

Essays on the general strike

Part II

Britain's crisis: From origins to World War I

The general strike was not unique to Russia. Nor was its albeit complex course - from inarticulate economic and social discontent to proletarian-led revolution - automatic. This can be seen all too clearly from the outbreak of intense class struggle in Britain that spanned the years 1910 to 1926. Years characterised almost from the beginning with the possibility of general strike, which culminated in what we still call *the* General Strike. Amongst other observations and conclusions our discussion in this supplement will show:

1. The *real* rather than sloganistic general strike results from an objective movement in society.
2. General strikes and revolution have a living, inseparable relationship and, while the trade union bureaucracy can initiate a general strike, it always acts as a barrier to revolution.
3. The role of revolutionary organisation, leadership and consciousness is crucial for a positive resolution of the general strike in socialist revolution.

We must start our discussion by reaching an understanding of what put the general strike so firmly on the agenda, why it ran like a red thread through the whole period of 1910 to 1926. To do that we have to go far beyond direct participants and immediate causes.

Perhaps to reach a fully rounded analysis we would have to examine the evolution of Britain over many years. That would mean studying the first stirrings of industrial capitalism in the 14th and 15th centuries; the tradition of religious non-conformism and the way its triumph from above in the statist form of Henry VIII and below in the form of Wycliff, Calvin, Wesley and Bunyon affected the national psyche; the 1642-8 revolution against the 'Norman yoke'; the 1688 Glorious Revolution which shaped the modern constitution; experience of the world's first industrial revolution during a period of counterrevolutionary wars against France; the 1832 reformist solution to the danger of a bourgeois political revolution; how for the sake of "theatrical show" the bourgeoisie left aristocratic blood and privilege to govern supreme in the "dignified part" of the constitution; how the Chartist challenge rose and was seen off.

These and a host of other events and social factors would have to be taken into account. For the sake of brevity though it would not be sacrificing too much if we begin with the mid-19th century when Britain was called the 'workshop of the world'. From this summit of achievement we can sketch the topography of subsequent developments, industrial falling behind, imperialism, parasitism, political conservatism, class compromise and class antagonism. This map will allow us to begin an "objective investigation of the sources of the mass strike".¹

Eric Hobsbawm estimates that in 1850 Britain produced as much as "two thirds of the world's coal", about "half its iron", and half its commercially produced cotton.² Needless to say, Britain had rivals. That became all too evident with the beginning of the Great Depression of the 1870s.³ Under its impact Britain's industrial supremacy met its day of judgement. By the end of the 1880s competition from Belgium, France, and above all Germany and the USA, was affecting even branches

of production where it once enjoyed a monopoly. Rockefeller, Carnegie and Morgan, Krupp, Thyssen and Stinnes accumulated capital which in absolute terms left their British counterparts far behind. So it was of more than symbolic importance that in the early 1890s both Germany and the USA surpassed Britain in steel output - that era's symbol of industrial prowess.⁴ Britain was now but one of three great powers. Even that much reduced status could not be guaranteed. Among the great powers Britain was the tortoise. Its industries were in comparison tied to traditional markets, were less monopolised and no longer on the leading edge of technology. If nothing was done it would not only be caught up by the new industrial hares. It would be left behind.

There was something Roman about the way the Britain of Disraeli and Salisbury responded. Faced with barbarians at the gates, the Roman slaveocracy abandoned its old religion and reconstituted itself in feudalism and Christian Constantinople. In its own particular way 'new Rome' did a Byzantine turn of changing things in order to keep things the same. Despite a considerable overhang as Britain's rivals went from catching up to overtaking, our rulers reconstituted themselves in parasitic empire imperialism. By the 1890s the ideal of competitive capitalism was being subsumed by finance capital, which in Britain took on its own particular form.⁵ At the same time through a similar *synthesis* the ethos of capitalism shifted from enterprise to usury - Adam Smith gave way to Cecil Rhodes; the night-watchman state to conquest and administration. The resultant British empire was a huge market which provided cheap raw materials and secure sales. It was also a wide self-contained base from which British capital could continue reaping the benefits of free trade with the rest of the world and thus put off the consequences of decline.

2.1. A detour on Anderson-Nairn

For many *New Left Review* intellectuals, the turn to imperialism showed once again the limitations of the middling sort who constituted themselves the world's first industrial capitalist class. The Cromwellian Revolution ended in the restoration of the Stuarts. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 reversed only some of the regressive effects of the restoration. But it was not good enough for those fixated by the abstract paradigm of 'bourgeois revolution'.

With 1688, say Perry Anderson, Tom Nairn and other 'new liberals', the bourgeoisie became fatefully and permanently entrapped in a subordinate historic compromise with the aristocracy. After all even the 1832 reform failed to produce the domination of parliament, culture and the upper echelons of the civil service by the industrial bourgeoisie. According to the 'Anderson-Nairn thesis' the subsequent pale narrative of bourgeois moderation meant Britain developed as a capitalist country under unremitting aristocratic domination. A socio-political superstructure which could only perpetuate a 'premature', 'incomplete' and 'provincial' form of capitalism - both in terms of economy, state and culture.⁶

In the course of his panoramic survey of the *origins* of Britain's crisis (which has its own origins in a 1963 *New Left Review* article) Anderson stresses that after 1688, alone of all the major capitalist powers, Britain experienced no 'second bourgeois revolution', a radical "remoulding" which not only makes up for the omissions, reverses and shortcomings of the first revolution but modernises it according to the constantly "advancing needs of the day".⁷

From 1688, state history, he argues, has been one of reform in "homeopathic doses", administrative fine tuning and careful extension of the suffrage.⁸ Everywhere else of importance, he maintains, the heights of society were subjected to the storms of creative destruction. Two centuries after the anti-Spanish revolt the ossified oligarchy of the Netherlands was replaced by the Batavian Republic. In France the Great Revolution of 1789 was followed by 1830, 1848 and 1871, which led to the Third Republic. Bismarck's Germanic Federation collapsed in the November 1918 revolution and gave way to the Weimar Republic. In the USA the "bourgeois tasks" of the independence war were completed by civil war. This way the most conservative or reactionary social elements of the ruling order - Dutch regents, the Southern slave owners, French legitimatists, Japanese landlords, Prussian junkers, Italian latifundists - were "eliminated, amidst a drastic recomposition of the dominant bloc".⁹ Because of its stability an 'exceptional' Britain alone was left with an 'irrational' archaic political society which was *central* to its decline.

Thus Britain is almost to be pitied because it emerged from World War II without being invaded. The Anderson-Nairn thesis makes much of this because elsewhere the cyclone of war re-drew more than borders. Across Europe and beyond, well established states were smashed to smithereens, their élites reduced to quislings, imprisoned, killed or flung abroad into exile. On the ruins of the old order and the bones of 50 million dead a fresh start was made, above all in the Axis powers. It is claimed that the allies reconstructed them according to the most rational and efficient capitalist blueprint.

Not only was agricultural reform imposed on Japan. So too was a parliamentary system and a pacifist constitution. Brought down to earth by the bombs that sent Hiroshima and Nagasaki to hell, the emperor had his celestial wings clipped. Germany, says Anderson, experienced a similar 'revolution after the revolution'. It too was blessed with an imposed pacifist constitution. The SS skull and crossbones was replaced by veneration of the D-mark and the BMW. Where the US, Britain and France channelled huge sums into the unproductive Cold War arms economy, the defeated powers were free to invest in infrastructure, industry and accumulation. Germany was further helped by the rationalisation of labour relations which cemented social peace for a generation. With the cooperation and advice of the British TUC its trade unions were born again along fresh industrial lines and slotted into a well designed system of works councils, arbitration boards and wage bargaining.

Having found the origins of Britain's decline in the royal family, residual aristocratic feudalism, common law, age old first-past-the-post elections

and an unwritten constitution, the literati around *New Left Review* as well as Charter 88 believe that what Britain needs now is a thorough going capitalist modernisation to bust apart the mental and physical grip that the aristocracy is still meant to exercise.

2.1.1. Britain's 'archaic' constitution

It is undeniable that in the 19th century what David Cannadine, for the sake of shorthand, calls the aristocracy "were still the most wealthy, the most powerful and most glamorous people in the country".¹⁰ The land-owning elite owned most of the country's acreage and, through staffing the Bank of England, the City, the navy, the Treasury and both houses of parliament, it also dominated the business of politics in a way that only the chronically indebted junkers of Prussia and Hungarian grandees could parallel (even there they collaborated with a non-patrician bureaucratic elite and constituted the "subordinate partners" to conservative autocracies).¹¹ So compared with the titled and territorial classes in Belgium, France, Spain, Italy and Russia, the British landed élite - through ownership, marriage and state they constituted an all-British Isles class - "was more wealthy, more exclusive and more powerful".¹²

But though these titled landowners lived in huge country piles full of ancestral heirlooms there can be no escaping the fact, as Cannadine convincingly argues, that from the 1880s the country "was gradually but irrevocably ceasing to be theirs".¹³ To fully come to terms with the actual relationship of classes in Britain it is necessary to do more than take account of the decline of the aristocracy in terms of wealth and power during the course of the 20th century.¹⁴ We have to recognise that capital is a social relationship which cannot be reduced to the industrial worker and the industrial manufacturer. For at least the last 250 years capitalism (formal and real) has been the main source of aristocratic wealth.

Long ago the moral economy became the money economy; military power over land became the legal power to charge rent; and through cash rents, landed wealth was free to become banking capital (invested in due course in productive industry as well as commerce). Hence, having accumulated unprecedented wealth through the massive expansion of world trade after the conquest of India and the continuous technical advances in agriculture, "many of them [aristocrats — JC] benefited very greatly from the industrial revolution".¹⁵

Leaving aside this socio-economic transformation of the old ruling elite and the creation of a new, complex and internally conflictive capitalist class, capitalism as a political superstructure, as is surely well known, lays hold of the (often mythic) past in order to legitimise itself and cohere the nation around itself through the ideological imagination. In the 1640s Cromwell quoted the *Old Testament* chapter and verse. The American and French revolutions took on the garb of republican Rome. Indeed, as Terry Eagleton emphasises, specifically in reference to what he calls the "aristocratic colouring" of the *haute* (high) bourgeoisie, a "dominant class may 'live its experience' in part through the

ideology of the previous dominant one".¹⁶ Forms, pretensions and values are, he says, stolen, transformed, appropriated across the frontiers of different classes¹⁷ - Britain's upper house of parliament, the crown, aristocratic snobbery, the church and common law courts, which Anderson and Co make so much of, being a case in point. They might appear to be, but are not, feudal encumbrances. They were carried over (redirected and modified) to serve the needs of capital.

Obviously the institutions of the state and civil society have an impact on the workings of the capitalist economy. Besides that though they should be considered in relationship to ensuring that the ruling class can rule and that oppressed classes remain oppressed. That is why capitalism has no ready-made set of state and civil institutional models. It constantly adapts the superstructure to its own needs. Thus the drive by the youthful bourgeoisie to junk the lumber of the absolutist state gave way in due course to the modern bureaucratic monster, once the working class emerged as an independent force and one 'civilised' nation began to tool up against another to further imperialist competition. This did not just involve state-sponsored arms industries. It meant the constant resecuring of legitimacy for the ruling order from those below. The masses had to be persuaded to work, vote and fight for capitalism. In the last analysis that is what most of Perry Anderson's and his fellow thinkers' 'revolutions after the revolution' were about.

Take the constitutional reconstructions following World War II. It was not only the German, Italian and Japanese rulers who were tainted by fascism. So were the upper classes in all the territories they occupied (including the Channel Islands). With mass resistance movements, often communist-led, achieving something approaching dual power, the post-World War II settlement had to entail sweeping reforms if capitalism was to be stabilised. However that did not mean these countries did not maintain 'archaic' features. Not only Denmark, Norway and Belgium remained monarchies. So did the model of post-World War II growth and success, Japan.

Japan is actually socially ultra-conservative and encrusted with countless reworked Shinto traditions. Business and politics rely on an elaborate tributary system of backhanders; sport and crime have Samurai style honour codes; relations between one person and another are governed by feudalistic bowing and scraping; the conformism of the ancestors is expected and new-fangled individuality is frowned upon; women and foreigners are openly said to be second class; and of course the monarch still has for many a religious aura.

The reason for Britain's 'archaic' constitution and civil society is no different. Modern capitalism needs tradition in order to conceal its destruction of tradition. Concrete circumstance and counterposing ideologies have to be taken into account, but in general the further back it can go, the better. Hence orthodox Greece lays claim to Homeric Hellas; Saddam Hussain's Iraq to Babylon; Japan to Amaterasu, the sun goddess; Zionist Israel to David's Israel. British capitalism led the way.

Present-day traditions from the queen's speech to life peerages certainly owe more to modern reinvention than uninterrupted age old custom.¹⁸ The system that destroyed the self-contained feudal village, that tore apart the labourer and the means of production, that committed regicide, that commercialises everything, that throws millions out of work, that wrecks entire communities and knows no rest, must, paradoxically, once it was established, take over, claim for itself, and encourage popular veneration of the new old.

When the bourgeoisie in Britain began its bid for hegemony the best minds from amongst it, like Francis Bacon and Thomas Hobbes, proposed rationalistic utopias and even offered up atheistic theories. However, after capitalism became secure as the dominant mode of production, in came apologetics. Intellectuals were paid to justify religion and, even more usefully, produce a culture characterised by the most unimaginative empiricism or daft irrationalism: history blind to all except the mental anguish of great men; economics that treated people as a mere factor of production; social theory whose *raison d'être* was anti-communism; philosophy that abandoned the big questions of life for the meaning of words. Monarchy, family, common law, parliament and other 'feudal hangovers' were sanctified in countless 'learned' works and drummed into the lower orders through the compulsory education system. In this way the existing order was legitimised and a veil drawn over the revolutionary misdeeds of its early juvenile self.

Superficially forms appeared the same but the content was changed. Because capitalism takes what is at hand in terms of traditions, institutions and ideologies, it can exist in many different guises. Nevertheless, whether capitalism has a monarchist, parliamentary or theocratic constitution or a Christian, muslim, Shinto or secular ideology makes in itself no fundamental difference to competitiveness or capital accumulation.

Success in making itself 'timelessly natural' might

mean that compared with some competitors Britain's political regime appears 'backward'. But surely this carefully accreted protective ideological outer shell should not be confused for a theory which explains Britain's decline. Take Britain's two main up-and-coming rivals in the late 19th century, the USA and Germany. Along the idealist spectrum between feudal 'irrationality' and bourgeois 'rationality' they leave Britain somewhere near the middle. The USA has no state religion, a synthetic constitution and a culture which from its guided age onwards unashamedly worshipped the green back. Being a 'new' country it has no feudal relics available to mystify the rule of capital. If ever there was one, here was a pristine bourgeois culture. On the other hand German capitalism developed not organically but under the patronage of Kaiser and Prussian junkerdom: ie the most reactionary, most militaristic, most feudalistic candidates available for the unification of Germany into a modern nation state.

Central to the Anderson-Nairn thesis is the idea that the industrial bourgeoisie in Britain - what they insist on calling with petty bourgeois silliness 'Ukiana' - was a failure. Hence in their schema industrial capital went along with those patricians who proposed the strategic turn from competition to the monopolistic domination of empire, simply because it was under the thrall of the aristocracy; not because of its own specific interests and the contradictions inherent in the capitalist mode of production. Unfettered, the bourgeoisie means to them technical progress, a neoteric national culture, primacy of industry over trade, removal of all traces of feudalism and a well oiled interventionist state machine: an ideal that in essence builds upon the one propagandised by Adam Smith in his *Wealth of nations* and which was, to say the least, contradicted by the turn of Britain to imperialism.

Nothing can be more foolish than to confuse the needs of early capitalism with the needs of decadent capitalism. Imperialism does not go against the grain of the bourgeois order. It is the result and development of capitalism. It is what Lenin tellingly called the last stage of capitalism. Like the "appropriation" of the feudal constitution, imperialism appears to contradict ideal capitalism. But, of course, capitalism is a real, not an ideal, system. For British capitalism (landed, commercial and industrial), countering decline through imperialism represented the line of least political and economic resistance. *Industrial* capitalists lacked not sufficient social weight to impose Prussian-style tariffs and a thorough-going statist modernisation of industry, but the class impulse to do so. Protectionism would have jeopardised Britain's position as international trading centre and banker. It could also have risked a disjuncture which might have opened the way for the working class. Above all it would have damaged the interests "of short-term profit".¹⁹

A real Marxist analysis of Britain's decline should begin by identifying, as Marx said it was, the *most* capitalist of 19th century nations, not a semi-feudalistic mongrel. Even today Britain has, compared with other leading countries, says Ellen Meiksins Wood - one of the more orthodox and therefore more genuinely original 'academic Marxists', "an unambiguously *capitalist* character".²⁰

From this it follows that Marxists should seek the origins of *capitalist* decline (though not necessarily in every other social system) not in the superstructure, but the base - we all know that this is a finite metaphor, but for our purposes here a most useful one. Working from the abstract to the concrete, Marx presented his analysis of the limits of capitalism in *Capital* with the commodity its most basic, atomic, unit. Any analysis of British capitalism should do the same. Imperialism was inextricably bound up with the dominant capitalist mode of production and its chronic limitations, which can be found in the commodity itself, not the domination of the aristocracy and a supposedly laggard political superstructure.

Under the capitalist system, with each turn of its constantly expanding spiralling cycle comes the tendency to overproduction, an inability to transform commodities into money. This over-accumulation of capital *periodically* threatens to bring the dynamic of production to a halt. And in the 1870s the main way *capital* in Britain - whether it originated with industrialists, merchants, brewers, aristocrats or the *rentier* petty bourgeoisie - responded to this block on the "tendency towards absolute development of the productive forces"²¹ was through the export of capital.²²

2.2. British imperialism

After 1870 capital exports regularly surpassed domestic capital formation; in the years prior to World War I the ratio reached 2:1. As a result in 1913 Britain accounted for 41% of the world's overseas holdings - surely a greater percentage than even the USA at the height of its super-imperialism. Unable to realise sufficient profit at home, capital *had* to go beyond simply exporting commodities to the world market to integrating *production* itself into a world economy²³. While Britain's domestic-

based performance slipped, it attempted to compensate by removing intermediaries, securing cheap raw materials, exploiting low paid labour and boosting profit rates - primarily through turning the *state* outwards: ie political-colonial, not industrial means. What had been thought a "millstone" inherited from the age of merchant adventurers was suddenly rediscovered.²⁴ Britain's rulers began again to "think imperially".²⁵ Cloaked in a paternalistic ideology of Britain being "the chosen nation" with a divine duty to shoulder "the white man's burden", one territory after another was painted a bloody pink.²⁶ The empire provided more than a captive market for Britain's industries, lucrative positions in the salaried for the haughty products of its public schools, a focus for national cohesion and a destination for the "strongest and most energetic" among its surplus population.²⁷ It was the *sine qua non*; it was the renewed condition for continued world supremacy.

Britain was first to enter the stage of capitalist imperialism. Due to its head start, economic and naval predominance, and unequalled commercial network, there was, to begin with, little or no outside resistance to the world island's colonial expansion. Of course, as other national capitals in their turn experienced barriers to capital accumulation they too had to find their place in the sun. A rapacious scramble for colonies began, most notably in Africa.²⁸ Those who had most gained most. Between 1870 and 1900 Britain added 4,754,000 square miles of territory and 88 million people to its empire, France between 1884 and 1900 3,583,580 square miles and 36,553,000 people. Germany was nowhere near as successful. Though now a leading power which was neck and neck with Britain industrially, it only managed to grab for itself 1,026,220 square miles and 16,687,000 people.

For Germany this would have presented no problem, *if* the world had infinite space - one quality it does not possess. By the end of the 19th century the division of the world had effectively been "completed".²⁹ Inevitably then there developed an accelerating drive for the redivision of colonies and spheres of influence. Such redivisionism was particularly dangerous, given that the uneven rate of development amongst the powers meant the existing division of the world reflected past glories, not present strengths. A series of wars broke out, pitting imperialist against imperialist, not only imperialist against native. The Spanish-American war, the British-Boer war in South Africa, the struggle to divide China, the Russo-Japanese war, the Italian war in Tripoli, the Balkan wars. And in 1905, 1908, and 1911 initially localised conflicts threatened to lead to a world war. Which of course finally came in August 1914.

So imperialism sharpened antagonisms internationally. In contrast, on the domestic scene, it allowed the continued attenuation or dulling of the class struggle. Shakespeare wrote of an earlier age: "That England that was wont to conquer others hath made a shameful conquest of itself." Britain's industrial domination had given the ruling class the wherewithal to buy off a whole layer of the working class. During the second half of the 19th century workers in Britain were seemingly metamorphosed. With the defeat of Chartism the British working class went into something like a political coma. Europe's most combative working class became the most docile and thoroughly imbued with false consciousness. The bold advocates of the grand national consolidated trade union, the cooperative commonwealth and Chartist revolution produced sons who were tame, pigeon-fancying, Liberal voters. To all intents and purposes because of this class *unconsciousness* socialism disappeared from the British body politic. There were plenty of Francis Fukuyama types to say it - here was the end of the class struggle.

Fundamentally Anderson puts the retreat from the revolutionary politics of Chartism down to what he calls the 'premature' nature of capitalism in Britain. Within this mistimed system as a corollary: to the 'subordinate' bourgeoisie there existed, he says, a 'subordinate' intelligentsia and a 'subordinate' proletariat. A class which, because it was too "early" for Marxism, ended up under the domination of Fabian Labourism. Because he has set his mind against the reality of fully developed capitalism and its content class relations, Labourism is viewed by Anderson as a sort of congenital disorder that has since the pubescent promise of Chartism permanently afflicted the working class in Britain.

Naturally, to sustain his model Anderson is forced to skip over the Labourisation of European social democracy after the outbreak of World War I and, not so many years later, of 'official communism' itself. Moreover throughout his historical account he pays no attention whatsoever to oppositionist elements amongst the intelligentsia and above all those revolutionary forces who were eventually organised under the banner of the CPGB - influential way beyond their numbers. For him and his ivory tower colleagues working class politics have for the last century and a half been uniformly Fabian and pro-imperialist. We shall see that reality was richer, more contradictory and not without significant moments

which could, given certain factors, have turned out differently and put Britain on a socialist course. There was in fact nothing uncontested about working class politics. Even if we just take the impact of imperialism, it becomes clear that working class action and consciousness has been affected by opposition to it, as well as lulled by its benefits.

2.3. Imperialism and the workers

By 1885 Engels was convinced that the giant was beginning to wake. With the erosion of Britain's industrial supremacy the bought-off British working class would "lose its privileged position" and "there will be socialism again in England". Or so he predicted. And as it turned out Engels' optimism was not entirely misplaced (and not only about England, but Scotland and Wales too). In the mid-1880s the British working class stirred from its comatose sleep and socialist ideas began at last to find a tentative hearing.

The Social Democratic Federation was formed in 1884 and less than a decade later the reformist Independent Labour Party. Though very much a sect, the SDF won an important, if thin, layer in the working class to Marxism. The ILP won an even wider layer to its admittedly thinner version of socialism. There was a corresponding and potentially more significant change in the trade union movement. Breaking with the elitism of craft unionism and its 'no politics' politics, new general unions organised those who had been considered the "lowest of the outcasts": ie the unskilled and semi-skilled.³⁰ They grew rapidly. So did the politics associated with them. Often under the leadership of men who considered themselves disciples of Marx, there was no doubting the behind the scenes influence of William Morris, Henry Hyndman, Edward Aveling, Eleanor Marx and their like.³¹

There was a shift in popular consciousness and a brief flutter of bitter strikes and disputes. Alarm bells sounded in ruling class circles. Traditional methods of intimidation - scab labour, army bayonet and police baton - were deployed with horrible effect.³² But from the more astute ruling class minds there had already begun the search for a strategy that would obtain consent for capitalism and provide a positive *alternative* to socialism.

Joseph Chamberlain argued that property should pay a "ransom". Along the same lines Arthur Balfour called for "social legislation" as the "direct opposite" and "most effective antidote" to socialism.³³ In his pamphlet *Imperialism, the highest stage of capitalism* Lenin quoted another one of these patricians, Cecil Rhodes. He had related to his close friend, the journalist WT Stead, how in 1895 socialist agitation and fear of revolution gave an added impetus to his imperialist convictions:

"I was in the East End of London yesterday and attended a meeting of the unemployed. I listened to the wild speeches, which were just a cry for 'bread! bread! bread!' and on my way home I pondered over the scene and I became more than ever convinced of the importance of imperialism ... My cherished idea is a solution for the social problem: ie in order to save the 40 million inhabitants of the United Kingdom from a bloody civil war, we colonial statesmen must acquire new lands to settle the surplus population, to provide new markets for the goods produced in the factories and mines. The empire, as I have always said, is a bread and butter question. If you want to avoid civil war, you must become imperialists."³⁴

2.3.1. A detour on labour aristocracy

Given the confusion that exists even in Marxist circles, it is worth briefly dwelling on the labour aristocracy question. While the *broad* labour aristocracy owed its existence to the economics of imperialism, it should be understood that at the end of the day what we are dealing with here is a political concept that *corresponds* to the sops, comfortable existence and soft jobs made possible by imperialism. The labour aristocracy is not decided by statistics, trade union membership, professional skills, wage levels or purchase of consumer durables - as rigorously and painfully documented by the misguided John Foster in his *Class struggle in the industrial revolution*. Who is and who is not in the labour aristocracy, as Lenin emphasised, is decided "only by the struggle".³⁵ Those privileged workers who in the *course of the class struggle* support the bourgeoisie constitute the labour aristocracy.

Most historians, academic 'Marxist' or otherwise, have had a fine time tilting at what they believe to be the Marxist-Leninist theory of the labour aristocracy. For them 'classic' Marxism has it that well organised, better off workers, are conservative and that explains why there has been no successful socialist revolutions in the west. Well, they have little or no difficulty in showing how skilled workers are often more, not less radical than the rest of the working class (See H Pilling *Popular*

politics in late Victorian society, London 1968). Hence, as against "several colleagues" and in the name of "traditionalist" Marxism, Eric Hobsbawm places more stress on defining the labour aristocracy simply on the basis of economics than the "cultural element".³⁶

For him that can be assessed according to six criteria: first, "regularity of earnings"; second, "prospects of social security"; third, "conditions of work" - not least vis-à-vis treatment by foremen; fourth, "relations" with "higher social strata"; fifth, "general conditions of living"; sixth, "prospects of future advancement", including those for their children.³⁷ So in his otherwise excellent *Industry and empire* he defines the labour aristocracy as the "undisputed top" of the working class, with wages far above labourers.³⁸ Here we have the method of bourgeois sociology, not Marxism.³⁹

The patriarch of the SWP, Tony Cliff, takes a typically Menshevik position on this, as he does on many other questions. He would have it that Lenin had no worthwhile theory to explain why the mass of workers in countries such as Britain normally adhere to reformist politics. Consequently, he not only 'forgets' Lenin's criticism of the trade unionist politics of working class spontaneity outlined in *What is to be done?*, but claims that the labour aristocracy thesis *is* his theory of reformism. Not content with that travesty, Cliff tries to portray Lenin as a simpleton. According to Cliff, Lenin's labour aristocracy thesis is based on the patently absurd notion that the capitalists say to the workers, "I have made high profits this year, so I am ready to give you higher wages". Apparently because they do not behave in such a benevolent fashion, "it invalidates the whole of Lenin's analysis of reformism".⁴⁰

The answer to this caricature is straightforward. Those who do not lend their support to the bourgeoisie, no matter how highly educated they may be or pretty bourgeois their life style, cannot be defined as being part of the labour aristocracy. Using Lenin's *politico-economic* definition, recent examples of the labour aristocracy would be the white workers of South Africa, Protestant workers in Northern Ireland and, in Britain, members of the Union of Democratic Mineworkers. Communists do not shun these workers. They do everything they can to win them away from reaction. Lenin not only insisted that the political position of these workers is decided in the course of struggle but that it "will be definitely decided only by the socialist revolution".⁴¹

In another piece of arrant nonsense Cliff, writing in collaboration with Donny Gluckstein, maintains that Grigory Zinoviev's discussion of the labour aristocracy was even "more crude" than Lenin's. They claim Zinoviev "singled out munitions workers as the most obvious example" of the labour aristocracy who, in Zinoviev's words, "sell their birthright for a mess of pottage" and "become a tool of reaction". To illustrate their brilliance the SWP judges are then able to state: "Events utterly confounded Zinoviev's analysis."⁴²

After all it was munitions workers such as in DMW in Berlin, Putilov in Petrograd and Wier's on Clydeside who "spearheaded" industrial militancy in the closing years of World War I. The problem for Cliff and son is that Zinoviev did not equate "the entire union membership", let alone munition workers, with the labour aristocracy.⁴³ What Zinoviev actually said, in his specific historic circumstances, was that the "cannon and munition kings" "throw a bone occasionally" from their "rich feast" of war profits to the labour aristocracy; which is "indispensable as the element under whose direction the ordinary workers, the women, the youth, and the children are carrying on their work in the factories and in the mills and mines" (my emphasis).⁴⁴ The much maligned Zinoviev, I think, stands vindicated.

Imperialism's super-profits also facilitated the transformation of the leaders of 'new unionism' - personified by men like Will Thorne, JR Clynes and Ernest Bevin - into a labour bureaucracy and capitalism's partners in industry. Full time officials were often more concerned with the union's funds and cohesion than the actual rights and conditions of their members. They were also engaged in day-to-day relations with the representatives of capital and solving problems alongside them, almost as equals. Hence their "commitment to stable and cordial bargaining relationships" within the limits and constraints of the capitalist system.⁴⁵

Employers were quick to learn the distinction between the union and its members and through contracts and deals use the unions as part of the control system of labour relations. The union official became in the evocative words of C Wright Mills, "a manager of discontent".⁴⁶ The unions' organisational control over its members was thus turned *against* its members, and in this way capitalism recruited some of the most energetic individuals in the working class for itself. Expert in negotiations and the rule book, the full time officials were a natural target for capitalist *social* appropriation in order to weaken resistance to their system. And as Marx pointed out - originally in reference to the catholic church in medieval times - the "more a ruling class is able to assimilate the foremost minds of a ruled class, the more stable and

dangerous becomes its rule".⁴⁷ These trade union turncoats no longer questioned the wages system. They strengthened it because they haggled within it as intermediaries, as merchants of labour power, *against* the long term interests of the working class.

In what I consider to be an excellent and in many ways model study of the origins of opportunism, Zinoviev made clear that while the labour bureaucracy and labour aristocracy were "blood brothers", they "are two different categories".⁴⁸ For all the temporary advantages they enjoy, labour aristocrats remain wage slaves. As such, the labour aristocracy, argued Zinoviev, commits treason against itself because of its pro-capitalist politics.⁴⁹ On the other hand the labour bureaucracy developed as a caste of misleaders which, because of its specialist functions, begins to have sectional interests apart from and under certain circumstances antagonistic to the mass of the working class. First peculiar to Britain, this development became a political feature in all the 'great' powers. Here was the root cause of the split in socialism, when in 1914 the international workers' movement cleaved into reformist and revolutionary poles.

Paying 'ransom' on property, enacting 'social legislation' and expanding its base through the subaltern integration of the labour bureaucracy into the outer layers of the "illusory community" of the state entailed huge costs. While they could be afforded, arbitration boards, harmony between labour and capital, compromise and consultation were more than worth it. But in the closing years of the 19th century monopolistic competition intensified and inter-imperialist contradictions approached flashpoint. Though the process of institutionalising labour relations continued, now domestically imperialism began to mean class war not class peace. The German menace provided Baden-Powell's scouts, John Buchan's novels and *Boy's Own* illustrators with shadowy villains. It justified the *entente cordiale* with the old enemy, France; the building of a fleet of hellishly expensive Dreadnoughts ... and the fight to drive down labour costs.

After the advances of 1888-92 new unionism experienced a harrowing string of defeats in the face of a determined capitalist counteroffensive. When the dust settled it became clear that the balance of class forces had been dramatically shifted in favour of capital. Workers' wages, conditions and rights all deteriorated. The number of strike days tumultuously fell. Trade unions, most notably the general unions, suffered terrible losses of membership. Victories for the employers which they sought to make permanent through the Thatcherite-style Taff Vale judgement.⁵⁰ Obviously it was not only unskilled workers who were on the receiving end of the capitalist blitz. The labour aristocracy, though less vulnerable, saw its privileges and social weight crumble. Yet, as its star dimmed, that of the labour bureaucracy shone all the brighter.⁵¹

2.4. 1914: Britain's aborted revolution?

From the closing years of the 19th century there was a powerful, not to say frantic pre-war boom in the world economy. But no return to the halcyon days of social peace. Not at all. In 1910 a strike wave of huge proportions erupted. Workers were determined to get back what had been stolen from them and more. Between September 1910 and the outbreak of World War I the number of strikes shot up in a social explosion of the like not seen since the days of Chartism. After the bitter *defensive* strikes of the preceding period, which tended to be grudgingly long, workers took the *offensive*. On average strikes were shorter. And even when they were not, the 1912 miners' strike for instance, they invariably ended victoriously (see Table 1 below). Evidently none of this happened because trade unions were strong. It was the social explosion itself which made weakened unions strong - Luxemburg was right. There was with each burst of struggle and strike action a leap in unionisation. Membership which stood at 2,447,000⁵² in 1909 almost doubled to 4,135,000 by the end of 1913⁵³. But there was more to the strike wave than

unions making up lost ground. The strikes were part of a many faceted crisis in British politics.

Old methods of rule were no longer effective. Liberalism was dying. Workers were again becoming conscious of themselves as a class. Women were demanding the vote, Ireland home rule. Moreover, as the famous radical historian George Dangerfield wrote, workers revolted against their "own creations" - ie trade union officialdom and the structure of collective bargaining - as much as they did against employers.⁵⁴

Cross sectional amalgamations were forced on reluctant leaderships. Rank and file committees denounced the whole capitalist system. Strikes were characterised not by passivity, but aggressive self-confidence. Police violence was willingly met with workers' violence. Mass picketing was commonplace and on many occasions involved the whole community. Sympathy strikes were expected and often delivered. The state abandoned its short lived reluctance to use troops in industrial disputes and opened these workers in uniform to the wenders of subversion.

No section of the population was left unaffected by the crisis. Both Larkin and Carson made Ireland a running sore. Bernard Shaw, Oscar Wilde, HG Wells and a host of other intellectual luminaries embraced socialism. Women joined unions *en masse* and provided the social weight which later enabled Sylvia Pankhurst to split the suffragette movement, the Women's Social and Political Union, and form the Women's Socialist Federation (to become the *Workers'* Socialist Federation). There was even a rash of strikes by school students.

Even the barest outline of workers' struggles in 1910-14 shows that what we are dealing with is more, much more than a break with the stays and conformist traditions of Edwardian Britain. Here was a challenge to the existing political system. Beginning with strikes by railway workers, shipbuilders and cotton workers, the first phase of militancy had at its core the struggle of South Wales miners.

They refused to accept terms recommended by Messers Ashton and Harvey, the union negotiators. Defiant, impulsive, courageous, the miners demanded "the twentieth rule" (ie a general strike). Deserted by their union and literally "starved into acceptance", their strike was defeated.⁵⁵ Though not before Lancashire fusiliers and Metropolitan police had rampaged through the Rhondda and burned the name Tonyandy onto the collective working class memory.

June to September 1911 represented the next phase of militant struggle. Now transport workers were in the fore. There was the first national railway strike and strikes closed the ports of Hull and Liverpool. In Liverpool this amounted to a brief *de facto* local general strike. Inevitably there was confrontation with the state machine. Workers clashed with police. And after the riot act was read the city was brought to a halt by a strike involving over 100,000 workers. The mood was fully illustrated by attempts to snatch arrested workers from police hands and the wrecking of the Shipping Federation's offices in protest against the employers' lock-out. To quell the upsurge troops were called in. Many workers were wounded and one was killed in the ensuing battle. Troops were also used by home secretary Winston Churchill in an unsuccessful attempt to break the railway workers' strike in 1912.

That year's crucial sectional struggle however, as it had been in 1910 and would be the pattern till 1926, was the miners'. Regional disputes demanding five shillings a day as a guaranteed minimum escalated when in February the Miners' Federation of Great Britain declared a national strike. This time though they were not beaten. A million miners struck for a month, returning to work only after the government rushed through legislation in five days, setting up joint boards to decide district minimum rates. Defeat of the dockers' strike in London in the summer of 1912 was a setback, but no more than a temporary one.

As can be seen from our table, 1913 saw a decline in the number of strikers and strike days compared with 1912. Yet the number of actual strikes increased. This shows that workers were finding it

somewhat easier to win. Morale was riding high. On top of that the employers' will to fight had been drained by the two previous years. Miners and railway workers struck again and militancy spread to new areas, most notably engineering workers in the Black Country and building workers. Its highest expression though was the intense outbreak of class war in rebel Ireland.

Against an employers' union-busting operation on the trams, Jim Larkin, of the Irish Transport and General Workers Union, led almost the whole of Dublin's working class against what soon became a generalised lock-out. For the workers this amounted to a general strike and inevitably saw the struggle go beyond narrow trade unionism.

The employers hired thugs. The police attacked meetings, batoned indiscriminately and carried out mass arrests, including Jim Larkin and his deputy, James Connolly.⁵⁶ Dublin seethed with anger. The action of the employers and police "created a sensation all over Europe".⁵⁷ Lenin described the Dublin events as a "turning point in the history of the labour movement and of socialism in Ireland".⁵⁸ There were sympathy strikes in Liverpool, Manchester and Birmingham. However, true to form, the TUC refused to go beyond token financial donations and weasel words of support.

Out on bail and touring Britain, Larkin denounced its inaction and declared, "I am for revolution". A month later, in September 1913, Connolly and the protestant, Jack White, took a real step in that direction. Together they initiated an armed defence corps to protect the workers, the Irish Citizen's Army. Sadly by the early months of 1914 the employers had gained the upper hand. The strike was haemorrhaging. Forced through hunger and exhaustion, they reluctantly gave way to the employers' demand that they did not remain in or "become in the future a member of the Irish Transport Workers Union". Though, in Connolly's words, they were made to "eat the dust of defeat and betrayal", the fuse of Easter 1916 was lit. A minority of workers were now determined on revolution; arms were now seen as a necessity, not only for protection, but the ultimate triumph.

Our table clearly indicates that 1914 was set to outdo 1910, 1911, 1912, and 1913. Political developments reinforce the contention. In June a triple alliance was arranged between the transport workers' union, railworkers and miners - all one and a half million of them. A bureaucratic lash-up no doubt. Despite that it was an unprecedentedly wide forum in which to curtail sectionalism and in itself a potentially general strike-making instrument.⁵⁹

Some have claimed that the three bullets fired from Gavriilo Princip's revolver at Sarajevo on June 28 1914 forestalled not merely "gigantic industrial disputes" but a "revolutionary outburst".⁶⁰ An exaggeration, perhaps. Not a solid prediction, obviously. Nevertheless for revolutionaries the oracles looked auspicious.

A swathe of workers had arrived at some sort of militant trade union consciousness. Moreover, a small minority had risen to revolutionary consciousness. If they had been organised into a vanguard party, what nowadays is called a communist party, numbers would have presented no fundamental problem. Petty aristocratic prejudices were being left behind. Workers had learnt to fight. They had come, in the words of Lenin, to see the "path that would lead them to victory".⁶¹ If the situation further developed and certainly if it became revolutionary, the advanced detachment would undoubtedly go from being the recognised leaders of the militants to the recognised leaders of the mass. Unfortunately there was no communist party. Only a clutch of interdigitated and bickering sects.

During the 1910-14 period a vacuum developed in working class politics. The Labour Party appeared useless. It was in fact worse than useless. In 1911 Arthur Henderson and three other Labour MPs moved a bill to make strikes "illegal unless 30 days' notice had been given in advance".⁶² In his *Socialism and syndicalism* its Philip Snowden actually came out against strikes as such. Instead this supposed English Robespierre recommended parliamentary gradualism as the way to the "co-operative commonwealth".⁶³ No wonder in historic terms Labour's forward march was confronted with a major hold-up. As to its 'socialist wing', the Independent Labour Party, it went into reverse. Its Militant Labour-type parliamentary road was irrelevant to the self-activity of the working class. Members deserted - or, should we say, left for the fight - in droves.⁶⁴

The revolutionary groups however completely failed to take up the challenge. The largest, the Social Democratic Federation under the autocratic Henry Hyndman, actually scorned the strike wave. Strikes were "foolish", "harmful" and "unsocial".⁶⁵ Adhering to a peculiar sectarian version of 'Marxism', which still exists amongst designer revolutionaries, the SDF mocked the 'sheep' who imagined they could change their conditions through strike action. Don't they know only political action could do that! The working class would have to 'learn' to

Table 1⁵³

Strikes statistics 1895 to 1914

	Strikes (total) 000	Strikers (total) 000	Strike days (total)	Strikers per strike (average)	Strike days per strike (average)
1895-99	793	172	7,524	221	32
1900-04	495	103	2,919	209	18
1905-09	456	144	4,254	323	20
1910	531	385	9,895	725	19
1911	903	831	10,370	920	11
1912	857	1,233	40,915	1,439	28
1913	1,497	516	11,631	345	17
1914 (Jan-July)	848	424	9,964	499	24
(Aug-Dec)	151	30	147	198	5

