

Unit 2: Britain: The Radical Period 1750-1840

This Unit aims to:

- Offer an interpretation of working-class radicalism 1750-1840 from an anarcho-syndicalist perspective
- Introduce, through case studies, the history of organisation and direct action in working-class movements
- Look at the social, political and economic context of the formation of early general unions and wage campaigns
- Suggest some of the reasons why mainstream historical accounts have failed to acknowledge working-class revolutionary aspirations

Terms and abbreviations

Diggers: A communistic movement that flourished during the English Revolution and Civil War. They advocated the abolition of private ownership of land and believed that political revolution must be based on social revolution.

Habeas corpus: A writ requiring persons to be brought into court before a judge to investigate the lawfulness of their imprisonment.

Hampden Clubs: Social and political societies set up in the industrialised north of England with the aim of social reform.

Levellers: A political group of the English Revolution who advocated political reforms around basic individual rights and the principle of popular sovereignty.

Tolpuddle Martyrs: In 1834 six agricultural labourers, who had combined to resist wage reductions, were sentenced to seven years transportation on a trumped-up charge of administering illegal oaths. They were pardoned in 1836 after massive sustained protests.

Introduction

Unit 1 outlined the first stages of the growth of capitalism. This Unit examines the ways in which the emerging working-class responded to the new ways in which they were being exploited within capitalism. The first signs of working-class resistance emerged during a radical phase in England during the first decades of the 19th Century. This Unit highlights key moments in the period of working-class responses to capitalist oppression, and looks at the forms those responses took.

As with Unit 1, this Unit seeks to provide a historical context for the growth of some of the ideas that later emerged as identifiably anarcho-syndicalist. In order to make sense of the development of these ideas, we need to understand the context in which they came about. Historical accounts have often overlooked the highly organised and forward-looking way in which the working class responded to the emergence of capitalism and industrialisation. This unit reviews the evidence for working-class radicalism and in the process, the true extent of working-class revolutionary organisation becomes apparent.

Problems with classical history

Many classical historical accounts of the period 1760-1840 are somewhat patchy in their record of working class history. Notably, they tend to underplay or even dismiss the reality that workers could organise themselves and take direct action in the pursuit of revolutionary aims. This tendency is partly because of a wider tendency to portray revolutionary aspirations as somehow “un-English” and not part of the English working class character. It is interesting to note, for example, that the events of the seventeenth century are never described as a revolution, but a ‘Civil War’. Often the reason given for this is that the status quo prior to the ‘Civil War’ was completely restored. Given that this is patently untrue, there must be another reason for the English being deemed incapable of revolution. Basically, it is due to a mythical ‘national character’ which is as racist as it is part of upholding a myth of ‘Englishness’. To quote just one example of this mythology, the historian Weymouth states:

“The English working man has no desire for conflict...they possess no innate tendency towards revolution...while the action of revolutionaries on the continent was not lost on the subject masses of Great Britain, the majority of working men were loyalist at heart and lovers of domestic peace.”

This myth of ‘Englishness’ is deeply pervasive and many historians ignore the evidence and portray the English working class as largely passive and only occasionally reactive. The fact that the history of the working class does not conform to such caricatures is often explained away by the liberal use of the words “mob” and “riot” in the average history book covering 18th and 19th Century British history. Typical references of this kind include descriptions such as the Gordon Riots (1780), the mobbing of the King in London Streets (1795 and 1820), the Birmingham Bull Ring Riots (1839), the Rebecca Riots (1839), the Plug Riots (1842) to name but a few. Use of the terms “mob” and “riot” tend to imply that, typically driven by poverty, the normally docile working class occasionally lost control and committed isolated and random acts of violence before falling back into their placid acceptance of capitalism.

Reasons for this misleading description of events vary. The tendency to downplay working class organisation come from an ideology which places a docile and largely disorganised working class at the base of society. This assumption emanates partly from the

mythology of ‘Englishness’ against which England defines itself and distances itself from ‘Johnny Foreigner’. It may also come from a complacency which is borne out of the position in society in which the majority of academics find themselves; middle class beneficiaries of capitalism. Whilst not all historians are middle-class, taken in by myths of Englishness or conscious upholders of capitalism, many are affected by the assumptions built into English society and are part of the dominant class within it. History and historians are shown to be as much a product of the time in which they are writing as the events that they claim to be recording. All histories are partial. This being the case, there is no such thing as merely ‘recording’ events – all historians are interpreters of events, which means that their biases and prejudices will inevitably come into play.

Also, historians with differing political agendas may have good reasons to underplay a highly organised working- class response to capitalism. Liberal and right wing historians may wish to deliberately play down co-ordinated action, or may not make the (rather obvious) connections through the course of their research. The motives for this are probably already clear – talk of revolution and organised direct action tend to encourage people to review not only their history but also their present social position. Marxist historians, on the other hand, wish to demonstrate that workers could not reach “political consciousness” without the revolutionary perspective of the Marxist intelligentsia, which was absent at this time, as the period was prior to Marx. Labour historians may prefer to stress the social democratic tendencies of workers by attempting to distance trade unions from violent direct action and revolutionary goals.

This problem of historian bias is further compounded by the fact that the working class perspective of working class history is often missing, since during this period, the actions taken by the working class were often illegal and punishable by death or transportation. Operating in such circumstances, it is not surprising that working class organisation remained largely clandestine, with very few records kept to indicate how the organisations operated and what their aims were. These are grave omissions from any account of working class history. However, there is strong circumstantial evidence that many of the working class actions of the period were in fact highly planned within working class communities, with detailed aims. The growth of workplace unions can be interpreted as being an integral part of this

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wider struggle against capitalism. The goals of these integrated working class organisations were as sophisticated as the organisations themselves. Most significantly, the struggle for immediate improvements to pay and working conditions during the period were often backed up with longer-term aims that clearly demonstrate a revolutionary perspective. The combination of working class community and workplace organisation, linked to the struggle for both immediate gains and longer term revolutionary change, formed an important initial basis for the set of ideas which was later to emerge as anarcho-syndicalism.

As factory based capitalism developed, workers increasingly came together in large groups and suffered the same working conditions in the same building on a daily basis for the first time. It did not take long for them to recognise a common interest between themselves, and against their rulers and bosses. This growing sense of class-consciousness was the catalyst that led to organisation and working class action. For an 80-year period between 1760 and 1850 the British ruling class sustained the biggest attack on its authority ever organised by the working class. The decline of the guilds, along with the protection they had offered (see Unit 1), made it increasingly obvious to workers that they must seek new forms of organisations. So they began to form alliances and unions for their own self-protection. As early as 1683, printers in London began to organise in chapels, with a system of penalties for “non-observance” of chapel rules. Around the end of the eighteenth-century, the Government stepped up action to make such primitive unions illegal. Partly to get around such legislation, workers organised friendly societies, and often used these to mask their covert union activities. This was a successful strategy, and friendly societies quickly spread to most parts of Britain. So effective was this form of organisation that the sustained action against the starvation caused by soaring food prices during the eighteenth-century was able to draw on a well-developed and self-organised national network of working class friendly societies.

The Food Riots

Most histories have recorded the working class protests at rising food prices in the late 18th Century as 'food riots'. The massive unrest and violent action of the period has largely been interpreted as unplanned, disorganised, desperate scuffles. In fact, many of the so-called 'riots' were actually planned and co-ordinated. The unions were instrumental in this organised campaign, with workers consciously planning direct action aimed at lowering food prices. That workers should plan such illegal violent action hardly fits in with the classical historians' views already referred to in this Unit. But in spite of the workers' desperation through lack of decent available food, were far from being confused and desperate underlings. One early example of the real extent of planned resistance is seen in a letter the mayor of Liverpool wrote to the Home Secretary in 1772, with allegations that a meeting of the town journeymen carpenters were planning a 'riot'. Whereas historians have traditionally interpreted riots as spontaneous actions brought about by nothing more than the pressure being brought to bear on the 'rioters' immediately prior to the event, officials like the mayor of Liverpool, who were there at the time, clearly had other information and a different understanding. Indeed, many of the 'food riots' of the late 18th Century were carefully planned; they were simply too well organised to be otherwise. Throughout the Thames valley in 1766, for example, villages and towns were patrolled by large groups of workers, calling themselves "the irregulars", who enforced 'popular' food prices. Another example of this type of organisation is found in Halifax, in 1783, where workers marched on the town, formed in rows of twos, and forced the shops to sell oats and wheat at a fixed price. Given that in the time leading up to the execution of the alleged leaders, troops were drafted into the area to prevent wide-scale disorder and a planned attempt at rescue, we must assume that the authorities then knew about what historians since have contrived to overlook; wide-scale working-class organised resistance.

These examples were not isolated incidents of working class community planning. In 1795, the climactic year of the food 'riots', workers took co-ordinated action across Britain. In Carlisle, Nottingham, Newcastle, Cornwall and London to name but a few, well-organised actions against high food prices have been documented. Very often these protests took a characteristic form. After a prearranged signal, often a woman holding aloft a loaf of

bread decorated with a black ribbon, the so-called 'mob' would take over the market place, often for days, in order to enforce low food prices.

The practice of workers seizing grain being transported on roads, rivers and docks, also become common. Eventually, the Government was forced to accept that it could no longer guarantee the safety of the food in transport. Farmers began refusing to send food to market for fear that it would be commandeered in transit or that the workers would force it to be sold at a low price.

Government Response

Fearful of a French Revolution type insurrection taking place in Britain, the Government introduced a range of Acts of Parliament in the last years of the 18th Century, aimed at breaking working class organisation. In 1795, Prime Minister Pitt introduced the Seditious Meeting Act, which banned public meeting and brought forward legislation suspending *habeas corpus*. In 1799, the Combination Acts were introduced, which outlawed trade unions.

In 1797, an Act was introduced which made the swearing of unlawful oaths illegal. This piece of legislation was of great significance, for the swearing of oaths was the basis by which the working class organised successfully, and ensured both secrecy and solidarity. Not only did the ancient guilds, and later the unions organise around oath-taking, so did all manner of working class organisations, from political clubs to insurrectionist movements. By banning oaths, the Government hoped to end the methods by which clandestine working class organisations had been operating for hundreds of years. The importance the Government placed on undermining working class organisation by attacking the oaths system can be seen from the severity of the sentence for conviction under the new Act - up to 7 years transportation. By contrast, the anti-union combination legislation carried a maximum sentence of three months imprisonment. It was under the swearing of oaths Act that the Tolpuddle Martyrs were found guilty and transported in 1834.

The Government of the period recognised the food 'riots' as part of an organised working class protest with revolutionary undertones. Historians have by and large chosen to interpret this as 'panic' on the part of the government. However, the more likely explanation, one for which there is plenty of evidence, is that the food riots, far from being unplanned acts of desperation were highly organised. The Government did not see the unions as 'respectable' organisations cut off from this working class agitation, but as part and parcel of the food 'riots' protests. The anti-working class legislation introduced by the Pitt Government was not solely aimed at curbing the unrest. It also aimed to undermine the working class methods through which protest was organised.

The Radical Period

As the 18th Century drew to a close, Government fears that working class unrest may begin to take a revolutionary direction appeared ever more justified. By the early 1800s, organised protest was beginning to take on a quasi-insurrectionist nature. Actions such as consumer strikes were advertised in advance by handbills with wider aims than just the immediate demand for cheaper food.

This was particularly the case with factory workers in the growing industrial regions of the midlands and the north. Across Yorkshire in 1800, meetings were called by handbill in Sheffield, Wakefield, Dewsbury and Bingley. The purpose of these, as printed on the handbill, was '*to expose the fraud of every species of hereditary Government, to lessen the oppression of taxes, to propose plans for the education of helpless infancy and the comfortable support of the aged and distressed [and to end] the horrid practice of war.*'

In December 1800, magistrates in Sheffield issued a proclamation against 'numerously attended' meetings that were being held in fields at night. Government spies reported that 'there is a system of organisation going on in secret committees and preparation of hostile weapons'. By March 1801, this had spread to Leeds and Huddersfield, where magistrates reported to the Government that they feared 'an insurrection was in contemplation by the lower orders.' In Lancashire, magistrates reported that in Ashton-under-Lyne (near Manchester) a delegate meeting had taken place with 'agents' present from Yorkshire, Birmingham, Bristol and London.

With the temporary measures under the 1795 Seditious Meetings Act expiring, it became lawful once again to call public meetings, and these began to be called in a highly co-ordinated fashion. As the Committee of Secrecy in the House of Commons noted: 'It appears to be in agitation suddenly to call numerous meetings in different parts of the country, at the same day and hour.' An alarmed Government quickly re-enacted the Seditious Meetings Act and *habeas corpus* was suspended for a further year.

Organisation returned underground. In Halifax, in 1801, some form of delegate meeting took place with the swearing of oaths and the joining of the United Britons - an organisation based in Lancashire. All who joined were required to answer yes to the following questions:

Luddism

- 1 Do you desire a total change of the system?
- 2 Are you willing to risk yourself in a contest to leave posterity free?
- 3 Are you willing to do all in your power to create the spirit of love and brotherhood and affection among the friends of freedom?

In June 1802, a small eight-page pamphlet appeared entitled 'Addressed to United Britons' claiming to unite 'in a chain of affection' all those seeking to overthrow the nation's oppressors. By 1803 the Government received a number of reports by informants that secret organisations had 'pervaded the great body of the people in manufacturing districts, and that pikes – pointed wooden stakes - were being prepared. Reports also came in from Lancashire, Yorkshire and the Midlands of a secret organisation in existence, which sought to channel discontent at soaring prices into a revolutionary direction.

As well as these shadowy insurrectionist organisations, the early 1800s saw the growth of a national organisation campaigning for a minimum wage. This aimed to use constitutional methods to achieve its ends, although the campaign itself was illegal, being organised on the basis of secret committees. It was well represented in the industrial heartland, with some twenty secret committees of weavers existing in the industrial towns of Lancashire alone. The common geographic spread, class situation and clandestine organising methods strongly indicate that these committees had connections with the more insurrectionist groups, although this is often denied in the history books. Agitation for a minimum wage reached boiling point in 1807, with petitions, strikes and demonstrations. Despite a heavy Government response and the arrest of many involved, a similar burst of protest occurred in 1811, when a petition in support of a minimum wage was handed in to Parliament. The extent of the minimum wage organisation is indicated by the fact that it contained signatures from throughout Britain, including 40,000 from Manchester and 30,000 from Scotland. However, the signatures were wasted on the Government.

The failure of the minimum wage movement to gain reform through constitutional methods drove many working-class people to direct action. On the failure of the petition, the Lancashire organising committees apparently abandoned constitutional reform and, acting in a single mass block, they turned to Luddism (see E. P. Thompson).

It was about the time of the failure of the minimum wage campaign that Luddism burst onto the scene. It is important to make a distinction between the common image of Luddism and its reality. The popular contemporary portrayal is that it was an uncouth backward looking movement; so much so that it is common even now to refer disparagingly to someone who is suspicious of new technology as a 'Luddite'. Popular historical interpretation has constructed the Luddites as *'simple minded labourers [reacting] to the new system by smashing the machines which they thought responsible for their troubles'* (E.J. Hobsbawm). In addition, there is a slightly more sophisticated analysis often put forward that Luddism was a form of collective bargaining based on sabotage. However, none of these representations are accurate.

The Luddites were not trying to prevent technological progress and protect their privileged position as tradesmen by destroying machinery, nor were they opposed to new technology. They were, however, very strongly linked to the minimum wage campaigns through their emphasis on preventing the lowering of wages. In addition, there is evidence that the aims of Luddism were not immediate, local and reactionary, but revolutionary.

Luddism was in fact rooted in the clandestine working class organisations that had been growing since the mid-18th Century. It developed in the industrial heartland, which by the beginning of the 19th century was to become the scene of insurrectionist organisation. Luddism originated in Nottingham around 1810. It quickly spread to Derbyshire and Leicestershire, then onwards to Lancashire and Yorkshire. The Luddism movement was well organised. Members not only swore an oath but also were expected to pay a regular subscription. Regular secret meetings were held, mainly on the moors at night, from which organising committees and delegates to attend regional meetings were elected. Such organisation enabled small bands of Luddites to remain largely undetected by the authorities, as they moved through the English industrial heartland, destroying the machinery of those employers who had lowered wages. By 1812, the Luddites were confident and numerous enough to begin attacking well defended mills. Groups of armed Luddites in Lancashire and Yorkshire attacked several such mills. Pitched battles were fought with soldiers, with many being killed or wounded on both sides.

As Luddism spread, it quickly began to take on a revolutionary perspective. The fact that it presented such a threat at its height may indicate why the Government and those in power at the time sought to spread false rumour as to the Luddites' reasons for their actions and their intent. As its strength grew, Luddism increasingly took an insurrectionist nature. It spread to areas like Sheffield, where technology such as gigs and shearing frames were not in operation. Luddite activities began to include the collection of arms and raising of funds as well as the destruction of machinery. A secret House of Commons committee noted this with alarm. Luddism's appeal also began to spread beyond weavers, and workers from various industries began taking part in armed raids. Luddism, especially in Lancashire and Yorkshire, became increasingly inspired by the notion of overthrowing the Government once the organisation had spread and enough arms collected.

The fear amongst Britain's ruling class increased with the growing strength and political direction of the Luddist movement. Government quickly responded by making the crime of frame breaking a capital offence. Armies of Government spies were dispatched in an attempt to infiltrate working class communities. By the end of 1812, more than 12,000 troops were stationed in the most affected areas of northern England. To put the perceived threat into perspective, this was a greater force than Wellington had under his command in Spain. In Lancashire, in May 1812, a full 27 troops of guards as well as thousands of special constables were on active duty. Despite this army of occupation, the Luddites were able to continue to operate. This was only possible because of the protection they received from the wider working class community. The authorities offered very generous rewards to desperately poor workers for information, but in the main, they still failed to get workers to inform. When authorities were able to bring cases to court, trials were often moved to other areas of the country, both to ensure conviction and prevent unrest. Despite the efforts of the ruling class, the funerals of those executed for being involved in Luddism were turned into mass political rallies by the working class. All of this points to widespread working class support for Luddite aims.

By 1814, the economic and military power of the ruling class meant the odds began to be stacked against Luddism, and it declined in the face of massive Government oppression. However, as

Luddism passed, the revolutionary atmosphere that it generated led to other forms of resistance. Working class clubs such as the Hampden Clubs sprang up, and there was an upsurge in the number of radical papers and periodicals being produced and distributed. The explosion of radicalism that had swept across the country maintained momentum up to the 1840s.

Analysis: Reform or Revolution?

Clearly, Luddism developed and contributed important experience to working class organisations and tactics. It was a movement of the working class that united workers. It also employed methods of direct action in the struggle against capitalism. Luddism not only sought to make immediate economic gains, but also increasingly linked this struggle with the need for widespread social and economic change. Though the aim of the Luddite radicalism remained parliamentary reform, many of those involved equated parliamentary reform directly with revolutionary change. Luddism linked the short-term aims of reform with longer-term aims of revolutionary change. In short, the Luddites developed and practised some of the basic principles on which anarcho-syndicalism was later to be built.

The movement for reform was split into those who advocated change through peaceful constitutional methods and those who argued for insurrection as a way of bringing about change. While attention has been paid to the emerging politics of the former, the latter has been largely forgotten or rejected in popular history. By way of example, the reformist leader Hunt has been virtually canonised by historians, while the insurrectionist advocate Thistlewood has been dismissed as a crank. The fact that Thistlewood's public popularity matched that of Hunt, especially within the working class, tells us more about the prejudices of historians than it does about history.

Much is known and written about the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, in which soldiers butchered peaceful demonstrators. However,

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the attempted uprisings in Derby and Huddersfield at the same time have been given little attention. With hindsight, and a modern perspective, the aims of the insurrectionists may seem confused. Indeed, the Derby and Huddersfield episodes were tragedies bordering on farce. However, it is clear that these events were a reflection of the genuine desire of many working class people for revolutionary change.

The extent to which organised insurrection was a possibility during this period is implied by the Government's response. In 1820, what became known as 'the six acts' were introduced. The first prohibited military drilling and training, while the second gave justices the power to enter houses without warrants if they suspected arms were being stored. The third banned meetings of over fifty people (except Parliament, of course!), the fourth increased the stamp duties on newspapers (in effect banning them for working class use), and the fifth and sixth extended the power of the Government over sedition. Following the six acts, the Government embarked on a highly sustained campaign of prosecutions. This ranged from attacks on the press and the imprisonment of leading reformers, to the execution of Arthur Thistlewood, the insurrectionist advocate. Once again, widespread brutality and repression by the Government dampened down the growing mass movement for change.

Amidst unprecedented Government repression, the unions attempted to organise in new ways. A combination of growing working class identity and solidarity in the face of government repression and the growing factory system, contributed to changes in the approach to workers' organisations. Up to this point, unions had been based on individual trades, often promoting the sectional interest of skilled workers (as in the guilds). Now, the idea of general unions began to evolve, within which all workers would be organised.

In 1817, even though unions were banned, an attempt to form a general union of workers was made in Lancashire. This was known as the 'Philanthropic Society' and it soon spread as far as London. Though it was short-lived, the idea of a general union did not die away. With the repeal of the combination laws in 1824, union organisation began to grow. Within a few years, another attempt at building a national general union was made.

Following a failed strike by cotton spinners in Lancashire, the Grand General Union of the Operative Spinners of Great Britain and Ireland was formed. After a conference in Manchester in 1829, it was decided to turn the union into a general union called the National Association for the Protection of Labour. In a short time it had gained 10,000 members covering twenty trades. However, the union was short-lived, and it collapsed in 1832 after a defeated strike. In 1831, the London based Metropolitan Trade Union was organised, which federated a number of trades. This organisation, though again short-lived, is relevant because of its strong involvement with the National Union of the Working Class. This organisation went on to form the London Working Men's Association, from which the idea of a National Charter was to form.

As the 1830s progressed, the attempt to form general unions began to take on a more political-economic perspective. With influences from the philanthropist Owen, and the ideas of the political economist Ricardo, who argued that it is the workers who produce wealth, workers increasingly looked to the idea of replacing capitalism with a new system based on non-profit co-operative production. There are clear links here with the later development of anarcho-sindicalism.

The Grand National

In 1831, The Operatives Builders Union was formed. This was a national organisation of builders unions who subscribed to the idea of co-operative production, and it went on to form the more general Grand National Guild. From this, in 1834, the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union was formed. The Grand National grew rapidly to over half a million members. These included workers who had not previously been organised, including agricultural workers and a small number of women workers.

The aim of the Grand National was the complete replacement of capitalism and the system of competition with a co-operative system based on workers' control. Here we see further key elements emerging of early anarcho-syndicalist ideas. In particular, that of one organisation uniting all workers with the aim of direct workers' control of industry –an organisation based on the ideas of solidarity and mutual aid.

Though the Grand National did not survive long, it was able to provide limited support for strikers, and was pivotal in organising a massive demonstration in London in support of the Tolpuddle Martyrs. The idea that growing union organisation among agricultural workers had resulted in the spate of hay-rick burning organised by the “army” of Captain Swing instilled instant fear in the Government. The Government responded with brutal repression targeted at the new unions. Some 19 men were subsequently hanged for rick burning. A further 644 were jailed and 481 transported for being accused and convicted of the same offence.

Coupled with the Government repression, capitalist bosses also developed tactics aimed at curbing growing union organisation. They started to practise lockouts and use ‘the document’, whereby workers were forced to sign a pledge that they would not join or belong to a union. In the face of such Government and capitalist repression, and with its funds drained through the financial support given to strikers, the Grand National began to splinter, and collapsed around 1835.

Chartism

The idea of a common interest of all workers that had underpinned the ideas of the general union continued in the growth of Chartism. As already stated, the idea of a charter came from the London Working Men's Association. It was given further popularity by the anger generated from the introduction of the Poor Law Amendment Act in 1834, which attempted to force all those thrown out of work (e.g. through factory closures or increased mechanisation) into workhouses. The Charter for the Emancipation of the People of the British Isles called for various reforms; annual parliaments, universal suffrage, secret ballots, equal electoral districts, no property qualification for MPs, and payments for MPs.

Though the Chartist movement's aim was the reform of parliament, there was a strong revolutionary current within it whose aim was insurrection. Many in the insurrectionist wing argued for the establishment of a French style Republic and this resulted in a split in the Chartist movement in 1839. From the insurrectionist side of the split, a Convention of the Industrial Classes was organised as a workers' alternative to Parliament, and a movement emerged which argued that the charter could only be achieved by force. It is important to note that although Chartism was a working class movement, even the insurrectionists did not generally aim to overthrow capitalism. Rather, the main aim was political reform and the establishment of a Government based on equal representation. This is hardly surprising, for within the British working class at the time, the struggle for change was still dominated by the idea that the working class should aim to win state power by gaining control of the Government. Equally important, however, is the observation that within Chartism there were those who viewed capitalism as an important source of working class oppression as well as unrepresentative Government. In particular, the unions involved in the Chartist movement contained currents of such awareness. These included followers of Thomas Spence, a revolutionary who argued that land and property should be forcibly taken from the aristocracy and returned to the people. It was from the Spencian current within Chartism that the idea of the general strike was developed as a means of achieving the charter.

The Grand National Holiday

The first charter, containing over a million signatures, was presented to Parliament in July 1839 and its list of required changes were ignored. With its rejection, the Chartist Convention adopted the idea of a month long national holiday, during which all work would stop, thus forcing the reform of parliament. Spence had advocated the idea of a general strike in the form of a national holiday as a way to force land redistribution. The idea was made popular with the 1832 publication of a pamphlet entitled 'The Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes'. This was produced by the National Union of the Working Class (NUWC) and written by William Benbow, a follower of Spence. It was an instant success, and the tactic of a national holiday was endorsed by the London Committee set up to defend the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834.

In the pamphlet, Benbow argued for a month-long strike and the setting up of an alternative convention; a congress that would inspect the corrupt institutions of the British State and decide on how to rid the country of the misery which had been inflicted upon it. During the month, the people would be provisioned through 'an expropriation of the expropriators'. In essence, Benbow questioned the state's right to rule and argued the need for the people to create institutions of their own. In so doing, he was reflecting a radical tradition in Britain that had always had a deep-rooted antipathy to the state, dating back (at least) to the Diggers and Levellers in the English Civil War. The British State could not be trusted and a rival model was needed.

Benbow articulated the growing working class hatred of the capitalist class and politicians. He argued that to expect help from the existing political parties and the middle classes was 'sheer madness', and that the working class could only rely on themselves to bring about change. Although the Benbow pamphlet aimed at political change rather than the overthrow of capitalism, it represents one of the first documents in English that argues that the working class should utilise their growing industrial strength by the use of the social general strike to bring about revolutionary change. Furthermore, in calling for a national convention, Benbow was well on the way to arguing that the working class should set up alternative organisational structures to those of the state. As such, Benbow's pamphlet can be seen as an early exponent of two important ideas of early anarcho-syndicalism. For Benbow and for later anarcho-syndicalists, responsibility for the emancipation of the working class lay not with

political parties and reform of the state, but with working class people themselves. It also involved the setting up of working class organisations outside those of the state.

In the event, the Grand National Holiday did not take place. Though the Chartist Convention had passed the idea, there remained deep divisions within the Chartism movement over its implementation. The more moderate elements feared its revolutionary implications, while many in the more radical wing argued that not enough preparation had been done to sustain a general strike. The Leeds based Northern Star argued: 'any attempt to bring about the sacred month (as the Grand National Holiday became known) before a universal arming shall have taken place, will ruin all.' Two days before the holiday was due to take place on August 12th, the Chartist Convention called the strike off. With this, a number of radical Chartists attempted an uprising, particularly in Bradford, Newcastle and, most famously, at Newport. Thousands of miners marched on Newport and were dispersed by soldiers. At least 24 miners were killed.

The Charter was again presented to Parliament in 1842. During this year, a limited general strike in support of the Charter took place in the midlands and the north of England. It started as a protest against wage-cuts and led to strikers pledging to stay on strike until the Charter was passed. However, it ended in failure, with the organisers being arrested and the strikers being starved back to work. Though the Charter was subsequently presented again to Parliament in 1848, this too largely failed.

With the failure of the Charter, the radical movement went into decline. Though the unions were to come to advocate the need to replace capitalism with socialism over the next sixty years, they were increasingly looking to winning state power through the use of the electoral voting system to bring about change. It was this trend that led to the unions setting up the Labour Party through which socialism was to be established.

Conclusions

The period 1750-1830 saw the rapid rise of the market economy in Britain, so that by the early 1830s, full-blown capitalism had become firmly established. During this same period, as capitalism tightened its grip on the emerging working class, so the first signs of real resistance against this new form of economic oppression began to develop. During the early part of the 19th Century, there was a radical period in Britain, and the working class started organizing themselves and trying out methods of resistance. Of these, one of the most significant was the idea of the Grand National Holiday - the forerunner of the General Strike. Although a coherent set of ideas and tactics was not yet developed, some important lessons were already being learned which would later contribute to the advent of early anarcho-syndicalism.

In spite of the demise of radicalism by the 1840s, the lessons, ideas and tactics developed in struggle by the early British working class were not entirely lost. The idea of forming an organisation of the working class, which sought to use the methods of direct action, most notably the general strike, were soon to be further developed by workers throughout the world, in what became known as anarcho-syndicalism. The next stage of this development took place in mainland Europe. In Unit 3, we will trace that development, starting with the formation of the First International and the historic split between Marxism and anarchism. In subsequent Units, we will examine the birth of anarcho-syndicalist activity in France and follow its development back to Britain.

Key points

- Historians have tended to portray working class unrest of the period as singular unplanned acts of desperation rather than as acts integral to the aims of organised, radical and often revolutionary groups
- The period 1750-1830 witnessed the rise of the market economy in Britain and by the early 1830s capitalism was firmly established
- During the period 1750-1840 resistance in the new working class took the form of radical reform and revolutionary movements
- The minimum wage campaigns of the early 1800s were based around working class organisation on a national level
- The Luddite movement was part of a highly organised, working class movement with revolutionary aims
- From 1817 there were a series of general unions formed, whose aims of working in the interest of the working class led to the Chartist movement
- A common division in working class movements during this period was between those who favoured reform through constitutional means, and those who favoured insurrection as a means to bring about change
- The 'Grand National Holiday', was an important fore-runner of the General Strike
- The ideas of using collective direct action and creating a structure of organisation for working class people outside of the state contributed to what later became known as anarcho-syndicalism.

Checklist

1. Why might historians have characterised working class agitation against the oppressions of capitalism in the period 1750-1840 as acts of desperation rather than planned and organised protests?
2. What is the evidence for working class organisation and revolutionary aims during this period?
3. Why did the radical movement go into decline after the 1840s?
4. What were the main intentions of the Grand National Holiday?
5. What links can be made between developments in the working class resistance to capitalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the later development of anarcho-syndicalism?

Answer suggestions

1. *Why might historians have characterised working class agitation against the oppressions of capitalism in the period 1750-1840 as acts of desperation rather than planned and organised protests?*

Historians are as immersed in the assumptions of the present day as they are interpreters and (re)presenters of what happened in the past. They are susceptible, for example, to the myth of 'Englishness' which offers the image of a docile working class uninterested in revolution. Another reason they may be resistant to the idea of an organised working class in this period is that the idea itself may be too uncomfortable – especially for middle-class academics who benefit from capitalism. This is not to say that all academics take a middle-class perspective, nor that this is part of a conscious conspiracy. Marxist historians may be unhappy with the idea that the working classes knew how to organise before the period of their predestined 'consciousness' as prescribed by Marx, and before Marx even came along. Similarly, traditional Labour historians may choose, for obvious reasons, to emphasise the social democratic tendencies of workers by distancing trade unions from insurrection, direct action and revolutionary aims.]

2. *What evidence is there for working class organisations and their revolutionary aims during this period?*

Firstly, the sheer extent of government repression indicates how significant the movement was and what a threat the government felt it was – in other words, how revolutionary it was. Examples of specific evidence include: numerous Acts were passed designed to curb workers' organisations; the carefully planned so-called 'food riots' of the late 18th century indicates a high level of organisation; the refusal of farmers to send food to market for fear of working-class seizure of goods and their sale at a low price; the 1797 Act forbidding the swearing of unlawful oaths was directly aimed at working class methods through which protest was organised; magistrates proclamations against well-attended night meetings; handbills spelling out the aims of the meetings; the joining oath of the United Britons included commitment to the 'total change of the system' and willingness to 'risk yourself' (sic) for freedom – all revolutionary aims; the growth of a national organisation campaigning for a minimum wage; the existence of petitions with in excess of 70,000 signatures.

Some discussion points

These are just some of many elements of working class agitation that indicate the organisation and revolutionary aims of the working class in this period.

3. *Why did the radical movement go into decline after the 1840s?*

The radical movement went into decline largely through the failure of Chartism. The reasons for the failure of Chartism are both diverse and disputed. It can, however, be given a general cause, which is that of coercive government repression leading to arrests, executions and mass murder and the brutal techniques of lock out and starvation by capitalists who were backed by the government.

4. *What were the main intentions of the Grand National Holiday?*

The Grand National Holiday was a planned month-long strike. The Chartist Convention intended the strike to impact upon the government in such a way that it would force the reform of parliament. Spence wanted it to be a way of forcing land redistribution. This time away from work was intended, by Benbow, a leading exponent of the Grand National Holiday, to be for the setting up of an alternative convention that would examine the corruption of the British State and decide how to act upon them. It was intended that people would be given provisions taken from the 'expropriators' i.e. the capitalist class. Benbow also indicated in a pamphlet explaining the aims of the Grand National Holiday that he was questioning the state's right to rule and argued for people to create their own institutions outside of it.

5. *What links can be made between developments in the working class resistance to capitalism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the later development of anarcho-syndicalism?*

The main links can be found in the ideas of working class organisations, direct action and in the revolutionary aims for the working class to build and organise outside of state structures.

- Are there any lessons to be drawn from the minimum wage campaigns of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in relation to campaigning for a higher minimum wage level in the twenty-first century?
- What are the main differences between the government repression of working class agitation between 1750 and 1840 and current methods of class oppression?
- In which ways does an anarcho-syndicalist perspective shift your understanding of the history of working class people in this period?

Further Reading

E. P. Thompson. The Making of the English Working Class. Pelican. -LI- -BS- -SE-

This is a good all-round book covering the rise of the working class in England in 1780-1832. One of the few contemporary books to expose the genuine aspirations of the workers of the period, it takes a generally Marxist perspective. Well worth asking for at your library.

R. F. Wearmouth. Methodism and the Working Class Movement of England 1800-1850. ISBN 0678 008299. -LI-

Written circa.1930s, Wearmouth details the working class revolts of the early 19th Century. Christian perspective, but nevertheless good descriptions of working class self-education and organisation.

T. Lane. The Union Makes us Strong. ISBN 0099 086409. -LI-

Rigid orthodox Marxist perspective ties early union development to their stage in economic development. Nevertheless, good descriptions of workers' struggle at the time, especially on Luddism and Chartism.

H. Pelling. A History of British Trade Unions. -LI-

Dominantly reformist perspective, but nevertheless gives some background to early unions and their part in the Chartist movement.

D. Richards and J. W. Hunt. An Illustrated History of Modern Britain 1783-1980. -LI- -BS-

Typical general background text written from a reformist viewpoint. Nevertheless, readable and covers a wide period.

Grand National Holiday. -AK- -SE-

Excellent pamphlet containing a reprint of the original Benbow pamphlet which explained the idea for a Grand National Holiday.

W. Cobbett. Rural Rides. Penguin. ISBN 0140 430237. -LI- -BS-

Contemporary accounts of William Cobbett's jaunts around Britain observing rural working class life.

W. Cobbett. Surplus Population. Pelagian Press. -AK-

More Cobbett, this time a cheap pamphlet available from AK. A focussed attack on Malthus' recent (at the time) theory of population.

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Note: The further reading outlined is not designed to be an exhaustive bibliography or a prescriptive list. It is designed to provide some pointers for the reader who is interested in taking the topics raised in this Unit further. There will be many useful sources which are not listed here, and some of those which are listed may be difficult to obtain. To assist Course Members, an indication is given alongside each reference as to how best to obtain it. The codes are as follows: -LI- try libraries (from local to university), -AK- available from AK Distribution under Course Member discount scheme (order through SelfEd), -BS- try good bookshops, -SE- ask SelfEd about loans or offprints).