

From Chartism to labourism

We print here an article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at Independent Working-Class Education Network meetings on 23/1/16 at Northern College, Barnsley, on 6/2/16 at Ruskin House, Croydon and on 11/6/16 in Norwich.

From Chartism to Labourism is a book by Theodore Rothstein. However, I'm not talking about this book, just borrowing the title.

I would like first to quote something that the economic historian, WEA and Labour Party activist R. H. Tawney said in 1934 (the context being, obviously, the debacle of the Ramsay MacDonald National Government of 1931.) Tawney, who was not on what we would normally call 'the far left', said:

'The Labour Party deceives itself, if it supposes that the mere achievement of a majority will enable it to carry out fundamental measures, unless it has previously created in the country the temper to stand behind it when the real struggle begins . . . What is needed . . . is the creation of a body of men and women who, whether trade unionists or intellectuals, put Socialism first, and whose creed carries conviction because they live in accordance with it.'

I will try to show that this is still a key insight. What, then, was 'Labourism'?

By Labourism is meant the extension of routine-style union activity into the sphere of mainstream electoral and parliamentary politics. On the one hand, you have trade unions, led by officials, bargaining in the sphere of employment, and, on the other, a specialised offshoot of this trying to do the same sort of thing in the sphere of national and local government, with an institutionalised division of labour between the two. There is either no perspective of bringing about a different social order altogether, or else this is put off to the remote future. Issues about how working-class people

understand the world, the questions they ask about the social order and the ideas they have about it, are pushed to the side, or treated as subordinate to practical questions, and left to academics, philosophers and such like 'traditional intellectuals'. On this definition, for most of its history, the Labour Party has been a labourist party. With this in mind, let us now look at Chartism.

Chartism was the first large-scale working-class political movement in world history. Much of the *Communist Manifesto* (written in 1848) was based on the Chartist movement. Chartism was mainly a mass movement of people like Lancashire textile workers, South Wales ironworkers, miners in the Northeast, and artisans, especially tailors, in London, distillery workers like Samuel Holberry in Sheffield and so on. They were trying radically to democratise parliament. Their demands (manhood suffrage, annual parliaments, secret ballot, payment of MPs, equal electoral districts, no property qualification for MPs) had first been put forward in the 1770s. The Chartist movement was triggered by the 1832 Reform Act and the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act. The Poor Law Amendment Act was applied with extreme brutality.

Revolutionary

Between 1839 and 1842, and again briefly in 1848, Chartism was perceived by the powers-that-be as a revolutionary movement, and arguably it really was that. There was extreme ruling-class fear of it.

Preceded in the 1830s by big union struggles, and the struggle for an unstamped press, Chartism was a

movement in which political struggle was thoroughly integrated with ideological and educational struggle. Writing in the 1970s, Richard Johnson termed this the movement for 'really useful knowledge'. A central aspect of the 'really useful knowledge' movement as a dimension of Chartism was the role played by working-class newspapers, especially the *Northern Star*, which functioned as a two-way organising and educating tool.

A key feature of Chartism was the involvement in it radicalised intellectuals who truly threw in their lot with the working class, for example Feargus O'Connor, James (Bronterre) O'Brien, Peter McDouall, John Frost and Ernest Jones. These people were prepared to risk imprisonment, transportation and even the death penalty in the cause of Chartism. It is noticeable that many of them were Irish, Scottish or Welsh by origin, and were from - or close to - a rural background.

We can see, then, that the Labour Party has always been an utterly different kind of movement from Chartism. Does this matter, and, if so, why?

I feel that it matters, in essence, for the reason that Tawney set out in the passage I quoted earlier on. The Chartists did what the Labour Party never has done - that is, they created a large body of organised, educated and self-educating support, capable of struggle at the level of ideology as well as politics and economics. How did it come about, then, that the Labour Party failed to do this? In preparing for this talk I've looked at two books.

Roots

First, I looked at Royden Harrison's 1965 study *Before the Socialists*, which is subtitled: *Studies in Labour and Politics 1861-1881*. (People may know that Harrison taught on the day-release scheme for mineworkers run through Sheffield University.) Harrison shows how the roots of Labourism lie in the 1860s. He shows that trade union activists from craft unions, supported by Positivist intellectuals in pursuit of electoral reform, began a process of deals with the Liberal Party, by which trade unionists were allowed to stand as Liberal parliamentary candidates, an arrangement that was called 'Lib-Labism'. These Positivists, for example Richard Congreve, Frederick Harrison and E. S. Beesley, were nearly all high-ranking academics. Lib-Labism was a powerful setup which continued well beyond the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, and even of the Labour Party itself.

Secondly, I've read David Howell's 1983 book *British Workers and the Independent Labour Party 1888-1906*. The ILP was initiated by the former

mineworker James Keir Hardie, and set up in Bradford in 1893. In the period dealt with by Howell, it was dominated by Hardie plus Philip Snowden, John Bruce Glasier and James Ramsay MacDonald. Howell documents the twists and turns of the long process by which the ILP persuaded unions to move away from Lib/Labism enough to allow the setting up of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. He also comments that the ILP started out with 'an educational emphasis' (that is, something like the one Chartism had) but adds: 'Over time, the pursuit of electoral success squeezed out much of the vitality from the educational emphasis'. In other words, the closer the ILP got to creating the Labour Party, the more it lost sight of the other goal it had started out with, that of 'making socialists'. But, again, I think we need to ask: 'why did this happen?'

Morris

Let us look at the phrase 'making socialists'. It's associated mainly with the Marxist William Morris, who was politically active between 1880 and 1895, and died in 1896, and with the organiser of the Clarion movement, Robert Blatchford. (People may be familiar with the activities of the Clarion movement, as described for example by Robert Tressell towards the end of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*.)

'Making socialists' meant the 'missionary' activity of speakers going round and explaining socialism to workers on street corners, from Clarion vans, in public lectures and so on, and thereby attracting a minority of them to it - in short, of building the group and fostering the socialist culture that Tawney in 1934 said was lacking from the Labour Party. Therefore it might be thought that a key priority now would be to put this right; that is, to bend the stick back in the direction of 'making socialists'. I believe that this is what we should do, but that we also need to think a bit more about this idea of 'making socialists'. I feel that there are two assumptions around this phrase which can lead us in the wrong direction.

First, it assumes that at any given moment we know what socialism is, that its nature has already been defined, once for all, in the past, that it is clearcut, cut and dried, requiring only to be spelt out to people, and not to be further developed. This to me is completely wrong. Yes, it is urgent now to make people, for example people who have recently joined the Labour Party, aware of the history of socialist ideas, of the actions taken by workers, including working-class socialists, in the past and so on - in other words, to rebuild a spreading culture

of knowledge and understanding of these things. But nevertheless the ideas of what socialism has been, is and can be need to be constantly developed. They rapidly lose validity if this doesn't keep on happening.

Further, although research academics and people in similar positions are a necessary part of doing this, in the end it's working-class people themselves (that is, the active minority of them) who must do this developing. Why? Because, firstly, only they have the relevant life experience, and, secondly, only they have agency. Therefore any process we organise to extend such a culture to new Labour Party activists and the like must include getting them to work out for themselves – and to thrash out with others - their own ideas of what socialism is. And above all, people need to develop the capacity and confidence to go on doing this through repeated changes in their circumstances, through defeats, through thick and thin.

Secondly, the phrase 'making socialists' comes close to implying that they can be 'made' in advance of them being involved in activity. Yes, people do need to learn history, ideas that people have had in the past, and so on. But the sharpest insights most often come from things like standing on a picket line, trying to make a speech, drafting a motion, trying to produce and distribute a leaflet, doing minutes, trying to chair a meeting, and similar things. I would give as an example such experiences as the police battering pickets at Grunwick. In other words, the act of 'making socialists' needs to be integrated with, on the one hand, theorisation, the development of ideas, and also, on the other, to activity, to practice.

Ideas

In the Labour Party a situation has developed where - if ideas are acknowledged to be relevant at all - their production is seen as the specialised province of academics, advisers, people working for thinktanks, journalists and the like - that is, of intellectuals of a fundamentally different kind from those involved in Chartism - and where, also, ordinary members are expected to do nothing except put leaflets through doors, do stalls, canvassing, voter ID, stuffing envelopes and the like – that is, unquestioningly to carry out routine tasks that support councillors and MPs. This goes back a long way. But why has it been like that?

In Chartism, as we said, you had educated people - 'traditional intellectuals' - who truly threw in their lot with the working-class movement. Moreover, Chartism inherited a tradition of struggle against

middle-class interference – that is, against the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge as organised by Benthamite Philosophic Radicals which in turn sparked the 'really useful knowledge' movement. But in the Labour Party, starting even before there was a Labour Party as such with the Positivists in 1860s, and continuing via the Fabian Society later, groups of middle-class intellectual advisers and politicians - that is, people who expected the movement to dance to their tune - have always been intrinsic to the way it has been organised. And since the 1980s, this has been made worse by the 'deindustrialisation' of the UK economy, because this has undermined the power of organised workers to control union leaders. As a result, where we've previously had Positivist and Fabian interventions in the Labour Party and its precursors, since the 1990s we've had Blairites – that is, middle-class elements put in power within the Party mainly by TU leaders who are unchecked by their rank and file union members.

So in terms of what people like ourselves can and should try to do now, what conclusion can be drawn from this history?

Midwives

To me, the basic conclusion is that we should have a model of 'making socialists' where we act less like magicians and more like midwives. In other words, we should see this not so much as being about waving a magic wand – for example, making a stirring speech – but more about working with people to help them level up their own insights into a consistent socialist consciousness and capacity to act. So the IWCE should work with people who have joined the LP recently to make available to them a dialogic educational process that starts to rebuild the 'really useful knowledge' tradition that was intrinsic to Chartism. Hopefully today we can discuss ways of doing this.