

Materialist Conception of History

FOR BEGINNERS

LESSON 18.

THE disbanding of the army and the stoppage of munition production after the Napoleonic wars, made unemployment acute with all its attending consequences of misery and poverty. When the Highlanders of Scotland returned from the Napoleonic wars they found their people evicted from the land. The Napoleonic wars made sheep runs temporarily more profitable, and when the game laws were enacted deer and sporting rights became more profitable, deer forests were substituted for sheep farms. We have controversialists of today attempting to show there were no evictions on account of deer forests. It was no fault of the landlords that there were not. Evictions took place for the object that was at the time most profitable during the Napoleonic wars. The atrocities were perpetrated by the landlords in burning down the natives' houses, confiscating their cattle and smashing their furniture. Between 1811 and 1820 there were evicted 15,000 inhabitants. Alex. McKenzie, in his book the 'Highland Clearances,' tells us although the sons of these highland people were Britain's best soldiers, that their mild nature and religious training prevented resort to that determined resistance and revenge which has repeatedly set bound to the rapacious landlords of Scotland. The professed ministers of the church glossed over the foulest deeds by ascribing them to Providence as a punishment for their sins. The people of Glengarry, County of Ontario, are the descendants of these evicted highlanders who were driven into ships against their will and dumped upon Canadian shores, hundreds of them dying from starvation on board the vessels that brought them. The depression of business after the Napoleonic wars brought down prices just as we are witnessing today after the Great War. Foodstuffs fell so low, the farmers and landlord class became alarmed and enacted the Corn Law of 1815 to keep up the price of corn and wheat. They prohibited the importation of foreign corn under 80 shillings a quarter; consequently with the bad harvest of 1816, it caused a famine. Riots broke out. The agricultural workers, colliers and Luddites rose in violence and smashed machinery believing that the machine was the cause of their misery.

A paper called the "Weekly Register," printed in the interests of the workers, teaching political action, resulted in political meetings being held all over the country. These meetings became so threatening that the government suspended the Habeas Corpus Act, and a Manchester meeting on August 16th, 1819, at Peter's Field attended by 50,000 to 60,000 men, women and children was charged ruthlessly by the military, many being killed and wounded. The following year, 1820, the revolutionary weavers of Glasgow, Scotland, who were encouraged by police spies to take up arms, were suppressed in the usual bloody fashion. Their leaders, Wilson, Baird, and Hardie, were hanged at Stirling. England's greatness was accomplished during this period when her workers were in the most degraded conditions. When the continent was almost laid waste during the Napoleonic wars; England's geographical position left her unmolested, and she utilized the full economic strength of her industrial revolution. With the smelting of iron with coal, the blast furnace and the new spinning machinery, England enjoyed the exclusive monopoly of foreign trade and was the workshop of the world.

The worst period of labor in England was the 40 years between 1782-1821, the period in which manufacturers accumulated fortunes rapidly, and agricultural rent doubled. The workers were forbidden to combine and were imprisoned on any pretense, while the Tory landlords passed 1,481 acts of parliament from 1792 to 1816, to enclose the common lands. The conditions of the workers were so bad that Lord Byron said in 1812: "I have traversed the seat of war in the Peninsula; I have seen some of

the most oppressed provinces of Turkey; but never have I beheld such squalid wretchedness as I have seen in the heart of this Christian country."

The year 1824 brought prosperous times, and an increase in trade union activities, but with bad trade in 1825 they fell to pieces, even although the laws against combinations had been repealed in 1824. All resistance on the part of the workers to prevent the fall in wages was of no avail, and their organizations perished in the attempt to maintain their wages. The distress was so great, the government was forced to lower the corn tariff. The economic depression of 1826 caused a great emigration to the colonies and created political agitation. The growing power and wealth of the industrial capitalists was expressing itself and using the workers as tools to accomplish its own ends.

The result of this agitation was the Reform Bill of 1832 with its re-distribution of seats. Small boroughs, 56 in number, with 111 (one hundred and eleven) seats, were given up and 30 others were given one member instead of two. These 143 seats were given to counties and growing towns. Here again we see a reflection of economic condition expressed in political representation. Loria expresses himself on this question very clearly, he says: "Slavery and serfdom both tended to exclude the owning classes from productive labor and to concentrate themselves in public life, whereas any system of representation would have shut out a large majority of proprietors from the exercise of political power. Under such circumstances representative government was logically impossible. The conditions were altered with the introduction of the wage system, when the wage system began to re-enlist the energies of the proprietors in matters of industrial enterprise and accumulation. Hence, England being the first in the new economic conditions, was also the first to have representative government. The conditions inherent in wage economy rendered it impossible for a large majority of the capitalists to take active part in the work of legislation and, accordingly, compelled them to delegate their political power to another class, but let me add, this class is an unproductive class and detracts in no way from the interests of the capitalist class, because the representatives chosen are, either already upon the property class or are made dependent from the fact that they owe their election to the capitalist class. Their choice of unproductive laborers, are generally doctors, lawyers and professors, and their like, who, living on the fruits of property are not at all inclined to deny the principles of their existence.

It is for this reason that the parliaments of the world today are composed largely of this element. England had a large landlord class regularly returned; this was due to the fact that the acquisition of rent requires no assiduous attention like profits, and consequently opens up a broader field of political activity. Since 1880, however, the number of unproductive laborers in the British parliament has increased. In France and Italy they constitute an overwhelming majority. And in America this class practically makes up the whole of Congress. It could not be otherwise, because economic development tends to alter the quantitative revenue relations between profits and rents. When the rent from land predominated, the landowning class exercised political power, and their political power is limited to rents. The capitalist power is not limited to profit but to capital, and we see how capital accumulation is continually increasing."

The introduction of agricultural implements is causing the percentage of population to increase in the cities. The city percentage in the United States was 3.35 in 1790; and 29.20 in 1890. In England it was 67.9 in 1881; and 78.1 in 1911.

Therefore, looking at the increasing migration to the cities with the shifting economic power, it becomes clear to understand the change of electoral centres from the country to the cities, increasing the political representation of the industrial centres, and

the unproductive laborers becoming representatives of the new economic ruling class.

As proof of the above analysis, the U. S. A. Congress is composed of 298 lawyers, as compared with 21 farmers or 12 merchants. The first Congress of 1789-91 had 30 lawyers, and there were eleven farmers, so you see unproductive laborers have greatly increased.

The English House of Lords was the expression of the landholding class, and the rising capitalist class was able to enter its political sovereignty by purchasing estates from the vassals of the crown and small landholders who, unable to buy the new agricultural machinery were forced to sell their land, because they could not compete with their more fortunate neighbors. Scotland had not made provision for that as she had not got past the pastoral and agricultural stage; previous to the union with England she had only one house of parliament. As long as the landed interest was dominant in England the House of Lords only tolerated the House of Commons, but as soon as profits got the upper hand, the Lords became reduced to a decorative chamber in the political system. An Italian ice cream vendor can become Lord Hockey Pokey if he has the wherewithal to fill the party fund, and sit in this decorated chamber.

The passing of the Franchise Bill of 1832 did not satisfy the workers, and between the disappointment and hard times there arose the Chartist movement. During this time (1834) the Poor Law was passed, instituting the workhouse to try to decrease the amount of spongers who lived by their wits on the system of poor relief of Queen Elizabeth's reign which was used to keep wages low, the difference of a low wage being made up by a payment from the poor relief fund. The historian says it was a success in reducing the number of paupers at the time, but with all the increased wealth production, through steam driven machinery, the misery of the poor was intensified, farm laborers could hardly buy barley or rye bread, while meat except a little salt pork never came within their homes. This was the economic pressure behind the Chartist movement, which advocated six reforms, the first two: (1) Yearly parliaments; (2) one man one vote, are not upon the statute books of Britain yet.

The ruling class were so hysterical that they deported six laborers of Dorsetshire for a perfectly innocent act. Thorold Rogers says they were pardoned, but their pardon was concealed from them in consideration of the vested interests to which the Sydney Government sold them at five dollars a head. The Chartist movement, like trade unions, lost its numbers and the prosperity of 1842 killed it. People cared little for the Charter when they got work and food. Following this prosperity we had the Anti-Corn Law enacted as a result of the bad harvest in England and potatoe famine in Ireland. The greatest advocate was Bright, a carpet manufacturer, and Cobden, a cotton print manufacturer. They told the workers that their misery was a result of the high price of bread caused by the Corn Law. When it was repealed and bread became cheaper, wages fell 10 per cent. This free trade and protection stunt is of no importance to the worker. It is a struggle between two sections of the ruling class.

(Lesson 18 to be continued next issue.)

MANIFESTO

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SOCIALIST PARTY OF CANADA
(Fifth Edition)

Per copy 10 cents

Per 25 copies \$2

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