ultimately only frustrate the efforts of libertarian revolutionaries. The only way ideas of workers' power and solidarity are to have relevance for the present and for the future is through engagement with average (and below-average) workers and an organic connection to the actual, existing labour movement through immersion into mass popular struggles and organisations, with a clear strategy centred at empowering the rank-and-file of labour."

This article is complemented by a classic contribution to working class and syndicalist history. **'The Way to Win'** by Tom Mann that stresses the necessary inclusivity of syndicalist union organising that includes people regardless of political views, and which is the necessary politicizing mechanism of people by and in the process of their own workplace experiences. The article further identifies that sectionalism must disappear and that whole industry organisation in one big union for all is a way to achieve working class success.

## Notes on the situation facing us

Never has the political situation of our time been experienced as blatantly as it is now. The state in the form of government, police and army are all increasing their direct and ideological attacks on the working class in the UK and around the world. As Naomi Klein in her book "The Shock Doctrine" showed (reviewed in Mayday issue 2), government and capitalism around the world all use natural and people-made disasters to their advantage. Either in the form of harsher working conditions, harsher prison conditions, harsher standards of warfare or the decreasing of controls upon capitalism which means privatisation and less state control, so that basically capitalism can do what the hell it wants, the rich get even richer, and to hell with the consequences.

**Make the Bankers and the Rich Pay!**

Currently in the UK while the Rich (Sunday Times Rich List, 25.4.10) have increased their wealth by 30% in a year of crisis for everybody else, lower grade management, the workers and poor all have to take the brunt of the economic pain for the fuck up made by the rich and powerful. They use the UK deficit of £163 billion as an excuse to attack the conditions of all. This £163 billion debt could be wiped out immediately if we only took half of the wealth (£335.5 billion) of the richest 100 people, **still leaving them fabulously wealthy**, and pay off the national debt with it. Of course it can be done, it is just that there is no political will to do so. We would immediately freeze the assets of the rich until we have direct control of the required levels of finance.

### Flying Pickets

The British Airways (BA) negotiator who recently said informally to Union negotiators that the 'workers will have to get Asian' and to hell with payment levels and conditions says it all. Of course, the BA negotiator wants conditions where they have to pay next to nothing for labour, so there is no holiday, sick, or pension rights and wage levels are rock bottom. Rather like the capitalists want for the whole economy. In part this has already been achieved, but now the struggle is against further lowering of wage and benefit levels, and for fair living conditions for all.

There are other contradictions in the class war at present. It just shows that there was at no point a serious consideration of democracy when the capitalists accused the N.U.M in the 1980s of 'not having a fair ballot to strike'. 'Democracy' as Mayday 1 indicated, is not about fairness for all, it is about getting the capitalists their way all the time. Thus for the second time, BA went to court and managed to get an injunction preventing strike action despite an overwhelming ballot FOR action. These attacks on workers abilities to strike show that a **right to strike** does not exist and that Labour made it harder by increasing the technical elements of Trade Union law that unions have to go through before a ballot is legal. Of course, workers resistance is criminalised and anything the bosses do is OK.

There are now specialist law firms that advise bosses on minor technical breaches of law, enough to get strikes blocked, which amounts to a breach of Article 11 of the European Convention of Human Rights, which provides that;

"Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and to freedom of association with others, including the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his/her interests".

We should be wary of the myth that the Labour party leadership is at all reliant on the unions, when the unions have consistently been in dispute with the New Labour government. It is bankers, business people, and the rich buggers who have been in charge; the only difference is that the Tories do it openly. All this has had calamitous consequences for all of us.

Facing us now are the Tory Liberal democrats – **Condoms** – who are pulling blinkers over our eyes, but even Labour did not help with their acceptance that cuts were necessary. So it is necessary to look at the terms of the current debate and its likely political implications.

### Is cutting public debt really an objective economic necessity, or is it actually a deeply political position that mediates the interests of the rich, business and financial elites?

The answer of course is that it is in the interests of the Rich and powerful that government is acting, as usual. From financial lubrication for the rich and business, to 'get the system working again', we have moved onto austerity and cuts for the masses of people, exemplified by the G20 recently. Business profits are boosted by the state which taxes the people until the

pips squeak to make large profits for the super rich. To prove this a brief outline of economics and history will be attempted now.

The end of Keynesian economic policy in the early 1970s is the root cause of current economic woes. The answer then for the rich was Thatcher and Reagan who adopted Neo Liberalism as promoted by Milton Friedman et al (the monetarists) and monetary policy. This return to pre Keynesian economics, liberalism and social conservatism was very destructive. The fierce monetary and fiscal squeeze that followed destroyed manufacturing and mining, while developing oil and the abolition of exchange controls allowed money to be invested abroad. This in turn allowed the further dominance of imperial control, in the form of the world financial, inc. mineral and energy, markets created at first by the UK and developed with American capital. This *frontier capitalism*, in the form of dynamic (rapid and vast) expansion, as it always does, to unsustainable credit growth, overheated markets, credit squeezes (crunches) and inflationary pressures.

The gradual dominance of neo liberal economics means that there is a wave of policy makers with no knowledge of alternatives, and thus a dominance of neo liberal ideology. It is ironic that it took Keynesian policy and knowledge of, and practice, in terms of quantitative easing, from Britain to save world capitalism. Debt that gets beyond levels repeatedly announced by right wing forces promotes further problems for the country in such debt. Thus **Greece** is told that they have to cut debt levels, why? Because Markets say so, but why do they say that? Because we are told, experts say so? But why? Because the markets need them. This of course is self-fulfilling prophecy and not argument. Greece has proved that wants a country is indicated as 'weak', then financial markets move to exploit the situation and cause further crisis for that country, not because there is an underlying problem. A radical government (an oxymoron anyway) would never be able to borrow any money, simply because the markets wouldn't allow it.

Today's global capitalism relies on imbalances anyway, the trade deficits countries like the USA (whose debt is virtually owned by China) and the UK run up because manufacturing is accomplished abroad show that world markets can cope with differences. Why the obsession with getting debt to 'normal' levels, when the economy is flowing as naturally as it can now (though it still has not reached relatively high levels of growth)?

The answer lies, as it always does, in class warfare. Neo-liberalism was capitalism's reply to growing working class strength around the world. Now they promote division and trade workers against worker, all that matters is cuts, getting everybody to 'compete' against each other, while the rich do not compete except to see *who can book the best suite at the seven star hotel in Dubia*.

The crisis of September 2008 when we were 2 or 3 days away from money drying up completely, this imminent total meltdown forced the glocal (global and local) elites to allow a massive rescue plan for the world banks and its economies. This disarray was only temporary and when the rich had regained confidence, they were straight away deflecting responsibility, and therefore blame from themselves and putting it onto the usual suspects (the poor). Thus they shifted debate from banks and other financial institutions, to blaming governments for allowing it to happen. Schizophrenia! Against state control when they want to make money, and then blame the state for not taking enough control when it goes wrong. **It's a win win situation for the rich.**

The Condom budget included a rise in VAT to 20%, a pay freeze for most public sector workers and the cutting and erosion of a number of key benefits - including housing benefit.

These CUTS will hit millions of workers and the poorest people in society very hard, and there is much more to come, such as large-scale public sector job losses and attacks on pensions. At the same time, the richest in society will benefit from the lowest rate of corporation tax of any major western economy, a cut to 24% over the next three years.

This onslaught can be stopped. The cuts should be met with an equally dynamic and persistent response from ordinary working people - saying NO to cuts, job losses, welfare cuts, pension cuts and privatisation. It is imperative that we link up all the struggles, different groups should twin with other similar campaign and union groups in different sectors so the struggles have natural connections. These connections are there, it is time to manifest them and make them real.

This *catalogue of horror is far from complete as far as the government is concerned. More is coming in its Comprehensive Spending Review.* In October; a further £17 billion a year will be cut from government departments by 2014/15, taking the total combined amount of spending cuts and tax rises to around £80 billion a year before the government has finished. Most departments are targeted for cuts of around 25% over the next four years, with the hardest hit to include schools, transport and housing. Up to one million public sector jobs are being lined up for the axe out of the present six million, and public sector pensions are particularly in the government's firing line.

Most public sector workers on the other hand, who are already very hard-pressed financially, face a two year pay freeze, which IS A PAY CUT when inflation is taken into account. Those earning under £21,000 will receive a flat rate increase of £250 a year and all workers will gain from a £1,000 increase in the tax free allowance. These small concessions will quickly become outweighed by the extra costs of the VAT increase and other government attacks. The VAT increase will have a major impact on all working and middle class people - it is a regressive tax that affects the poorest the most.

Osborne's phoney 'consultation of the people' will not be a true free choice. We will not be given the opportunity to tick a box which says; 'Would you like your local council to remain fully staffed?' nor one saying 'Should we increase the income tax on the rich, abolish off shore tax havens', or 'restore corporation tax to the much higher level of the pre-Thatcher days?' We will not be asked to state that we want wages that pay our bills, or to scrap Trident or to end the war in Afghanistan. We will not be given the choice of cancelling all PFI debt instead of cutting benefits for the sick and unemployed.

The plans to slash government departments' budgets by up to 40 percent represent a massive cut to public services, which millions of people rely on. The attacks will destroy services and throw the economy from recession into depression. So, join in with other groups, the Trade Unions are talking class war in the Public Services Alliance and are looking for allies, broad left and anarchist alliances will all be part of the developing fightback.

What the syndicalists and the IWW want is to overcome the barriers e.g. sectional issues and the anti strike laws to realise working class strength in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This is likely to develop in practice, and there will be many opportunities to protest both locally and nationally. The call by the European TUC for a European-wide day of action on **29 September**, which could potentially involve 24-hour general strikes in a number of European countries, is something that could develop across the summer and have a significant impact by the time the date arrives.

The Tory conference in Birmingham on **October 3<sup>rd</sup>** could also be one place to start, and so could a huge anti cuts demo **at the end of October**;

<http://ianbone.wordpress.com/2010/06/30/huge-anti-cuts-demo-in-october/>

**See you all on the frontline!**

## Tolpuddle and Swing: The Flea and the Elephant

*'One and all, one and all, we'll stand by one another'*

Chant of a Sussex Swing mob (1830)<sup>1</sup>

*'We will destroy the constables and threshing machines this year, next year we will have a turn with the parsons, and the third we will make war upon the statesmen'*

Kent Swing activist (1830)<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

In February 2009 some members of Bristol Radical History Group travelled to Salisbury Guild Hall to witness the unveiling of a Trade Union plaque to commemorate the people who had passed through the court as a result of the agricultural uprisings of 1830<sup>3</sup>. Until very recently these disturbances known as the 'Swing Riots' occupied a strange place in my memory. The very name 'Swing' conjured up a vaguely sinister (but appealing nonetheless) series of scattered backward 'deep-country' riots mixed with some Luddite-like behaviour.

Having got more seriously into history over the last few years I have come to be suspicious of my own 'folk' memories for a couple of reasons. Firstly, I know from experiencing a few historic events in my own lifetime that it doesn't take long for the pure volume of media (TV, radio, newspapers, books, internet etc.) to overwhelm the populace with hegemonic<sup>4</sup> views about such incidents and from there they often pass into our collective memory to become what we all remember<sup>5</sup>. Secondly I stopped learning history at school when I was 14, so most of what I absorbed concerned Romans, Anglo-Saxons and Vikings (and most of this I have forgotten)!

Consequently much of the history I have acquired has come later in life due to its intersection with various social and political activities. However, my lack of formal education in history above pre-GCSE level I take as a useful advantage as it allows me to judge my historical memory in keeping with the majority of the British population.

This year Bristol Radical History Group have been asked by local Trade Unions to take part in the 175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Tolpuddle festival. Now I do know about Tolpuddle, the repression unleashed by the state in 1833-34 on a group of Dorset farm labourers who joined an early Trade Union. Six 'martyrs' were tried and convicted and transported to Australia as a result. The date is curious, as it is so close to the 'Swing' events of 1830-31. I mulled this over and thought I better check out this Swing malarkey. After all, I thought, there might be an interesting link between the two events. The seminal work on these rural disturbances is 'Captain Swing'<sup>6</sup>, authored by the Marxist historians Eric Hobsbawm and George Rudé, which I would highly recommend as it's readable and full of interesting angles on the revolt. This work forms the starting point of my analysis and critique of the historiography<sup>7</sup> of the Swing risings.

<sup>1</sup> Hobsbawm, E.J. and George Rudé. *Captain Swing*. Penguin University Books (Harmondsworth) 1973 p.82.

<sup>2</sup> Wells, R., 'Rural Rebels in Southern England in the 1830s' in *Artisans, Peasants & Proletarians: 1760-1860* Edt. Emsley, C. and J. Walvin, Croom Helm (Kent) 1985. p.134.

<sup>3</sup> There are very few memorials to the Swing risings. A second plaque was unveiled in Hampshire in June 2009 [http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/search/4435203.Micheldever\\_s\\_tribute\\_to\\_executed\\_rioter/](http://www.dailyecho.co.uk/search/4435203.Micheldever_s_tribute_to_executed_rioter/)

<sup>4</sup> Dominant views in a society, Marx claimed they were the views of the ruling class at any particular period of history.

<sup>5</sup> By way of example, I was chatting to some students in the pub a few months ago who told me about the *race riots* of the 1980s. In another incident, some political activists explained to me that the 1990s Poll Tax protests in Bristol weren't violent!

<sup>6</sup> See note 1.

<sup>7</sup> Historiography is the study of how knowledge of the past, recent or distant, is obtained and transmitted. Broadly speaking, historiography examines the writing of history and the use of historical methods, drawing upon such elements such as authorship, sourcing, interpretation, style, bias, and audience.

## So what were the 'Swing riots'?

The 'Swing riots' were a huge wave of mass machine breaking, arson, protests, riots and extortion carried out by farm labourers and village artisans between the summers of 1830 and 1831<sup>8</sup>. Beginning in Kent the movement spread rapidly over three months to engulf twenty-two counties from the southeast to the southwest of England. They became known as the Swing riots as the collective destruction of agricultural machines and the burning of hayricks was often preceded by a threatening letter to the owners signed by the mysterious 'Captain Swing'<sup>9</sup>. The disturbances were characterised by self-organised mobile gangs of farm labourers and others, often from different villages, carrying out the brazen destruction of machinery and extortion of the better-off landowners in a local district. Other facets of the movement included riots over wages and tithes, the destruction of workhouses and factories and attacks on parsons, the gentry and overseers of the poor.

According to Hobsbawm and Rudé there were several causes for the riots the most obvious being the progressive unemployment and pauperisation of the farm labourers after the Napoleonic Wars, partly due to the mechanisation of agriculture. As a result many of the labourers and their families were forced into taking parish charity and consequently there were attempts by the wealthy to reduce the increasing burden of poor relief<sup>10</sup>. The final straw was two particularly bad harvests in 1828 and 1829<sup>11</sup>, which faced the already hungry, and desperate farm labourers in the summer of 1830, after an unimpressive harvest, with little option but to take action.

To give some idea of the scale of the disturbances (and these are conservative estimates<sup>12</sup>), over 400 agricultural machines (mostly threshing) were destroyed; there were around 350 cases of arson and over 350 riots between Jan 1830 and Sept 1832<sup>13</sup>. The final cost of the destruction was conservatively estimated by Hobsbawm and Rudé to be in the region of £120,000<sup>14</sup> (approximately £136 million pounds<sup>15</sup>). The human cost to the labourers and their allies was even more severe with nearly 2000 trials, of which 252 people were sentenced to death (19 were actually executed), 644 imprisoned and nearly 500 transported to Australia for terms of 7 to 14 years with little hope of ever returning<sup>16</sup>. This was the largest group of prisoners ever transported from England for a common crime. The authors point out as a result of the repression *'in the south of England, there were whole communities that, for a generation, were stricken by the blow. From no other protest movement of the kind – from neither Luddites nor Chartists, nor trade unionists – was such a bitter price exacted'*<sup>17</sup>.

## Why Tolpuddle and not Swing?

<sup>8</sup> The height of the disturbances being between August 1830 and January 1831.

<sup>9</sup> The origin of 'Captain Swing' is not definitively known. It has been speculated that it is connected to the 'captains', the leaders of the harvest gangs who shouted *'Altogether Swing!'* when scything the corn. Alternatively, the 'swingel' was a flexible part of a threshing flail (*'Swing Unmasked'*, Edited by Michael Holland, FACHRS Publications 2005 p.5).

<sup>10</sup> This was often achieved by humiliating the poor in public to drive them off the relief (Hobsbawm and Rudé p.53).

<sup>11</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé chap. 4.

<sup>12</sup> John Archer in *'Social Unrest and Popular Protest in England: 1780-1840'* Cambridge University Press (Cambridge) 2000 p.16 noted that *'The 'last labourers' revolt', as the Hammonds termed it, was far more widespread than they had documented and with each succeeding generation of historians the scale appears even greater'*. This appears to be the case, as more recently Carl Griffin shows in East Kent that Hobsbawm and Rudé underestimate Swing incidents by 85%, see p.140 Table 1. in Griffin, Carl *'There was no law to punish that offence'. Reassessing 'Captain Swing': Rural Luddism and Rebellion in East Kent, 1830-31.* Southern History Vol.22 pp. 131-163 (2000). Also a recent countrywide survey by the Family and Community Historical Research Society (FACHRS) has suggested that the 1475 'Swing' type incidents recorded by Hobsbawm and Rudé (App. I) between 1<sup>st</sup> January 1830 and 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1832 should be expanded to 3350, an increase of 137%! See *'Swing Unmasked'*, Edited by Michael Holland, FACHRS Publications 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé App. I. Interestingly, no one was killed by the rioters in this orgy of destruction and the author's argue that this was not the aim of the uprisings p.179.

<sup>14</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.188-90.

<sup>15</sup> Based on Per Capita GDP.

<sup>16</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.224.

<sup>17</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.225.

So why don't I know about the Swing uprising? As a historical event it makes the Tolpuddle incident look like a flea on the back of an elephant! I can understand why don't I remember it as vividly as the Battle of Trafalgar or Waterloo. I have come to expect this from my memory, which was partly constructed by history books and war comics in the 60s and 70s written by British nationalist mythmakers<sup>18</sup>. But hang on a minute I come from vaguely lefty stock, so how could such a massive movement be obscured for so long? After all, it's not Irish history, which (finally) we seem to be seeing on the TV and radio after the end of 'the Troubles'. Hobsbawm and Rudé were given huge praise for writing the groundbreaking 'Captain Swing', so how come it took until 1969 for somebody to write it? My shock at this state of affairs was the inspiration to think these issues through and try to answer some of these questions.

My recent comparison of the riots in Bristol in 1831 with the Peterloo 'massacre' in 1819<sup>19</sup> follows a similar path to what I am going to suggest here. I am going to discount the more reactionary views about ahistorical 'rabblies' and 'mobs', which are fairly useless at explaining anything apart from the political position of the proponent<sup>20</sup>. Instead I am going to suggest that the Swing uprisings just didn't (and still don't) tick the right boxes for either the Whig<sup>21</sup>, social-democratic/labour or even the classical Marxist histories (despite the pioneering efforts of Hobsbawm and Rudé). I am going to start by outlining the criteria that were required for a historical event to become iconic in modern Trade Union history and compare Tolpuddle with Swing in this context. Then I move onto to examine the more complex problems events such as the Swing risings face with respect to classical Marxist analysis.

## Formal organisation

In general for historical events to be recognised as part of social democratic or Trade Union history there must be a *formal organisation* involved. The Tolpuddle martyrs score well here as they joined a 'friendly society' run by a respectable Methodist<sup>22</sup>. Friendly societies have been interpreted as early forms of Trade Union and although it would have been better for the Tolpuddle narrative if it had been in an industrial setting, beggars can't be choosers when it comes to random repression by the state. Unfortunately, although the numerous Swing militants showed admirable and highly functional forms of self-organisation, including early types of flying pickets and 'hit squads' beloved by the more militant industrial workers of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, were able to organise mass meetings and deploy delegates from various villages<sup>23</sup> and were able to spread their movement both physically and by example across virtually half of England in less than three months, *they didn't have a formally recognised organisation*. Despite valiant (or desperate?) attempts by Hobsbawm and Rudé to find an actual rather than causal link between non-conformist religious groups or friendly societies and the organisation of the Swing risings they were forced to concede that Colonel Brotherton's assessment that *'the insurrectionary movement seems to be directed by no plan or system, but merely actuated by the spontaneous feeling of the peasants, and quite at random'* was correct<sup>24</sup>. So Swing *apparently* scores nil points on the formal organisation scale.

## Non-violence and direct action

The arrest, trial and transportation of the Tolpuddle six for swearing an oath was met by peaceful mass petitioning (800,000 signatures), a meeting of 1000 people and a one day demonstration of 200,000 in

<sup>18</sup> And of course New Labour who appear to have dropped their multi-cultural post-modernist street credibility for a standard nationalist grand narrative since the so-called 'War on Terror'!

<sup>19</sup> See *'1831 And All That...'* at <http://www.brh.org.uk/articles/1831.html>

<sup>20</sup> In any case they have been pretty much demolished by works such as the excellent: Rudé, George. *'The Crowd in History: A study of popular disturbances in France and England, 1730-1848'*. Serif (London) 1995.

<sup>21</sup> 'Whig history' can be defined as the idea that British history is following a gradual path towards ever-greater liberty and enlightenment, culminating in modern forms of liberal democracy and constitutional monarchy.

<sup>22</sup> Actually the *Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers* led by George Loveless and probably a branch of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union (GNCTU), see *'Radical and Revolting: The English Working Class'* Revolutions Per Minute No. 12 p.16-18.

<sup>23</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.89 and 176.

<sup>24</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.187.

London<sup>25</sup>. The six were eventually pardoned two years later in March 1836 and all had returned to England by 1838. So one could argue that the peaceful and law abiding campaign for their pardon was successful. However the fact that the authorities were able to carry out this disgraceful trial and transportation *at all*, shows their feeling of strength and confidence after the horror years of 1830-31.

In contrast to the peaceful Tolpuddle incident, the Swing risings involved a great deal of direct action involving systematic destruction of property by arson and hammer, straight forward riot, successful attempts to release prisoners, violent threats by crowds in order to extort money from the wealthy and in some cases public beatings of the gentry and clergy. In this form of open class warfare, the normally veiled relations of force are exposed and weaknesses in the systems of control become obvious to the protagonists.

For example, consider this public declaration by Norfolk magistrates on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1830 after a week of Swing riot and arson: *'The Magistrates..., having taken into consideration the disturbed state of the... Country in general, wish to make it publicly known that it is their opinion that such disturbances principally arise from the use of Threshing Machines, and to the insufficient Wages of the labourers. The Magistrates therefore beg to recommend to the Owners and Occupiers of Land in these Hundreds to discontinue the use of Threshing Machines, and to increase the Wages of Labour to Ten shillings a week....at the same time they feel that no severe measures will be necessary, if the proprietors of Land will give proper employment to the Poor on their own Occupations, and encourage their Tenants to do the same'*<sup>26</sup>. This amazing statement, showing the impact of the Swing uprising upon the gentry and their magistrates, is effectively a reform against the financial interests of the landed and clearly shows the supposedly unwavering 'Law of the Land' to be a sham purely dependant on relations of force in a class war<sup>27</sup>.

A clear comparison can be made here with the failure of 200,000 people on a *peaceful* demonstration to get an immediate pardon for the Tolpuddle six in 1834. Perhaps, a few hundred *rioting* Dorset labourers may have got the men free or even forced the magistrates to drop the ridiculous charges in the first place. The point I am making is that the Tolpuddle incident fits the bill for a particular view of Trade Union history, as it involved *no direct action, destruction of property or violence* despite the fact that those kinds of actions had been and were still prevalent at the time around Tolpuddle<sup>28</sup>. In fact, the peaceable Friendly Society or early Trade Union that characterised the Tolpuddle incident was the exception to the rule<sup>29</sup> whereas *arson, machine breaking and riot, were not*<sup>30</sup>. The Swing risings were too close to these forms of direct action and as such failed to suit the reformist and parliamentary practices that the Trade Unions were engaging in then and of course now. Tolpuddle by comparison emphasises the peaceful search for justice through Trade Unionism.

#### The need for a victim orientated narrative

The Swing and Tolpuddle histories do have a significant connection in that most of the convicted protagonists ended up transported to Australia to work as forced labourers on government projects or for private employers. The main difference of course is that the Tolpuddle Martyrs are just that, *martyrs*. That is they are generally regarded as *innocent* victims of the unjust Combination laws of the 18<sup>th</sup> century<sup>31</sup>. However, these acts had actually been repealed in 1824 and in practice an obscure 1797 law relating to the Mutiny Act

<sup>25</sup> *'Radical and Revolting: The English Working Class'* Revolutions Per Minute No. 12 p.16-18.

<sup>26</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.123-24. These magistrates were heavily reprimanded by central government for apparently acceding to the demands of the riotous labourers.

<sup>27</sup> The success of the use of these tactics by the Swing rioters can be gauged by the directive issued by the Home Secretary on 8<sup>th</sup> December 1830 to all magistrates which stated *'dictating a discontinuance of all yielding to threat or intimidation, either as respects the recommendation of a uniform rate of wages or the non-employment of the thrashing machines which, it is justly observed, are as much under the protection of the law as any other machinery'* Rudé p.154. In addition, the Whig government actually created Special Commissions to try the Swing rioters in some areas as they did not trust the local magistracy to carry out the harsh repression required. See Archer p.21.

<sup>28</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé note that incendiarism was very prevalent in the region of Tolpuddle p.327.

<sup>29</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.252.

<sup>30</sup> Of course urban labour disputes had often involved 'collective bargaining by riot' in the 18<sup>th</sup> century see Rudé p.70.

<sup>31</sup> Rudé notes that *'Trade Unions, or 'combinations', were, however expressly forbidden by Act of Parliament- among tailors in 1721 and 1767; in the woollen trades in 1726; in 1749, in the silk, linen, cotton, fustian, iron, and leather trades and others; and universally, by the notorious Combination Act of 1799'* Rudé p.68.

forbidding the swearing of oaths was used to convict them<sup>32</sup>. This makes them doubly victimised, by the fact that they were unjustly arrested for joining a Trade Union and outrageously convicted of treasonous behaviour. Consequently, they were perfect material for reformist propagandists who could portray them as patriots rather than traitors, merely trying to protect their meagre wages by joining this new form of organisation, the Trade Union in the guise of a Friendly Society.

In contrast, those convicted of offences during the Swing rising were part of a desperate movement that went on the *offensive* against the classes who exploited their labour. That is, they *actually did something*. They were not (in general) innocent; they did break machines, commit arson, and extort money from the parsons and the gentry. Not only this, they often did it on mass, in broad daylight and with a conviction partly derived from a belief in customary right. That is *that they were entitled to do so*. They are thus considered in standard British histories to be *guilty*. This is a recurrent problem for any reformist movement (such as the emerging Trade Unions of the time), which is trying to protect its political image. Usually, when members or potential supporters of such reformist organisations do break the law and use tactics that are considered by the leadership to be counter-productive to *their* notion of acceptable struggle, there are only two ways to deal with the issue. The first is to claim that the protagonists are law-abiding, therefore innocent and that someone else was responsible<sup>33</sup>. With the Swing rising this was impossible, because it was so widespread, so blatant and despite the attempts by sections of the ruling class to blame 'outside agitators'<sup>34</sup> clearly the work of some or all of those arrested and convicted. The second course of action is to at the time condemn it, disassociate your organisation from it and *eventually write it out of your history*. This I believe is what happened to the Swing events. Tolpuddle was a far more attractive proposition as an iconic story of the founding of the Trade Union movement and at its core, as with all Judeo-Christian narratives are some *martyrs*.

The paradox of course is that those convicted in the Swing rising *were victimised and were actually martyred*, with 252 condemned to death, 19 executions and massive numbers imprisoned and transported as I have noted previously. The suffering of the convicted and their families<sup>35</sup> lasted a lifetime and affected their communities for generations. Interestingly, there was an immense local reaction in some areas to the sentences. For example, *'At Reading, within thirty-six hours of the Commission's sentence, a petition for reprieve had been signed by 15,000 residents'*<sup>36</sup>. From further afield, radical groups petitioned the government for mercy in support of Swing arsonists, but at no time was there an attempt to portray the convicted as *innocent*.

#### The two sided coin of modernity

I want to move on to some of the difficulties a classical Marxist analysis presents in remembering the Swing risings. By *classical* I mean, an emphasis on the objective parts of Marx's analysis of capitalism and its supersession. Essentially this is the idea that not only is the overthrow of capitalism only possible when the right economic conditions have been achieved<sup>37</sup> but that the consciousness of those who are going to do it, the revolutionary class, is also determined by this objective process. This is a *stagist* view of history, where only when you have jumped all the hurdles are you able to win the race to human emancipation. The hurdles being, feudalism, capitalism, socialism and eventually communism, with the end of history being the winning tape. Classical Marxists argue that you certainly can't skip hurdles along the way and your consciousness develops as you get over each one. So if you are, say, a peasant then you cannot get over the capitalism hurdle because

<sup>32</sup> This law was related to the mutinies in the British Navy of 1797, arguably partly inspired by republican sailors.

<sup>33</sup> As with the Poll Tax riot in London in 1990, where both the Trotskyite Militant organisers *and the police leadership* claimed that the disturbances were the work of a tiny minority of anarchist 'outside agitators' who were ruining it for the vast majority of law abiding citizens. Of course this was clearly untrue to those who participated and has since been discredited by academics from within the Metropolitan Police ranks. See 'In Living Memory' 12 March 2008 BBC Radio 4.

<sup>34</sup> There is a discussion of the question of the 'outside agitator' by Hobsbawm and Rudé but their general conclusion is that *'Even that familiar figure in the mythology of the well-fed and the contented, the subversive agitator, could not explain more than a fraction of the riots'* Hobsbawm and Rudé p.58. I discuss this issue later in this essay in more detail.

<sup>35</sup> Over half of those transported were married Rudé p.209.

<sup>36</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.223.

<sup>37</sup> When capitalism is fully developed so that the material conditions (i.e. mechanisation, electricity, division of labour, Taylorism (sic) etc.) are available for socialism to be possible.

*you are not equipped to do so.* Only by being dispossessed of your land and forced into wage labour (proletarianised) can you gain the required class-consciousness to get over the capitalism hurdle<sup>38</sup>. So for classical Marxists, peasants are by their very nature backward, incapable of revolutionary consciousness and Dodo like in that they don't realise they are going to be extinct pretty soon<sup>39</sup>.

These kinds of views are of course familiar to us all in quite a different way. The term *peasant* means dumb, obstinate and backward to us for related reasons from a different origin. The rise of capitalism necessarily entails the dispossession of the peasants of their means of subsistence (i.e. their land or access to common land or both), otherwise they just won't work for you, or will work only half-heartedly and when they want, like they did for feudal lords. Consequently alongside primitive accumulation<sup>40</sup> there was a propaganda war unleashed by the landowners and manufacturers that linked enclosures, the agricultural efficiency of large farms and the idea of progress. Central to their arguments were the concepts of free labour (in fact wage labour) and the idea that the peasant was a literally a dumb ass obstinately refusing to embrace the liberating and modernising force of capitalism<sup>41</sup>.

So the two sides of the modernist coin become clear, a pro-capitalist position expounding the freedoms of wage labour and the market and a classical Marxist position supporting the inevitable development of capitalism and proletarianisation. Both positions essentially follow the same historical trajectory and both regard the peasantry as backward, a spent force and essentially an obstacle to be overcome in the march of progress.

### Swing and the problem of the peasant

So as far as most Whig historians were concerned the primary protagonists in the events of 1830-31 were decidedly backward and of little importance. Hobsbawm and Rudé make an observation about the paucity of historical information in their introduction *'It is a salutary exercise for the modern historian to read - in most cases vainly - through the opulent volumes of that monument to the gentlemen's view of the countryside, the older volumes of the Victoria County History, in search of any information about the rising of 1830...'*<sup>42</sup> They go on to note that *'The Liberal politicians of the 1840s, always anxious to comment on the abuses of squire and parson in the interests of Free Trade and in order to palliate the horrors of their own towns, often display an insouciance about the facts of the labourer's life which reflects both a fundamental lack of interest and a virtually total lack of knowledge'*<sup>43</sup>. So this Whig ideological position about the peasant and progress allied with of course a rose tinted defence of the free market explains the lack of information and interest in Swing in the establishment histories.

But what about the more socially conscious leftist histories of the period? Two parallel movements, the rise of Trade Unionism and the struggle for enfranchisement of the working classes dominate socialist thought in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. According to the historians of these movements the 'peasant' features in neither struggle, is a dying class and is thus written out. However, the Swing risings provide an interesting contradiction, as the

<sup>38</sup> Of course history is full of opportunists and Lenin decided in Russia in 1917, against the views of the classical Marxists in his own Bolshevik party (and in much of the left), that he could use the militant but small working class and the revolting peasant majority to jump two of the hurdles (feudalism and capitalism) in one go, to get to socialism. Hence the hammer and surprisingly the sickle on the Soviet flag. Fortunately (or unfortunately depending on your point of view), Lenin didn't let the peasant revolutionaries in on his little secret that they and the rest of their class were going to be physically destroyed in the process.

<sup>39</sup> For example *'In Wales, as in England, the rural riots of the 1830s and 1840s had been the final upsurge of a dying social class....As capitalist industry and agriculture developed, the peasant, like the handloom weaver, was inevitably doomed'* Rudé p.162. Also *'the early years of the nineteenth century were marked by a series of social protests denoting the stubbornness with which the old English (and Welsh) peasantry resisted the new and clung to the old ways of life'* Rudé p.149.

<sup>40</sup> By primitive accumulation I mean the legal or semi-legal process by which the peasantry had their means of subsistence deprived from them.

<sup>41</sup> Similar stereotypes, for similar purposes, were applied to the *vagrant or vagabond* - work-shy, criminal, bestial; the *colonial native* - lazy, savage, stupid; the *gypsy* - criminal, work-shy, rootless etc. Any group that could not be disciplined into wage labour was liable to branding (either ideologically or even physically!).

<sup>42</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.xvii.

<sup>43</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.xviii. Note my emphasis in bold.

main actors, the farm labourers, *are not actually peasants* but *proletarians*, that is wage labourers with no land or significant means of subsistence. Hobsbawm and Rudé state that *'He (the English peasant labourer) became not merely a full proletarian but an underemployed, pauperised one, and indeed by the time of the 1830 rising he retained little of his former status except the right to parish relief'*<sup>44</sup>. Also, Hobsbawm and Rudé note that 14% of those who were tried and whose occupations were listed were craftsmen of one sort or other<sup>45</sup>. So at least technically the central characters in the Swing events have got over the feudalism hurdle, they are certainly not peasants, they are proletarians and therefore they should apparently count according to the classical Marxist definition of the potential revolutionary subject.

This brings us nicely on to a more subtle prejudice against the agricultural wage labourer that provides clues as to the discounting of the history of the Swing risings from a left-wing perspective. The somewhat simplistic explanation of the classical Marxist stagist theory of history that I covered previously hides another layer of hierarchy within the proletarian class itself. Marx envisaged the creation of a mass proletariat as integrally connected to the industrial revolution, that is the concentration of workers in large factories in urban settings. So, it is not just proletarianisation itself that creates the revolutionary subject but also the particular geographic circumstance of that process that is important for classical Marxists. Firstly, the concentration of proletarians creates the conditions for mass organisational forms such as the industrial Trade Union. Secondly, Marx considered the modern city, unlike the countryside, to be a politically and culturally liberating environment<sup>46</sup>. Finally, the importance of industry within the overall economy places the industrial proletarian at a point of strategic importance in any revolutionary situation. Thus, for several reasons, the industrial working class was considered to be the politically conscious vanguard, if not the sole actor in any revolution. Consequently proletarians involved in agricultural production in rural settings do not score highly on the classical Marxist register of revolutionary importance.

It is therefore not surprising that modernist left-wing historians had ignored the backwaters of proletarian rural revolt throughout most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first major work to mention Swing was the Hammonds' *'The Village Labourer'* of 1911<sup>47</sup> which underestimated its importance and incorrectly called it the *'last labourers' rising'*<sup>48</sup>. The next major phase of historical research work comes *fifty years* later, which is indicative of a significant lack of interest by the left, culminating with Rudé's *'The Crowd in History'*<sup>49</sup> and his collaborative effort with Hobsbawm *'Captain Swing'*. The authors came from a British Communist Party background, which *at best* had a classical Marxist point of view, so although their critique of Whig history with its clear disregard of the Swing risings is in my opinion fairly accurate, they were already working within a theoretical framework which not only considered the 'peasant' backward but more importantly proletarian rural revolt to be of lesser historical importance than that of the industrial proletariat. This classical Marxist theoretical background allied with a good dose of Leninism would create even more obstacles for Hobsbawm and Rudé's analysis of the Swing rising.

### Progress and pre-industrial tactics

It is worth considering another aspect of the Swing risings that has caused embarrassment for Trade Union histories in general and had by 1850 appeared to have been pretty much put to death by 'progress'<sup>50</sup>. These are the so-called pre-industrial tactics of the labour dispute where workers used 'collective bargaining by

<sup>44</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.xxi-xxii.

<sup>45</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.207.

<sup>46</sup> For example *'The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life'* Marx, K. and F. Engels: *Manifesto of the Communist Party*: Progress Publishers (Moscow) 1974 p. 47 (my emphasis in bold).

<sup>47</sup> Hammond, B & J.L. *'The Village Labourer 1760-1832'* (London) 1911.

<sup>48</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé xix.

<sup>49</sup> Rudé chap. 10.

<sup>50</sup> Ironically some of these tactics reappeared in the 1980s under Thatcher's neo-liberal policies. For example the use of 'Hit Squads' attacking pit heads and machinery in the 1984-85 Miners' strike and similar tactics in the Print workers disputes of 1986-87.

riot<sup>51</sup>, arson and machine breaking to achieve improvements in wages and conditions. All of these Luddite style tactics were common in the rural disturbances of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century and of course were the defining features of the Swing risings. Luddism in fact provides an excellent example of the two-sided coin of modernity that I examined earlier. Unsurprisingly, from the position of (hegemonic) Whig history, Luddite tactics are clearly anti-progress and necessarily backward, which is probably why the common usage of the word 'Luddite' signifies this definition. However more interesting is the ostensibly anti-establishment Trade Union or classical Marxist view which although often sympathetic to the ideas of workers exercising power at the point of production have a problem with Luddite tactics as they are read as an attempt to turn back the tide of progress, Canute stylee. If you believe in the inevitability of the collapse of capitalism via the stagist theory of history then Luddism is at best doomed to failure and at worst a fetter on the very forces that are going to deliver to us the Promised Land. This tension between the supposedly progressive objective economic forces and the subjective agency of the proletariat presents a serious contradiction.

*A rural proletariat ponders his options, starvation for his wife and children or direct action by arson in an attempt to increase his wages...*

In addition to this, there is a somewhat tautological<sup>52</sup> view of history going on here. Britain in the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century was regarded by both nationalists and classical Marxists as having the most advanced capitalist economy in the world. If you follow the argument of the stagist theory of history through, that means that not only is British capitalism the most advanced at that point in time but the British proletariat is also the most highly developed and by definition the tactics employed by the proletarians in the class struggle are the most sophisticated. So by definition, looking back from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century where organised Trade Unionism is dominant, to the period of Swing and Luddism, it *appears* as if such tactics are backward<sup>53</sup>. The assumption being that the tactics of the so-called *modern* labour disputes in Britain are more advanced. However, what if, actually the British working class had been divided by trade, fully disciplined into capitalist labour and had either been cowed or conned into using certain tactics acceptable to their joint bosses the Unions and the management. How would we look back then? To a golden age of unmediated autonomist action by an undefeated emerging working class, perhaps?

So was the Luddism of the Swing rioter a conscious defence of the backward ways of rural labour or was something else going on? To begin with, the fact that Luddite tactics were present in the emerging cities as well as rural settings is in itself interesting and suggests that the supposed backward nature of such methods is not necessarily related to the rural. I am sure that if such tactics had been confined to the rural, *they would have been soundly dismissed by both sides of the modernist coin for that very reason*. So it appears that such tactics were common in many sections of the emerging working class of the period of Swing, both rural and urban, and significantly had had a long and honourable history<sup>54</sup>.

A second point which historians such as E.P.Thompson understood in their assessment of classical Marxist criticisms of Luddite tactics<sup>55</sup> was that wrecking machines, arson and riot were not necessarily paroxysms of violence based on revenge or savagery but organised, conscious actions used to extract concessions from the propertied classes whether farmer, gentry or factory owner. For example, you may break a machine for a couple of different reasons, perhaps to cease its productive use or to cause financial loss for its owner. In the first instance it could be a conscious action to protect you from unemployment and pauperisation or it could be because the machine destroys the quality of your labouring life, that is it causes your labour to become

more *alienated*<sup>56</sup>. In the second case, you might be threatening a machine owner with financial penalties unless he increases your wages or improves working conditions. The key to this is the *agency of the proletariat*. Most if not all proletarians realise that their working time is not going to decrease (or their wage increase) with the introduction of machines *unless they own them*. This is not rocket science! No capitalist has knowingly introduced a machine with the intention of reducing the working day of a proletariat whilst paying him the same wage. So breaking machines is not necessarily a protest against progress or even the machine itself but actually *an attempt to alter or oppose the economic (and ultimately I would argue political) power relations within which the machine is introduced*.

This becomes clear in the Swing rising when labourers often recognised that small farmers were being forced by market conditions to introduce the threshing machine in order to compete with large farms<sup>57</sup> or where tenant farmers were merely overseers of the landowner's machines. In these cases the labourers often did not need or even attempt to coerce them but instead chased up the value chain to the landowning gentry or the parson who was extracting, profit, rent or tithe<sup>58</sup>. These cases go some way to explaining why there was tacit and in some cases active support by some farmers for the destructive actions of the Swing mobs<sup>59</sup>. The point I am trying to make is that the Swing proletarians were at least partly, if not fully aware of the *economic power relations* within which the machine was introduced. After all, they were close to the action both in their work and in their communities. So machine breaking cannot easily be dismissed as a mere truculent reaction to 'progress' or a superstitious fear of modernisation. Instead it was a widespread, measured and in the case of the Swing uprising, arguably successful tactic to deal with a particular problem for agricultural proletarians<sup>60</sup>. That is, the effect upon their class of the introduction of the threshing machine *within capitalist social relations*.

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# Working Class Bookfair

## Saturday 11-5pm

### SATURDAY 21st August 2010

## MUSEUM VAULTS

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Barbecue - meat & veggie, Books & Mags;

Local and general history, Environment, football and other sport, culture, railways, mining, fiction, social science, co-operatives, economics, anarchism, international relations, socialism, trade unions, sex, drugs & rock n' roll... :)

This will be a good place to talk about & link up the resistance to the cuts; stalls include IWW, Tyne & Wear Left Unity, Sunderland Against the Cuts, Mayday Books, a Capital & Class table & CW.

<sup>51</sup> A term coined by Hobsbawm as the more common type of Luddism in England. See Rudé p.125.

<sup>52</sup> A tautology is when a statement is apparently (though falsely) proven by reference to itself. So, for example, the statement that the 'grass is green because it is green' is a tautology.

<sup>53</sup> Rudé states after 1817 in England 'Luddism, like other forms of popular action appropriate to the pre-industrial age, had no future in the new industrial society' Rudé p.91 and in France after 1848 'The Second Empire of Napoleon III saw another leap forward in industrial growth, in workers' organisation, and in the relations between capital and labour: and soon such manifestations as 'taxation populaire' and 'Luddite' attacks on machinery, which still survived in 1848, would be almost as dead as the proverbial dodo' Rudé p.177.

<sup>54</sup> See Archer p.48-56.

<sup>55</sup> See Archer p.51.

<sup>56</sup> Good examples of such sabotage could be found on the production lines of car factories in the UK in the 1970s.

<sup>57</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé App. IV. In fact they argue that even with threshing machines small farmers were unable to compete equally with large farms due to economies of scale. So it was in the interests of smaller farmers for all the threshing machines to be broken!

<sup>58</sup> We know that this tactic was in the tradition of 'price control by riot' employed in English market towns of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, where rioters moved up the value chain by physically tracing a path from market to mill to farm in order to fix prices. Thompson E.P. 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', Past and Present, 50, 76-136.

<sup>59</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.194-200.

<sup>60</sup> According to Hobsbawm and Rudé (p.258) as a direct result of the Swing rising, threshing machines did not return to a substantial part of the country until 1850!



## Swing and radical politics in 1830



'Liberty Leading the People' by Eugène Delacroix famously commemorated the French Revolution of July 1830

1830 was an exciting year if you were a republican in Western Europe. In July in France a revolution broke out which overthrew the Bourbon king Charles X. After the creation of four thousand barricades on the streets of Paris and three days of street fighting the revolutionaries triumphed, formed a provisional government and instituted a constitutional monarchy. In August after a performance at the Brussels opera, a riot erupted, quickly followed by uprisings elsewhere in the country, which led to the secession and eventual independence of Belgium from the Netherlands. Both of these events were widely reported in the British press and energised radical and republican activists<sup>61</sup>. Money was collected in Kent villages for the families of the French revolutionaries, notorious radicals such as Cobbett began inflammatory speaking tours, petitions for reform were circulated and Political Unions were formed in London, Birmingham and elsewhere<sup>62</sup>. The Whig's in parliamentary opposition began to grasp the idea that their route to power could be helped by reform of the Commons and consequently the language of their election candidates grew more and more pro-reform. As this pressure for change grew on Wellington's<sup>63</sup> Tory government during the summer of 1830, the Swing risings began.

In their introduction to the first edition of 'Captain Swing' Hobsbawm and Rudé note that 'There were plenty of reasons for rebellion, but it is doubtful whether it would have occurred on such a vast scale when it did, without the double stimulus of the French and Belgian revolutions abroad and the revival of intensive political agitation in England'<sup>64</sup>. Having opened up an intriguing aspect of the revolt, that is the politicisation of the participants, they go on to both question whether there was any new consciousness amongst the

<sup>61</sup> Wells R., '1830: the Year of Revolutions in England, and the Politics of the Captain Swing Insurrection' (2007) p.5 at <http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/arts-humanities/history-and-american-studies/history/WebPublications.aspx>

<sup>62</sup> Wells R. (2007) p.5-6.

<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, Wikipedia states 'the epithet 'Iron Duke' originates from his period as Prime Minister, when he experienced an extremely high degree of personal and political unpopularity. His residence at Apsley House was a target of window-smashers and iron shutters were installed to mitigate the damage. It was this, rather than his resolute attitude, that earned him the nickname 'The Iron Duke'. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur\\_Wellesley,\\_1st\\_Duke\\_of\\_Wellington](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arthur_Wellesley,_1st_Duke_of_Wellington)

<sup>64</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.xxiv.

labourers and limit this to the standard fare of British labour histories, that is the presence of non-conformist sects such as the Methodists. Later in the book, they seem to come to the conclusion that the revolt was 'essentially a labourers movement with essentially economic ends' and that it had no overall plan, was spontaneous and fairly random<sup>65</sup>. There does seem to be a contradiction here and it relates to certain classical Marxist ideas about political consciousness. The first problem that I have touched on already is that of the capability of a rural proletariat to become politically conscious, considering their temporal proximity to the 'backwardness' of the peasant, the dispersed nature of rural work and the supposed 'idiocy' of the countryside. Allied with these structural and geographic obstacles, comes the spectre of Leninism within Hobsbawm and Rudé's analysis.

Lenin's contribution to the debate about political consciousness concerns spontaneity, organisation and the role of the political party. His early writings emphasise the structurally derived limitations of political consciousness within both the peasantry and the proletariat and place the political party led by professionals as central to any successful revolution<sup>66</sup>. According to Lenin, not only were self-organised, spontaneous activities within the working class politically limited but also without the professional revolutionaries and the party to lead them they were doomed to failure<sup>67</sup>. Thus, the thread of structural limitations to consciousness proposed by classical Marxism allied with the supposed organisational pragmatism of Lenin has led many Marxists to not only deny or denigrate political consciousness in the working class and the peasantry but also to question the actual or potential agency<sup>68</sup> of these classes.

The analysis (and lack of analysis) of the Swing risings is a good example of this tendency. As I have described previously, in 1830 the economic and political conditions for revolt and possibly revolution were already in place. According to Rudé there was 'a sustained intensity of excitement unknown since 1641' sweeping the country somewhat akin to the 'Great Fear' of the French Revolution of 1789<sup>69</sup>. When the risings kick off there are numerous examples of politicisation, from the tricolours and black flags flying over Kent villages<sup>70</sup>, to the distribution of seditious placards and hand bills across the counties<sup>71</sup>, to marches of labourers led by radicals<sup>72</sup>.

There are clear links and in many cases concerted action between the artisans, rural labourers and sometimes even factory workers<sup>73</sup>. All of this suggests that some kind of political discussion and organisation was occurring either prior to or during the disturbances. How was this possible?

Rural labourers and artisans were far from the illiterate, isolated, semi-peasants that they have been portrayed as. In fact many labourers and artisans could read and could thus transmit written ideas to others. The 'public reading' to those who could not typically in an alehouse was part of contemporary village culture.

<sup>65</sup> See p.4. and Hobsbawm and Rudé p.186-87.

<sup>66</sup> Prior to the 1905 revolution in Russia Lenin argued that the organic political consciousness of a proletariat was limited to that of Trade Unionism and he stated that only the Social Democratic party could carry out the tasks needed for revolution. 'There is much talk of spontaneity. But the spontaneous development of the working-class movement leads to its subordination to bourgeois ideology; for the spontaneous working-class movement is trade-unionism, and trade unionism means the ideological enslavement of the workers by the bourgeoisie. Hence, our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is to combat spontaneity, to divert the working-class movement from this spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.' Lenin, 'What Is To Be Done? The Spontaneity of the Masses and the Consciousness of the Social-Democrats' (1901). This was all turned upside down by the events of 1905 where (apparently) spontaneously the Russian working class not only attempted to overthrow the Czarist regime by a series of armed strikes and mutinies but also created a new form of organisation the 'Soviet' or workers council to practice direct democracy in a post-revolutionary society.

<sup>67</sup> It is no surprise then, that in St. Petersburg of 1917, the Bolsheviks were commonly known as 'Firemen' in the period prior to the October coup, as they spent most of their time trying to 'put out' spontaneous revolts by sections of the working class.

<sup>68</sup> By agency I mean the ability of a group or individuals to consciously act without being ordered or mediated by an actor or actors external to them.

<sup>69</sup> Rudé p.150 and 103-4. The Great Fear (*La Grande Peur*) was a wave of belief amongst French peasants in the summer of 1789 that the aristocracy was plotting to use 'brigands' to try to take away their property. It culminated in the burning of the Chateaux of the manorial lords across France and the destruction by the peasants of the documents that defined their feudal rents and obligations.

<sup>70</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.76.

<sup>71</sup> Wells, R. (2007) p.8.

<sup>72</sup> Wells, R. (2007) p.18-19, 32-33.

<sup>73</sup> See for example the activities of the paper mill workers of High Wycombe. Hobsbawm and Rudé p.114-115.

Agricultural labourers were by necessity often seasonally mobile and developed networks of regional and local contacts in the process of their travels. Village artisans were even more cosmopolitan than this, having to travel to find work after their apprenticeships were over and in the process being exposed to the culture and politics of the town and city<sup>74</sup>. The literacy and political radicalism of shoemakers for example is well known and Hobsbawm and Rudé note that the 'average riotous parish had from double to four times as many shoemakers as the average tranquil one!'<sup>75</sup>. Finally, the opening of the new 'beer shops' in October 1830 was suggested by the gentry as the cause of the Swing risings as they provided a place for the lower orders to congregate out of the control of their betters, read radical newspapers and plot subversion<sup>76</sup>. Whether beershops in particular were something new and dangerous is debatable but certainly there is a perception that drinking establishments in general were places where artisans and labourers would meet, read and discuss politics. What should be noted is that during the disturbances themselves, the roving bands of machine breakers and rioters moved from 'village to village, from pub to pub'<sup>77</sup> spreading the Swing contagion. As I have argued here, was asserted by E.P.Thompson<sup>78</sup> and has been more recently stated by Griffin, at the time of Swing, 'In every village, no matter how small or remote, there was the potential for the uptake and diffusion of radical political doctrines'<sup>79</sup>. This suggests that the penetration of subversive ideas into the consciousness of agricultural labourers, whether by the conduit of the radical artisan or by other means was greater than had been previously acknowledged.

Hobsbawm and Rudé toy with the evidence of dissemination of radical ideas and the possibility of political consciousness in the Swing risings and then fail to follow it through. They appear to be tantalised by the possibilities but the rigid Marxist-Leninist framework just can't give. For example in their introduction to 'Captain Swing', they dismiss any development of political ideology amongst the rural proletariat as a result of the risings and denigrate them to accepting 'ancient symbols of ancient ideals of stable hierarchy'<sup>80</sup>. This translates to *rural labourers can't do modern politics*. They go on to accept that the 'English village of the early nineteenth century was plainly not a dark backwater totally insulated from knowledge and contact with the more dynamic sectors of society'<sup>81</sup> noting the radicalism of the village artisans, the impact of the European revolutions and the Reform agitation. However, again they pull back and end up denigrating the potential for the development of political consciousness within the rural labourers. This translates to *rural labourers are unable to develop organic consciousness unless led by more advanced sections of the class bringing ideas from outside*. Finally, with the Marxist-Leninist hammer they nail the Swing uprising as a whole with the description that it was the greatest of many 'improvised, archaic, spontaneous movements of resistance to the full triumph rural capitalism' and finish with the patronising statement that it 'was as near to a national movement as so spontaneous and unorganised an upsurge could be'<sup>82</sup>. In conclusion, you could say that the Swing risings were for the Marxist-Leninist's, *wrong time, wrong place, wrong people*.

## Conclusion

In the South West TUC conference in 2009, Bristol Radical History Group ran a workshop called 'Why history matters...and why radical history matters more'. I asked the 25 Trade Union delegates in the audience two questions, 'Has any one heard of Captain Swing?' and 'Has anyone heard of Tolpuddle?' About a third of the audience put their hands up in response to the first question and unsurprisingly everyone to the second. This essay has been an attempt to explain the curious results of this crude straw poll.

<sup>74</sup> Griffin P.135.

<sup>75</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.151.

<sup>76</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.64-65 also 'Every beershop is the seat of a club attended by the working classes, who read inflammatory newspapers. In towns there may not be more of this than formerly, but there is much more in villages, and some are for the first time invaded by politics and drunkenness' from Wells R. (2007) p.7.

<sup>77</sup> Rudé p.151.

<sup>78</sup> 'By 1832, and on into Chartist times there is a Radical nucleus in every county, in the smallest market towns and even in the rural villages' E.P.Thompson, 'The Making of the English Working Class' (1968) p.201, 806.

<sup>79</sup> Griffin p.135.

<sup>80</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.xxiv.

<sup>81</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.xxiv.

<sup>82</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.xxv.

As far as reformist urban labour histories go the Tolpuddle incident ticks all the boxes and provides a classic narrative of victim orientated struggle. Some *impoverished* workers joined a perfectly respectable *Methodist* led *organisation*, which was dedicated to *modern* forms of industrial struggle including the *non-violent* improvement of wages and conditions. As a result the local landowners in collaboration with an anti-union government used a law based on *mutiny* and implying *treason* to prosecute a group of *innocent* men, transport them and in so doing *martyr* them. A massive peaceful campaign by the *urban* working class eventually leads to their *pardon* and return to England to live happily ever after<sup>83</sup>.

In an essay that touches on the themes of this piece, historian Roger Wells points out that the Tolpuddle incident 'As an ideological issue...was high-jacked by non-agrarian trade unionists and non-rural radicals, and used as a cause célèbre to advance labour organisations, and as an exemplar of Whig treachery to politicise the masses'. He goes on to note that labour historians, ignoring Swing and other rural struggles of the period, instead concentrating on the Poor Law reform as central to the beginning of Chartism, which is 'traditionally perceived as the preserve of the urban and industrial masses'<sup>84</sup>. Interestingly Hobsbawm and Rudé also acknowledge that Tolpuddle 'is known only because of its urban repercussions. It has never been studied in relation to contemporary rural movements'<sup>85</sup>. So the Tolpuddle narrative survives to this day, created as a powerful propaganda tool for the urban industrial working class, separated from its true origins in rural class struggles and effectively the 'Year Zero' for the Trade Union movement and its history.

Enough of the flea, what about the elephant that is Swing? As I hope I have shown the Swing rising represented an antithesis of the Tolpuddle narrative in that it was massive, complicated and filled with a mix of 'pre-industrial' forms of sometimes violent collective direct action. Its acceleration and unpredictability was its strength, the fear of incendiarism and the portentous Swing letters sending shudders down the spines of the landowning gentry. The tricolours flying over villages in the autumn of 1830 and the seditious handbills of the radicals distributed amongst the Swing rioters frightened the ruling classes on a national level. No wonder it was buried by the Whigs, and later by the reformist labour historians for 130 years, to be rediscovered by the British Marxist school of historians under the pressure of the New Left ideological shift in the 1960s. Also I hope I have shown that Hobsbawm and Rudé's analysis of Swing although ground-breaking and absolutely necessary, contains within it the ideological clues to why it took so long for the 'revolutionary' left to acknowledge it. The fetters of the classical Marxist stagist theory of history upon class consciousness, allied with Marx's disdain for the rural and its proletariat plus the rigid Leninist doctrines concerning the validity of self-organisation and spontaneity put Swing and other similar waves of class struggle in the 'dustbin of history' for too long.

Recent re-analyses of the Swing risings, without these ideological constraints, have both highlighted a huge rise in the quantity and distribution of the events, as well as placed them as a big wave within a sea of similar incidents. These studies far from denigrating Swing have merely suggested that overt rural class struggle was deeper and more widespread than had been thought<sup>86</sup>. The related question of finding temporal boundaries to the Swing risings, which tantalised Hobsbawm and Rudé, has led researchers connecting Swing to later episodes of rural resistance, for example to the Poor Law of 1834<sup>87</sup>. Other studies have suggested that the Swing participants developed latent political and class consciousness through the praxis<sup>88</sup> of the disturbances. For example one study employed sophisticated quantitative methods such as event-history diffusion models in order to analyse temporal and spatial patterns within the revolt. The researchers concluded that their analysis 'shows events were certainly not spontaneous as the authorities of the time and Hobsbawm and Rudé insisted'. In fact they argue that 'Swing events were not distributed randomly across England in 1830. Nor

<sup>83</sup> Actually only one of the Tolpuddle martyrs actually stayed in England, James Hammett who died in Dorchester Workhouse. The others emigrated to Canada, which ironically was the chosen destination of a government scheme to deal with the 'problem' of unemployed farm labourers by 'assisted' emigration.

<sup>84</sup> Wells, R. (1985) p.125.

<sup>85</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.242

<sup>86</sup> See note 12.

<sup>87</sup> Work in progress of Dr. Harvey Osbourne, University of Suffolk.

<sup>88</sup> By praxis I mean the continuous cycle of acting on ideas and in the process of this modifying them.

were they merely impulsive uprisings best left attributed to local economic and structural characteristics. Rather, the presence of a significantly quantifiable pattern... supports a case-level argument for a radical consciousness among labourers<sup>89</sup>. This tantalising conclusion leads us towards a more dynamic understanding of class (and political) consciousness, where implicit recognition of shared class interests can become explicit and contagious in extraordinary moments like that of the Swing risings.

Whatever you may think of these conclusions, one thing is for sure, the Swing risings of 1830-31 should not be ignored. Trade Unionists should recognise that they represent part of an unbroken history of rural class struggle, which encompasses Tolpuddle as well. The recent admirable efforts by Trade Union branches to recognise the suffering of Swing rioters and machine breakers, viciously punished for their attempt to improve the conditions of their families lives under a brutal agrarian capitalism, should be encouraged and extended.

### Epilogue: What did the Swing risings do for us?

The Swing risings were clearly part of a wave of economic and political unrest that bore some connection to the European revolutions and the domestic struggle for parliamentary reform in 1830. However, a key question to be addressed is; did the Swing risings themselves have any effect on the British political system?

On November 2<sup>nd</sup> 1830, Wellington the prime minister made a categorical declaration that parliamentary reform was out of the question. This energised the London radicals and led to a call for a massive demonstration against the government on the 9<sup>th</sup> November, the object of which was to disrupt the visit of Wellington and King William IV to the Guildhall to inaugurate the new Lord Mayor<sup>90</sup>. At the moment of Wellington's statement the Swing risings were mainly confined to Kent, but in the following two weeks of November they escalated massively both in quantity and spread, crossing East and West Sussex into Hampshire with portentous Swing letters appearing in other associated counties<sup>91</sup>. This increased momentum was noted by the authorities but 'the widespread discontent with Wellington's administration and particularly its position on parliamentary reform meant there was a reluctance on the part of the rural middle class to join any force that might be ordered to act against the rioters'. Some attempts to enrol special constables and yeomanry in Kent to deal with the disturbances had met with failure and there was a significant fear in the government that the use of troops to put down the disturbances might provoke revolution<sup>92</sup>. The vacillation of Wellington's Tories in dealing with the disturbances at this early stage not only allowed the risings to escalate exponentially but also projected to their enemies in all classes a sign of weakness.

It has been argued that a key moment in both the history of parliamentary reform and the Swing risings was 'the news on 8 November of the cancellation of the royal visit to the Guildhall'<sup>93</sup>. The authorities feared that, because of the demonstration called by the pro-reform radicals, 'neither the monarch's nor the duke's (Wellington's) safety could be guaranteed'<sup>94</sup>. According to the historical geographer, Charlesworth 'It was from this moment in the evolution of the revolt that the massive mobilisation of the labourers commenced. The conjunction of the events in London and those along the London-Hastings road on the 9<sup>th</sup> November appear to have transformed the rioting into what Colonel Brotherton later described as an insurrectionary movement'<sup>95</sup>. In the week that followed this event, the writing was on the wall for Wellington's anti-reform government. On the 15<sup>th</sup> November 1830, with the southern counties surrounding London apparently in a state of rural chaos, radicals agitating for reform and the government paralysed, the Tories lost a parliamentary vote of confidence, leading to Grey's pro-reform Whig government.

<sup>89</sup> Przybysz, J. and D. Myers, 'The Diffusion of Contentious gatherings in the Captain Swing Uprising', University of Notre Dame p.28-29. My emphasis in bold.

<sup>90</sup> Charlesworth, A. 'Social protest in a rural society: the spatial diffusion of the Captain Swing disturbances of 1830-31' Historical Geography Research Series No. 1 (1979) p.35.

<sup>91</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé App. III.

<sup>92</sup> Charlesworth, A. p.12.

<sup>93</sup> Charlesworth, A. p.35.

<sup>94</sup> Wells, R., 'Mr. William Cobbett, Captain Swing, and King William IV' The Agricultural History Review 45, 1 (1997) p.39.

<sup>95</sup> Charlesworth, A p.35. My emphasis in bold.



'State of the Country' a contemporary cartoon satirising the confusion in the gentry, government and reformers caused by the Swing risings.

In June 1832 the 'Great Reform Act' was finally passed into law, removing seats from 'rotten boroughs', increasing seats in the large industrial cities and enfranchising approximately 20% of adult males. After its passing William Cobbett, probably the most influential radical activist in Britain at the time, stated that 'the Reform Bill owed more to the COUNTRY LABOURERS than to all the rest of the nation put together'. He went on to assert 'that a combination of Wellington's rejection of constitutional reform and the insurrection (Swing) guaranteed the appointment of a successor committed to its passage'. The historian Roger Wells questions this statement as the riots of 1831 notably in Bristol and other cities and other political events were also of importance in achieving the reform<sup>96</sup>. However, whether by design or by chance (or a fusion of both) the Swing risings had a vital part to play in bringing about an important step on the road of enfranchisement and democratic reform.

Oh, by the way, it's also the reason we have allotments, but that's another story<sup>97</sup>.

<sup>96</sup> Wells, R. (1997) p.37.

<sup>97</sup> Hobsbawm and Rudé p.257.

## Revolutionary Unionism: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

Dan Jakopovich

**THERE IS A CONSENSUS** among democratic socialists today that the struggle for deep social change has to somehow reflect the kind of society we want to build, but this remains inseparable from the questions of power, political strength and effectiveness because prefiguration goes beyond the "pure" ethical sphere to include wider issues of ideological/cultural, political and socio-economic hegemony. The revolutionary syndicalist answer to the problem of integral *prefiguration* represents a specific and important historical (and contemporary) synthesis. Revolutionary unionism, in the ideologically broader and more modern sense, could be defined as a movement and strategy more closely resembling traditional revolutionary syndicalism on the ethical and organizational "micro-level," without adhering to the relatively rigid "grand narrative" which the traditional syndicalists attempted to provide.

I will try to identify not only the main lines of syndicalist development, but also some weak links of syndicalist strategy, which manifest its inability to produce a sufficiently *dialectical* strategic solution to the puzzle of social change.

### Beginnings

**ALTHOUGH EARLY ATTEMPTS AT COMBINATION** were already made in the pre-Chartist period (The Grand National Consolidated Trades Union of 1834 being a well-known example), it took several more decades of betrayal by craft unions and union bureaucrats for the ideas of industrial unionism and revolutionary syndicalism to flourish – 1). To the narrow sectionalism of contemporary unions, industrial unionists counterposed the idea of organizing all workers in the same industry into the same union regardless of skill or trade, and organizing across industries -- in such a way building collective leverage and workers' power through unity and solidarity beyond the boundaries imposed by capitalist society. Free associations of producers were the ultimate goal of this vision.

The idea of a system of labor councils, or Chambers of Labour (Bourses du Travail), which were to be the protection of workers in the existing system and the nuclei of the future society, was already present in certain sections of the First International (especially among Spanish and Belgian delegates, the Swiss Jura Federation, and many French sections – 2), but its practical implementation within the International came to an abrupt end when the two rival groups exemplified by Marx and Bakunin split at the Hague Conference in 1872, and it suffered further setbacks with the defeat of the Paris Commune and the incipient spread of reaction across Southern Europe.

Revolutionary Syndicalism, which first flourished in France at the end of the 19th century, developed both as a practical response to the exploitation of workers, bureaucratic and craft unionism and -- especially in its more explicitly anarcho-socialist forms - as a response to the parliamentary strategy of the Second International, when the

understanding that the real strength of workers ultimately lies in their character as producers began to rapidly develop.

The French *Confederation Generale du Travail* (General Confederation of Labour, CGT, founded in 1895) became one of the main initiators of the syndicalist movement. It was captured by the syndicalists, and was largely a result of patient anarchist and syndicalist radicalizing work from within the mainstream trade union movement.

As opposed to the largely *negative* program of many anti-capitalists of the time, revolutionary unionists propagated (somewhat idealistically, arguably out of context from the actual dynamic of the development of class consciousness and class power) "constructive" libertarian socialist activity based upon the ideas of self-help, mutual aid and struggle from below and the reorganization of socio-economic life on the basis of workers' self-management.(3)

### General Characteristics

**LIBERTARIAN REVOLUTIONARY UNIONISTS** are generally distrustful of leaders and the principle of hierarchy. Their views on the subject usually correspond to the "iron law of oligarchy" concerning the danger of bureaucratization inherent in hierarchical organizations, as identified by the German sociologist Robert Michels in his anarchosyndicalist phase. Revolutionary unionists therefore emphasize the importance of local branch and workplace assemblies, with union officials being directly elected, accountable and recallable delegates in direct contact with their fellow workers. Ultimately, independent rank-and-file thinking and initiative are seen as the basic precondition for liberation, since "the emancipation of the working class is the task of the working class itself" (Marx).

Related to the detestation of bureaucracy and the managerial approach is the rejection of the goal of centralized "state socialism."

As an alternative to the politics of states and parties, revolutionary unionism posits the economic reorganization of production, replacing the rule of man over man with the simple administration of things.(...) Revolutionary unionism considers that along with the disappearance of a property owning caste, must come the disappearance of a central ruling caste; and that no form of statism, however camouflaged, can ever be an instrument for human liberation, but that on the contrary, it will always be the creator of new monopolies and new privileges. (4)

Revolutionary unionism is therefore distinguished from most other approaches by its unequivocal endorsement of self-management and strong commitment to socialism from below. Its ideas of direct working class power precede and resemble the early Russian soviets and factory councils as a form of anti-capitalist dual power.

Furthermore, there is distrust of parliamentary politics(5), which is often extended to suspicion of party politics and conquest of state power in general, especially among anarchosyndicalists. However, there have also been and continue to exist revolutionary unionists who -- while subscribing to the goal of socialism from below and genuine participatory democracy -- still recognize a certain role for socialist revolutionary parties. Antonio Gramsci's *Ordine Nuovo* brilliantly epitomized (and served as a catalyst for) the fiercely democratic, councilist spirit of the Italian factory occupation movement of 1919-1920 ("*biennio rosso*") (6) The Marxian syndicalism of James Connolly is another prominent example of such an approach which, in a strategic and dialectical way, cautiously attempts (primarily through a revolutionary party) to utilize the political system, elections and the concrete, existing social structures and movements, but nonetheless appreciates and supports the central role of workers' self-government in the creation of a genuinely democratic socialist society. (7)

Another trait of most syndicalist organizations is federalism, IWW being a notable exception with a somewhat more centralist organization, mainly because of the enormous territory it had to cover (and still does), at the same time basing itself on the democratic principles of (relative) local autonomy, recallable delegates with

limited tenure, membership referendums etc., principles which were first put to practice on a grand scale in the Paris Commune of 1871.

Additionally, revolutionary unionists are united in their desire for truly combative unions, either through transforming existing unions, starting new, alternative ones, or combining the creation of autonomous rank-and-file structures with work in existing mass organizations, but universally stressing the value of creative militancy and primacy of direct action.<sup>(8)</sup> They share the supposition -- syndicalists in the narrow sense especially -- that the working class must prioritize the industrial, economic front.<sup>(9)</sup>

Following from this, syndicalism can largely be defined as "hardline workerism," which quite often (although not always and automatically) degenerates from an uncompromising commitment to egalitarianism into vulgar anti-intellectualism and rejection of organic intellectuals as possible allies in the struggle, one of the important reasons for syndicalism's lack of greater, longer-lasting counter-hegemonic ideological influence (somewhat ameliorated by a typically vibrant and creative workers' culture of resistance).

Finally, it is important to note the syndicalist "myth" of the *revolutionary general strike* -- sometimes propagandized as an isolated, final act (especially by early French and American revolutionary unionists), and as a possible nonviolent/unarmed path to socialism. However, it was generally seen as a prototypical "insurrectionary general strike," and it remains so both in syndicalist <sup>(10)</sup> and more popular contemporary Marxist approaches.<sup>(11)</sup>

### Syndicalism's Greatest Moment - CNT and the Spanish Revolution

**SYNDICALISM'S MOST ILLUSTRIOUS CHILD** has to be the historical Spanish CNT (Confederation National del Trabajo, National Confederation of Labor), and it was among the more "prodigal" ones as well.

The development of the Spanish libertarian labor movement, especially from 1910 when CNT was founded, and in the early stages of the revolution itself, is one of the most encouraging stories of democratic empowerment in the 20th century. Many thousands of libertarian revolutionaries, workers and peasants sacrificed their lives for a world based on genuine equality, decision-making by common people and freedom from oppression in the multiplicity of its forms. For a short time that new world seemed very near.

It is the great merit of Libertarian Socialism in Spain, which now finds expression in the CNT and the FAI, that since the days of the First International it has trained the workers in that spirit which treasures freedom above all else and regards the intellectual independence of its adherents as the basis of its existence.<sup>(12)</sup>

The Spanish CNT had over 550 000 members in May 1936.<sup>(13)</sup> It was ostensibly the strongest revolutionary organization at the onset of the civil war, main organizer of anti-fascist resistance, initiator of expropriations, agrarian collectivizations and factory councils.<sup>(14)</sup>

Although external factors (mainly the civil war and the sheer superior force of the reaction backed by Mussolini's and Hitler's military might) shouldn't be underestimated, the defeat of the revolutionary forces was also partly a result of their mistakes and weaknesses. The CNT in particular had to sacrifice its program in order to maintain an alliance with the Popular Front government, with a few of its leading members (who were also militants of the explicitly anarchist FAI) even becoming government ministers.

Radical land reform in the Republic endorsed and proclaimed by the government, would have allowed the Republicans to appeal to the peasant soldiers of the fascist army over the heads of their officers. If the Madrid government had proclaimed the Spanish colonies, Morocco for instance, liberated, they could have appealed to the Moorish soldiers of Franco's army to rise against the generals, or desert to the Republic. They did none of that. Their self-imposed "bourgeois" limitations ruled out everything of that sort. Above all, in the Republican areas they stood against a socialist revolution. <sup>(15)</sup>

A minority current within the union (and the independent Marxist POUM) advocated a political takeover, but that would have led to the breaking of antifascist unity and an open confrontation on at least three fronts: against the fascists, the republican and authoritarian left government as well as capitalist owners themselves. The CNT proved unprepared (or unwilling) to develop and carry out an independent program for workers'

power; it was unwilling to wage a battle for dominance against other currents fighting for control under the guise of the popular front, and was forced into submission and compromise politics, ultimately being pushed aside by more moderate leftist politics, as well as Stalinist and fascist reaction.

### Major Criticisms

**ONE OF THE BIGGEST CONTROVERSIES** regarding syndicalism has been its tendency to form alternative unions determined to compete with mainstream, craft and reformist ones, and organize the unorganized workers that the existing unions usually weren't interested in. It is necessary to take into account the important, although often not entirely clear-cut distinction (stressed by Hal Draper, for instance) between dual/alternative unions that came out of actual struggles and the actual mass labor movement (like the CIO), and ideological dual unionism: "artificial" attempts at "inventing" mass alternative organizations "out of the blue," and often with a radical phraseology that is alien and intimidating to most workers, therefore being an impediment to organizing.

Following from Lenin in "'Left Wing' Communism -- an Infantile Disorder" <sup>(16)</sup>, Trotsky argued strongly against dual unionist strategies and stressed the absolute necessity of working within existing mass unions vs. the tendency to form ideologically pure unions and turn backs on the workers stuck in bureaucratic trade unions. <sup>(17)</sup>

Some syndicalist unions grew out of the existing workers' movement by boring from within (e.g. French CGT, partly CNT & early American IWW). The Australian IWW largely pursued the "boring from within" agenda, with considerable success and a very strong position in the early Australian workers movement. It was based on the concept of a "conscious minority" and dual membership in the mainstream trade unions as well as the IWW, constituting the fighting spirit of those organizations.

In the U.S., William Z. Foster (later a Communist Party leader), influenced by French syndicalists, produced a brilliant, powerful critique of dual unionism that all proponents of this approach would do well to consider.<sup>(18)</sup>

However, see Max Eastman's and Karl Radek's more nuanced position regarding the IWW in Max Eastman, Foster, *The Liberator*, 1921 -<http://www.marxists.org/archive/eastman/1921/foster.htm>, as well as Hal Draper's greater "tolerance" of the IWW in light of the fact it was breaking new ground in terms of organising the unorganised etc. - Hal Draper, *Marxism and the Trade Unions*, 1970 - <http://marxists.org/archive/draper/1970/tus/index.htm>, not to mention James P. Cannon's unwillingness to directly cross swords with his past (James P. Cannon, *The I.W.W., Fourth International*, Summer 1955 - <http://www.marxists.org/archive/cannon/works/1955/iww.htm>).

Moreover, "boring from within" also holds grave dangers for the revolutionary movement, and has so far largely failed to produce expected results (or perhaps live up to its true potential). <sup>(19)</sup>

Other important charges have been that of economism and anti-politicism. It has often been argued that syndicalist neglect of the political sphere obstructed the creation of democratic revolutionary parties, in the end leaving vanguardist options as the only serious party-political response to social-democratic betrayal. These charges were less of a problem for Marxist revolutionary unionists like Connolly, Debs or De Leon who had their socialist parties and could therefore also easily mobilize around issues that weren't strictly economic.

Yet there were and are obvious, significant antinationalist, antiracist, and antisexist implications of syndicalist battles, if little explication. IWW was for instance far more open than most to women workers and worker's wives. "The IWW has been accused of putting the women in the front. The truth is, the IWW does not keep them in the back, and they go to the front." <sup>(20)</sup> It was also among the first to make an attempt at breaking the racial boundaries between the American working class, and the first to include all "races" (Knights of Labor excluded the Chinese). "During its active life, from 1905 to about 1924, the IWW issued about a million membership cards, of which about 100,000 were to Negroes." <sup>(21)</sup> Furthermore, syndicalist

involvement was important in general strikes for universal suffrage, they were heavily involved in free-speech, anti-war, anti-conscription and community struggles etc.

Indeed, while syndicalists have often been accused of vulgar economism (by Lenin and Gramsci for example), others have actually attacked the tendencies towards (universalistic) "revolutionary romanticism" instead of simply concentrating on bread-and-butter issues. A considerable number of IWW and CNT radicals (for instance) even attempted to further countercultural ideas such as free love.

A major, indeed central criticism, as previously stated in relation to the CNT, is that syndicalists -- especially anarchosyndicalists -- have on the whole failed to effectively address the issue of state power and construct an offensive program with regard to the state, a program for taking power.

This evasion of the problem of *power* has gotten worse since the days of the practical syndicalist unions, and the current position of workerist ideas is particularly unfavourable on the anarchist Left. The centrality of the labour movement in Left, and especially anarcho-socialist politics has been seriously challenged, and the workers' movement as a whole is in many ways lagging behind "new social movements". Libertarian revolutionary unionism has largely lost its natural ideological base, at least for the time being.

### Decline

**THE RISE AND FALL OF SYNDICALISM** as a mass movement that dominated the revolutionary left landscape at the beginning of the 20th century (22) has been compared to a shooting star by some, and a plainly failed concept by others.

The beginning, as with some other revolutionary movements, was very promising. Between 1902 and 1908, the French CGT experienced a rapid growth from 100,000 to 400,000 members – "out of a total unionized population of 900,000 workers. Its fight for the eight-hour day, against employment bureau, for a day off work each week, for wage increases and improvements in working conditions – a fight often crowned with success – made it the representative of the finest of the labor movement's aspirations to emancipation." (23) That same CGT later fell under reformist, governmental and jingoistic influences, and is today the biggest – and one of the most mainstream – trade union confederations in France.

Although some have argued that the "golden age of syndicalism" is confined to the period prior to WWI, it was actually largely still a formative phase, with early 1920's marking syndicalism's zenith (at least in terms of membership), even though the Spanish CNT's heyday came later.

Nonetheless, the Russian Revolution meant the "beginning of the end" for syndicalism, which was increasingly being seen as "old hat", without any such "successes" like the Bolsheviks had to point to, and unable to grasp the new political arena that was unfolding. Third International anti-syndicalist policies and the rise of communist parties didn't help either. Stalin's "Third Period" (with the establishment of "red unions") eroded the position of the syndicalists even further.

In 1922, the *International Workers' Association* (IWA) was founded in Berlin as a syndicalist counterweight to the Second and Third Internationals. Present at the conference were, among others, *Argentinian Workers Regional Organisation* (FORA) apparently representing 200,000 members, the *Industrial Workers of the World* in Chile representing 20,000, the *Free Workers Union of Germany* (FAU) with 120,000, the *Italian Syndicalist Union* (USI) with 500,000, *General Confederation of Workers in Portugal* 150,000, the *Swedish Workers Central Organisation* (SAC) with 32,000, *National Workers Secretariat of the Netherlands* representing 22,000, the *Committee for the Defence of Revolutionary Syndicalism* in France [a breakaway from the CGT] with 100,000, and the *Federation du Battiment* from Paris representing 32,000. "The Spanish CNT was unable to send delegates due to the fierce class struggle being waged in their country under the dictatorship of Primo de Rivera. They did, however, join the following year." (24)

Secondly, another major factor that has to be considered with regards to syndicalism's demise was the extreme repression that often frustrated organising efforts and destroyed gains that were already made. Workers and union organisers (often one and the same in the case of syndicalism) were subjected to methods

such as red baiting, mass deportations, long imprisonment, or vigilante "justice" among other things (25). "The Argentine FORA, in the middle of an internal wrangle in 1931, was suppressed by the military, never to regain its importance within the trade union movement. The Chilean IWW was beaten into the ground by the Ibanez dictatorship. The German movement was liquidated by the Nazis and a left-right combination of Stalinists and falangists destroyed the Spanish CNT in 1938-39. (...) Salazar wiped out the Portuguese movement. Brazilian syndicalists felt the lash of the Vargas regime. (...) the Castro regime finished off the Cuban syndicalists – something neither the Machado nor the Batista regimes were able to do. (...) Communist, fascist and military dictatorships crushed the movement in Argentina, Brazil, Russia, Germany, Italy, Bulgaria, Spain and Portugal. Government repression also played a part in the weakening of the Chilean and American IWW and the Mexican CGT." (26) Cooption proved more fruitful in other cases, such as the one of the Polish Solidarnosc (its full name, reflecting its early semi-syndicalist spirit, is still "Independent Self-governing Trade Union "Solidarity").

Furthermore - other factors such as the changing economic structures with new, hard to organise, non-unionised industries impermeable by political unions; agricultural collectivist principles – plausible in Spain or Ukraine, not in places where individual ownership was traditional; militant anti-clericalism which actually aided in the separation of the working class along the lines of religion, instead of truly helping to annul its negative effects; cooption and competition from conservative, mainstream and business unions, now infinitely superior when it comes to organisational size in the vast majority of countries - have all added to the demise.

Ultimately, the centralisation of political and economic power was the overwhelming tendency of the 20th century. Syndicalist ideas ran contrary to the tide of history.

### Today & Tomorrow

**GEOFFREY OSTERGAARD, THE SCHOLAR OF WORKERS' CONTROL**, stated in 1954 that the "syndicalism of the period 1900-1920 now appears as the great heroic movement of the proletariat, the last desperate attempt before society took the plunge down the managerial abyss to emancipate the proletariat by its own exertions, to build up a distinct proletarian culture purged of any traces of bourgeois ideology, and to evolve a uniquely proletarian method of social action." (27)

The resurgence of traditional syndicalism and separate "free unions" does indeed seem an unlikely prospect, at least in developed countries. Syndicalist unions still seem quite plausible in Third World countries where low levels of union density, coupled with hyperexploitation, lower level of political representation and a greater level of direct class conflict offer opportunities for combative, class unions. The energetic Mexican FAT (*Frente Autentico del Trabajo*, about 50 000 members and a working relationship with the American class union UE) and the great proto-syndicalist Indonesian union FSPNI (allegedly with a membership close to a million) are better-known examples. The militancy of the South Korean labour movement is particularly notable.

Also, considerable inroads have been made by some less ideological, "reformist" class unions (some of which are gathered in FESAL – European Federation of Alternative Syndicalism), such as the SUD unions in France that are influenced by democratic socialism and base committee ideas, the Swedish syndicalist SAC (about 10 000 members) which controls a portion of shipyards and the postal service, the Spanish CGT (with membership claims ranging from 60 000 to 100 000 - ). Particularly interesting is the Italian base union movement expressed through the COBAS ("Comitati di Base" – committees of the base) unions originating from the radicalisation of the 60s (reaching its political peak in the "hot autumn" of 1969, although the number of Italian factory councils continually increased from 1969 to 1973) and with a couple hundred thousand members, mainly in education but also among metal workers for instance.() Their presence, it could be argued, contributes to the atypical militancy of the Italian labour movement.

Some non-sectarian revolutionary unionist organisations could also provide one of the bases for highly progressive work in mass organisations, if they transformed themselves more into militant rank-and-file networks which would actively intervene in these conservative organisations. When ultra-leftists state that trade unions "may now be considered as a special police force deployed against the workers" (), that is a

recognition, but also an exaggeration of structural tendencies that are certainly present and even dominant at this stage of trade unionism in the "developed" world. However, trade unions aren't static entities – they are themselves spaces in which a continual class struggle for power between the union bureaucracy and the workers takes place. It is a struggle which mustn't be neglected, but the enslavement by the trade union machinery has to be actively resisted. () Socialists should work *with*, but also *against* trade union officials when necessary; they should help build strong and direct-democratic shop-floor, sectional organisations; combine struggles, encourage cross-sectional solidarity; and point to the political connection between fighting for immediate goals and building a better world.

Syndicalism itself is an ideology that is here to stay, although some of its past strategies - especially those that fetishised organisational purity over engaging with the working masses in less than pure organisations and movements - haven't withstood the test of time. Principled, daring opposition to the bureaucratic stifling of labour organisations is a necessity, but it should keep clear from well-intentioned, yet ultra-leftist fantasies that can ultimately only frustrate the efforts of libertarian revolutionaries. The only way ideas of workers' power and solidarity are to have relevance for the present and for the future is through engagement with average (and below-average) workers and an organic connection to the actual, existing labour movement through immersion into mass popular struggles and organisations, with a clear strategy centred at empowering the rank-and-file of labour.

## Notes

1. The terms "industrial unionism" & "syndicalism" or "revolutionary syndicalism" are usually used interchangeably, with the word "syndicalism" basically being an English rendering of the French for "revolutionary trade unionism" ("syndicalisme revolutionnaire"). Although it was often expressed through dual unionism (setting up of alternative, more or less explicitly revolutionary or direct democratic unions), it would be wrong to restrict the definition of revolutionary syndicalism solely to dual unionist strategies, as many syndicalists decided to work within existing union structures as well. This is where the distinction between "syndicalism proper" and democratic Marxism becomes quite blurred, but it is not our intention to always clearly delineate between the two, as it would mostly constitute an arbitrary and dogmatic abstraction.
2. "The workers in the Latin countries, in which the International found its principal support, developed their movement on the basis of economic fighting organisations and Socialist propaganda" (Rudolph Rocker, *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice* [with a preface by Noam Chomsky], AK Press, Oakland, Canada, 2004, p. 47).
3. "Industrial unions themselves were, in the Wobbly vision, to be the building blocks for the future cooperative society. By joining an industrial union, workers could prepare themselves to take over society directly. Working people who understood their own power had the capacity to act upon their fundamental right to expropriate and share with other workers across the world everything that they collectively produced." (Paul Buhle, *The Legacy of the IWW*, Monthly Review, June 2005, <http://www.monthlyreview.org/0605buhle.htm>)
4. Principles, Goals and Statutes of the International Workers' Association - <http://www.uncanny.net/~wsa/iwaprinciple.html>.
5. "The rise of the IWW [Industrial Workers of the World – D.J.] in the US was in part a response to the same general tendencies that triggered the rise of revolutionary syndicalism in western Europe: "opportunism, reformism, and parliamentary cretinism." (Lenin's preface to a pamphlet by Voinov (Lunacharsky) on the party's attitude towards the unions, 1907 in *International Communist Current, What is Revolutionary Syndicalism* - [http://en.internationalism.org/ir/118\\_syndicalism\\_i.html](http://en.internationalism.org/ir/118_syndicalism_i.html))
6. See Gwyn A. Williams, *Proletarian Order: Antonio Gramsci, factory councils and the origins of Italian communism, 1911-1921*, Pluto Press, 1975.

7. "Let us be clear as to the function of Industrial Unionism. That function is to build up an industrial republic inside the shell of the political State, in order that when the industrial republic is fully organized it may crack the shell of the political State and step into its scheme of the universe. But in the process of upbuilding, during the period of maturing, the mechanism of the political State can be used to assist in the formation of the embryo Industrial Republic." (James Connolly, *Industrial Unionism and Trade Unionism in Selected Writings*, Pluto Press, London, 1997, p.161)
8. "The IWW has been called red, but it has never been called yellow" (What Everyone Should Know About The IWW – <http://www.iww.org/culture/official/qanda>). The long-term aim, rather than being merely defensive, is to develop class consciousness and solidarity.
9. In a somewhat simplistic manner, Connolly wrote: "I feel that we cannot too strongly insist upon this point. Political division is born of industrial division; political scabbery is born of industrial craft scabbery; political weakness keeps even step with industrial weakness. It is an axiom enforced by all the experience of the ages that they who rule industrially will rule politically, and therefore they who are divided industrially will remain impotent politically.(...) To this end those who work for industrial unionism are truly co-operating even when they least care for political activities." (James Connolly, *Socialism Made Easy in Selected Political Writings*, pp. 268-271)
10. Iain McKay, 1905: Origins of the Social General Strike, *Anarcho-Syndicalist Review*, Issue 42/44, Winter 2006, pp. 9-12.
11. Cedric Durand, For a New Strategic Model, *International Socialist Tendency Discussion Bulletin* No. 7, 2006, p. 10 – [www.swp.org.uk](http://www.swp.org.uk).
12. Rudolf Rocker, *ibid.*, p.65.
13. Jose Peirats, *The CNT in the Spanish Revolution*, The Meltzer Press, Hastings, 2001, p.97. See both volumes of the famous CNT anthology by this distinguished CNT historian. Others have put membership of the CNT during the height of the revolution at 1 million (for instance Murray Bookchin, *To Remember Spain*, AK Press, San Francisco, 1994) and even 2 million (Gambone, *Syndicalism In Myth and Reality*, Red Lion Press, 1995., p.5).
14. The well-known Italian anti-fascist Carlo Rosselli, a professor of economics, stated: "In three months Catalonia has been able to set up a new social order on the ruins of an ancient system. This is chiefly due to the Anarchists, who have revealed a quite remarkable sense of proportion, realistic understanding, and organizing ability...All the revolutionary forces of Catalonia have united in a programme of Syndicalist-Socialist character: socialization of large industry; recognition of the small proprietor; workers' control...Anarcho-Syndicalism, hitherto so despised, has revealed itself as a great constructive force...I am not an Anarchist, but I regard it as my duty to express here my opinion of the Anarchists of Catalonia, who have all too often been represented to the world as a destructive, if not as a criminal, element." The statement of Fenner Brockway, secretary of the English Independent Labour Party, was also supportive of the anarchosyndicalists: "There are still some Britishers and Americans who regard the Anarchists of Spain as impossible, undisciplined uncontrollables. This is poles away from the truth. The Anarchists of Spain, through the CNT, are doing one of the biggest constructive jobs ever done by the working-class." (Rudolf Rocker, *op.cit.*, pp.66-67)
15. Sean Matgamna, *Revolution and betrayal*, *Workers' liberty* 3/6 - <http://www.workersliberty.org/node/6904> .
16. V.I. Lenin, "Left Wing' Communism – an infantile disorder, *Bookmarks*, London, 1993, pp.60-61.
17. Leon Trotsky, *Trade Unions in the epoch of imperialist decay*, Pathfinder, London, 1990.
18. William Z. Foster, *Bankruptcy of the American Labor Movement*, Trade Union Educational League, 1922 - <http://www.marxists.org/archive/foster/1922/index.htm>.

19. "For well over a century, various leftists -- orthodox Marxists, Trotskyists, independent socialists, communists -- have all tried to reform the AFL and its successor the AFL-CIO. "Boring from Within" they called their strategy of seeking to transform the organization from within while accepting its authority, obeying its rules, following its protocols, and soaking up its norms and culture. Not surprisingly, like the FBI agent in Donnie Brasco, who infiltrates the Mafia and starts talking trash and beating his wife, the longer they stay, the more they resemble their adversaries rather than vice versa. I call it the roach motel syndrome. The leftists go in but they don't come out." (Robert Fitch, interviewed by Michael D. Yates in What's the Matter with US Organized Labor, Monthly Review Zine - <http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org/yates300306.html>)
20. Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, *The IWW Call to Women in Rosalyn Fraad Baxandall, Words on Fire: The Life and Writing of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick and London, 1987, p.108.
21. Patrick Renshaw, *The Wobblies: Story of the IWW and Syndicalism in the United States*, Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 1999, p.140.
22. "In 1905–1914 the Marxist left had in most countries been on the fringe of the revolutionary movement, the main body of Marxists had been identified with a de facto non-revolutionary social democracy, while the bulk of the revolutionary left was anarcho-syndicalist, or at least much closer to the ideas and the mood of anarcho-syndicalism than to that of classical Marxism." (Eric Hobsbawm, *Bolshevism and the Anarchists, Revolutionaries*, New York, 1973, p. 61.)
23. Alexandre Skirda, *Facing the Enemy: A History of Anarchist Organization from Proudhon to May 1968*, AK Press, Edinburgh, 2002, p.96.
24. 1922-today: The International Workers Association, <http://libcom.org/history/articles/international-workers-association/index.php>. Stated membership numbers which I have just mentioned should of course be taken with caution.
25. See for example Bill Haywood, *With Drops of Blood the History of the IWW has been written* - <http://www.workerseducation.org/crutch/pamphlets/drops.html>, and Howard Zinn, *The Socialist Challenge, A People's History of the United States*, [www.iww.org/culture/articles/zinn13.shtml](http://www.iww.org/culture/articles/zinn13.shtml).
26. L. Gambone, *Syndicalism In Myth and Reality*, Red Lion Press, 1995, pp. 4-8.
27. Geoffrey Ostergaard, *Fabianism and the Managerial Revolution in The Tradition of Workers' Control*, Freedom Press, London, 1997, p.104.
28. La CGT se consolida como tercera fuerza sindical, Royo y Negro, September 2004, in Gambone, op.cit.,p.15.
29. See Donato Romito, *Anarchist Communists and the Italian 'Base Union' Movement*, Northeastern Anarchist, October 2003. - <http://www.ainfos.ca/03/oct/ainfos00539.html>, as well as "Cobas presentazione versione in inglese" - [http://www.cobas.it/Sito/Commissione%20Internazionale/Internazionale\\_index.htm](http://www.cobas.it/Sito/Commissione%20Internazionale/Internazionale_index.htm)
30. *Towards the Rebirth of the Working Class Trade Union*, Il Partito Comunista, no.205, 1992) - <http://perso.orange.fr/italian.left/English/Document/92Toward.htm>
31. Adam Lincoln proposed a model which differs both from the traditional "dual unionist" and "boring from within" approaches (the latter largely having been practiced by the libertarian elements of the British shop-stewards movements in the past, the radicalised workers of the late 60s and early 70s in South Europe etc.) in Adam Lincoln, *The IWW and Trade Unions, Bread and Roses*, Vol.2, Issue 9, October 2006, pp.10-11.

Originally published in New Politics (USA), Summer 2007, updated for UK 2010 publication.

## The Way to Win

An essay by Britain's most prominent syndicalist Tom Mann. Written in 1909 *The Way to Win* reflects Mann's disillusionment with parliamentary action as a means of the working class making gains.

### *An Open Letter to Trade Unionists on The Methods of Industrial Organisation*

Comrades, The great crisis is drawing nigh when the supreme effort must be made by the workers to take entire responsibility for the management of all industry and commerce; the existing system of society must out of necessity give place to some other system that will adequately provide for the requirements of all. The nature of the newer order will depend in considerable measure on the standard of intelligence possessed by the workers, and on their courage to apply sound principles that will ensure social and economic equality. The object I have in writing this letter is not to enlarge upon principles or ideals, but to direct attention to the machinery that is necessary to enable us to achieve our project.

#### **The preliminary essential condition is working class solidarity**

Without this solidarity, i.e., without the power and the disposition to act in concert as the working-class against the dominating plutocratic class, there is no hope. At present we have not got this solidarity, either industrially or politically. The weakness of our industrial organisation lies less in the fact that only one fourth of the workers are organised, than in the much more serious fact that those who are organised are not prepared to make common cause with each other. Hitherto we have been content with trade unions – meaning unions of skilled workers, supplemented by unions of unskilled workers. But each of these unions has for the most part initiated and as far as possible carried out a policy for itself alone; more recently broadened somewhat by joining Trade and Labour Federations to secure something in the nature of general help in time of trouble or warfare. Still, the basis of unionism to-day is distinctly sectional and narrow, instead of cosmopolitan and broad-based. In Australia, more particularly, resort to Arbitration Courts and Wages Boards for settlement of industrial disputes has resulted in settlements being arrived at and agreements entered into by various unions, binding them not to become actively engaged in any dispute during the period covered by the agreement. Such agreements in themselves absolutely destroy the possibility of class solidarity. Agreements entered into between unions and employers directly – i.e., without the intervention of Arbitration Courts or Wages Boards – are equally detrimental to, and in dead opposition to working-class solidarity. They, therefore, must be classed as amongst the chief obstructive agencies to general working-class progress. Thus it is clear that to continue entering into binding agreements with employers is to render the unionist movement impotent for achieving our economic freedom. Therefore, no more agreements must be entered into for lengthy periods. Of course, temporary adjustments must be made, but they must be for the hour only, leaving the workers free for concerted action with their fellows. The form of capitalist industry has changed during the past 50 years. It has passed through the stages of individual ownership of shop or factory, the employer taking part



in the business and competing with all other employers in the same business, then to limited liability and joint stock companies, which removed the individual employer – and reduced competition between the capitalist firms. From this it has now gone to trusts and combines, inter-State, and even international in their operation.

A corresponding change must take place with the workers' organisation. Sectionalism must disappear, and the industrial organisations must be equal to state, national, and international action, not in theory only, but in actual fact.

Another influence tending strongly towards discord and not towards solidarity, is the stipulating in some unions that a man who joins an industrial organisation by that act pledges himself to vote a certain way politically.

I have, in days gone by, argued strongly that the industrial organisations should be the special places where economic knowledge should be imparted and adequate scope for discussion afforded. I hold so still, but I am thoroughly satisfied that it is a source of serious discord to couple the political with the industrial in the sense of demanding that a man must vote as the industrial organisation declares.

It is not difficult to understand why this should be so. It is because in the unions or industrial organisations we are (or should be) prepared to enrol every person who works, irrespective of his or her intelligence, or opinions held upon political or other subjects.

Take the case of an organiser, who finds himself at the centre of an industry where there is practically no organisation. He soon discovers that the usual orthodox bodies are there, theological and political. He finds out the composition of the local governing bodies and the type of politician who received the votes at last election. From this he concludes that there are resident there the usual percentage of reactionaries, Liberals, Laborites, and Socialists, and each of these parties finds its adherents chiefly in the ranks of the workers.

That ought not to interfere with industrial organisation, in which they should all be enrolled entirely irrespective of political faith; and becoming members of the industrial body, it is here these workers should get their education in industrial and social economics, and this would prove the true guide to political action.

To insist upon them voting solidly politically before they have received instruction in matters economic, is to add to the difficulties of organisation.

Notwithstanding what has been done and is now being done by the Australian Worker's Union, it is abundantly clear that we shall have to separate the industrial from the political, and so afford scope for growing activities with the least amount of friction.

I am not wishful to deprecate political action, but it is necessary to say that during recent years, in Australia, undue importance has been attached to political action; and although the actual membership of industrial organisations may be as large, or even larger than in former years, there is not held by the typical unionist a proper understanding of the fundamental and vital importance of economic or industrial organisation. Indeed, to listen to the speeches of the typical Labor politician it is clear that he has surfeited with the idea that that which is of paramount importance is the return to the legislative bodies of an additional number of Labor men, and that all else is secondary and relatively trifling.

In absolute fact, the very opposite is the case. Experience in all countries shows most conclusively that industrial organisation, intelligently conducted, is of much more moment than political action, *for entirely irrespective as to which school of politicians is in power, capable and courageous industrial activity forces from the politicians proportionate concessions.*

It is an entirely mistaken notion to suppose that the return of Labor men or Socialists to Parliament can bring about deep-seated economic changes, unless the people themselves intelligently desire these changes, and those who do so desire know the value of economic organisation. During the past few years the representative men of France, Germany, Italy, and other countries have urged upon the workers of the world to give increased attention to industrial organisation, and they are acting accordingly. Indeed, it is obvious that a growing proportion of the intelligent pioneers of economic changes are expressing more and more dissatisfaction with Parliament and all its works, and look forward to the time when Parliaments, as we know them, will be superceded by the people managing their own affairs by means of the Initiative and the Referendum.

However, I am not an anti-Parliamentarian. I am chiefly concerned that we should attend to the first job in the right order, and thus make it easier to do whatever else may be necessary.

It is encouraging to see the practical turn in affairs in Port Pirie, SA. There the Combined Unions' Committee has already sent out a circular letter to the unions of South Australia, in which they say:

During the present struggle with the Broken Hill Proprietary Company, we have had ample opportunity of ascertaining in what manner industrial organisation might be made more effective in resisting the tyrannical encroachments or modern capitalism, and securing to the worker a larger share of the product of his labor. My committee have come to a definite and unanimous conclusion that craft unionism has outlived its usefulness, and that 20th century industrial development demands on the part of the workers a more perfect system of organisation. With this end in view we urge, as a preliminary step, the holding of a Trades' Union Congress in Adelaide during the month of July next. We sincerely hope that this proposition will meet with the earnest and energetic support of your members, and that immediate action will be taken.

This is a significant sign of the times, and an encouraging one, too, to those who lament the sectionalism of the present unionism movement. Such a conference could well discuss and carry such resolutions as follow:

That the present system of sectional trades unionism is incapable of combating effectively the capitalist system under which the civilized world is now suffering, and such modifications and alterations should be made in existing unions as will admit of a genuine Federation of all organisations, with the power to act unitedly for industrial purposes.

That this conference urgently advises all trade societies, unions, and associations to speedily make such changes in their rules as may be necessary to separate the funds subscribed for purposes usually provided by Friendly Societies from the funds subscribed for economic or industrial purposes, and proceed to at once form district Federations of all unions as distinct from trade or craft Federations.

That a provisional committee, or Council, be formed in each State (or, if need be, each industrial district), to direct organising activities, until the movement attains such dimensions as will warrant the holding of an Interstate Congress, at which Congress all details as to objects and methods can be definitely decided upon. The members composing such provisional councils or committees to be drawn from members of unions agreeing to the previous proposals.

That no dispute be entered upon and no encouragement given to any section to formulate grievances (unless compelled by the action of employers), until the movement shall have attained a high standard of organisation, approved by the proposed Interstate Congress.

That in order to guard against dissension, it be declared from the outset that this movement is neither anti-political nor pro-political, but industrial and economic, and that members may belong to what political organisation they please providing they do not oppose the expressed objects and ideals yet to be agreed upon at the Inter-state Congress, and at present set forth in the previous proposals.

If the unions of the Barrier agree to take such action as suggested in the foregoing proposals, I believe there could be, in a short time, a far more powerful organisation than anything of the kind known to modern times.

Beyond any question, the industrialists of Australia are prepared to carefully consider any well thought-out proposals submitted to them by the comrades of Broken Hill and Port Pirie.

The time is particularly opportune also, because for some two years past much discussion has been indulged in as to the merits of industrial unionism, and the minds of many are prepared to co-operate in such effort as here set forth.

Many of the unions in New South Wales and Victoria have already given much attention to the subject, and are well disposed hitherto.

To remain in the present forcibly feeble condition characteristic of present-day unionism would be to stamp ourselves as incapables; and would admit of an indefinite prolongation of capitalist tyranny.

On all sides we see hysterical efforts being made by the plutocratic Governments of the different countries to prepare for war on an unprecedented scale, as a relief from glutted markets. Such is the condition of the peoples in Europe and America that deaths by starvation and deaths from diseases arising out of ill-nourished and unsanitary conditions are so appallingly large that the modern system stands condemned in the eyes of all intelligent citizens.

Through the ages men have died by millions before the naturally allotted span of life, because they have not been able to produce life's requirements in the necessary abundance; but never before did the anomaly we now witness obtain, viz., that people die of hunger because they have produced so much as to glut the markets and fill the warehouses, and are then deprived of the opportunity to work, therefore of incomes. Hence, poverty, destitution, and misery.

These conditions cannot last. In spite of colossal ignorance, there is already too much intelligence and genuine courage to acquiesce in such class dominance and exploitation as bring such results in its train.

**Therefore, comrades, get to work like men of intelligence and courage, count it a privilege to be permitted to share in the great work of social and economic emancipation; for, indeed, there is no higher, no worthier, no holier work that can engage the energies of man.**

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