

The First Mass Movement in History

Socialist Standard, No. 1297, September 2012

The Chartists struggled for political democracy in nineteenth-century Britain, but did they need a “revolutionary leadership” any more than we need one today?

The Chartist movement, which lasted from 1836 to the 1850s, has been described as the first mass workers movement in history. In some ways it was. Chartism was a movement composed mainly of the working class that demanded the enactment of the People’s Charter, which would grant the vote to working class men.



The vote had been extended to a wider section of the propertied in 1832 amidst widespread fears of unrest. Propertied political radicals, who had previously courted working-class support to advance the extension of the suffrage to them, declined to endorse further extension; supported the Poor Law of 1834, which instituted the workhouse; backed vicious anti-trades union prosecutions; and refused to repeal the newspaper ‘tax on knowledge’. Unsurprisingly, a surge of working class consciousness and independent political organization was the result.

Within this new movement were strands of thought associated with individuals such as James ‘Bronterre’ O’Brien, George Julian Harney and Ernest Jones that stressed the need for the Charter ‘and something more’, which anticipated the later development of revolutionary socialism.

Working class consciousness and the democratic-socialism (at this time meaning variants of Owenite socialism) of many of the supporters of Chartism were only elements of a diverse movement. Rather than an early mass workers movement it is more plausible to see Chartism as a popular movement in which these elements were significant developments. Hence the survival of older radical forms such as the prominence of the ‘gentleman leader’ in the movement, exhorting the working class from the orator’s platform, and utilising the threat of force as the dominant strategy. Prominent in this respect was Feargus O’Connor, a radical Irish aristocrat, whose oratory and newspaper, the *Northern Star*, dominated early Chartism and defined the mainstream of the Chartist movement.

There were others in the movement who, although often desiring the ‘something more’ that they anticipated would result from the Charter, wished to moderate the element of social threat. These ‘moral force’ Chartists were exemplified by the London Working Men’s Association which was influential in the early stages of the movement, and drew up the People’s Charter with the assistance of the wealthy political radical Francis Place. By taking a moderate approach they hoped to draw in the support of propertied political radicals who wished to advance the suffrage

for their own ends such as abolition of the Corn Laws and free trade. The Birmingham Political Union, for example, was an important body in the early stages of Chartism, through which it hoped to advance the currency crank ideas of its leading member, the wealthy capitalist Thomas Attwood. This section dropped out of the movement, however, (along with most of the other early propertied supporters) when the gravity of the movement shifted towards the industrial centres, and the working class presence and the tone of social threat increased.

The increasingly resolute working class presence on the national political scene was expressed at the other extremity of Chartism by those on the 'physical force' wing of the movement who wished to fan the flames of insurrection. Their approach was characterized by the deployment of extreme and provocative language to threaten the propertied into granting the Charter, backed up with secret organization and insurrectionary zeal. Exhortations for the people to arm were commonplace and intimidating torch-light processions took place in some localities (until they were banned). It is debatable to what extent many on this side of the movement really believed in the possibility of successful armed insurrection, but by 1839 this section was increasing in influence.

The insurrectionary element in the Chartist movement has fascinated left-wing historians who see in it a frustrated revolutionary potential from which a modern vanguard can learn lessons. Adding to this literature is a new history of the Chartist insurrectionaries of 1839 by David Black and Chris Ford (*1839 – The Chartist Insurrection*, London, Unkant Publishing, 2012, £10.99). It is a compelling read, telling the story of Chartism through the experiences of George Julian Harney and other 'firebrand' Chartist leaders such as Dr. John Taylor and examining the ill-fated Newport Rising of 1839. The authors provide a vivid account of the revolutionary potential that had built up in Britain by the late 1830s, culminating in the aborted rising at Newport in which several Chartists were killed.

A successful rising in south Wales may well, as the authors claim, have resulted in a chain of risings. Their claim that it would have achieved "world historic importance" is questionable though. It may have extracted compromises on focal points of working class struggle such as the Ten Hour day, the poor law, bread prices and land monopoly. It may even have achieved further extension of the suffrage. But Black and Ford accentuate the existence of working class insurrectionaries in south Wales and elsewhere and not the rising's shambolic failure in the face of a state resolutely set against the prospect of armed revolt by the Chartists. Indeed, the perceived threat of insurrection set the propertied against the Chartists in a way which the threat posed by their radical political demands did not. It was the overt social threat of: 'peaceably if we may, forcibly if we must', that meant the Chartists had to be defeated by the government on behalf of the propertied, even if ultimately its political demands could be conceded.

The authors seem disappointed at what they see as the paucity of revolutionary leadership within the Chartist movement. The proposed general strike in support of the Charter is regarded as a failed revolutionary opportunity because Feargus O'Connor refused to see it as a chance for the "revolutionary seizure of power." Black and Ford argue that "the strike had an inexorable revolutionary logic: with no strike fund to draw on, the people would have to violate bourgeois property rights in order to eat" (pp.88-9). But most Chartists did not want a revolutionary seizure of power; they wanted an extension of the vote backed by the *threat* that if it was not granted

then ‘force’ *might* follow. Chartist leaders such as O’Connor did not want a showdown with the state via a general strike because he knew that the likely consequence would be defeat.



John Frost, the leader of the Newport Rising, is likewise characterized as a somewhat reticent and indecisive insurrectionary leader, not because he fell short as a revolutionary leader of proletarian revolution but because he did not see himself in these terms to begin with. He did not anticipate having to actually use force but believed, in line with the mainstream of the Chartist movement, that the threat of force would be

sufficient to achieve Chartist objectives. He found himself a ‘gentleman leader’ in a situation that escalated way out of his control. The Chartists at Newport, however sincere, walked into a confrontation that led to deaths and a subsequent display of the strength by state in which hundreds of arrests of Chartists were made across the country and John Frost, a broken man, was transported to Tasmania (a sentence of death having been commuted).

The authors suggest that Chartism was neither the tail end of radicalism nor the forerunner of socialism. But it contained plenty of the old in with the new. In their words, “In 1839 the ideas of Thomas Paine stood in dialogue with the socialistic ideas of Thomas Spence, Robert Owen, Bronterre O’Brien and Gracchus Babeuf” (p.199). Chartism was: “a conscious attempt by working-class insurgents to resolve ...[capitalist] crisis by breaking the power of ‘Old Corruption’” (p.198). This is followed by the claim that “the movement undoubtedly did have revolutionary and socialist tendencies which persisted and developed” (p.199). It is clear that the intellectual inheritance of Chartism was a mixed bag of traditional radicalism and new Socialism. In trying to tell the story of insurrectionary Chartism, however, Black and Ford want to highlight a working class consciousness that is ripe for insurrectionary revolution. In so doing, although the story they tell was part of the Chartist movement, they highlight some voices in the movement at the expense of others.

Labour MP, John McDonnell, in the foreword to the book suggests that Black and Ford reveal that the threat to the British political establishment, even of revolution, in Britain in 1839 was closer than is often realized. This is indeed the main achievement of the book. But McDonnell also claims that the authors reveal a history that is suggestive of a possible “alternative revolutionary route” (p.xi) that could have been taken by British labour. This is to see a nascent revolutionary potential for seizing political power in the movement for democratic reform. Democratic reform, however, was expected, by those struggling to bring it about, to involve a

significant shift in political power in favour of the working class and harmful to the propertied. Such a shift was anticipated, by supporters and opponents of the Charter alike, to result in measures beneficial to the working class. If revolution was on the agenda it was intended to achieve democratic reform from which the working class would benefit, not to advance a 'proletarian' vanguard.

Black and Ford conclude that we should salute the Chartist insurrectionaries and seek to understand why they did not succeed in 1839. It is suggested that a major reason for their failure was weak revolutionary leadership. But, today, we have few positive lessons to learn from the bloody failure of past insurrections; less still do we need revolutionary leadership. Rather than inspiring an investigation into how such struggles can be harnessed by an enlightened cadre, it is the limitations of insurrection as a strategy for social change that strikes us. Armed insurrection was not necessary or even useful to the cause of democratic reform in Britain.

We should, of course, salute the Chartists but from a different perspective. They made bold and courageous sacrifices in the face of the determined opposition of the British state on behalf of their propertied opponents. And it is thanks to the struggles of the Chartists and of those who came after them that insurrection is more than ever a moribund revolutionary strategy. Since the late nineteenth-century the working class has possessed the political means to effect social and economic change. It is high time that we, the working class, had the confidence and knowledge to use those means for ourselves.

<http://www.worldsocialism.org/spgb/socialist-standard/2010s/2012/no-1297-september-2012/first-mass-movement-history>