Revolutionary Socialism and 'Labour Representation'

Brown, James Morgan · *Commonweal · Vol 6, No. 251 · 1 November 1890 · p. 349*

The Revolutionary Socialist often puzzles the novice in Socialism by his determined stand against and denunciation of "palliatives." He is often asked in tones of wonder why he should oppose anything that would make the strain of our social system press more lightly upon the oppressed. The novice naturally turns his eyes to Parliament, and visions of remedial measures pass in succession before him till he beholds the transformation of society into the "statist" of State Socialism.

His dreams of Parliamentary action are naturally seldom disturbed by the thought of the mighty economic movement that is working in its own way with dreadful earnestness the destruction of Modern Industrialism, and that to stop the action of the elements of decay–if that were possible–is only to prolong the agony and increase the miseries of a large section of the workers. No Act of Parliament can humanise competition, nor bring within its reach the helpless thousands whose sorrowful homes are their workshops.

The Revolution alone can bring salvation to the workers, and palliatives can only strengthen the conservative element in human nature and make the workers that they "benefit" more contented slaves. The Revolutionary Socialists are the only real practical men, and the politicians are the dreamers and utopists.

The *agitation* for an eight hours' day may be of use in knitting the workers more closely together, and turning their minds more directly to a consideration of their position in society as mere agents for the manufacture of wealth for others, and thus making more sure the destruction of the tyranny that renders them helpless to think seriously of any question save the one of food, and that adulterated too! What a hollow mockery it is for the "professional spiritual guides" to preach "Take no thought for the morrow," when it is the leading impulse of all out actions today, developing the greed, the heartlessness, and separateness of all our lives.

An Eight Hours' Bill is an impossibility for a goodly number of years; but, supposing it were passed tomorrow, it would not do one half the good claimed for it by its promoters. At the most only a few trades would benefit, and for a short time the aristocracy of labour would look with still deeper contempt upon the struggles of their more helpless brethren. I could almost go down on my knees and thank the gods for every new machine that is introduced. When Socialists fail the machines succeed! It is the duty of the Revolutionary Socialist to hail with delight every factor that tends to destroy our present society, and wherever possible to help it in the good work. He will not vote for tyrannical Tory, canting Liberal, or well meaning Social Democrat, knowing well that "Labour representation" is a farce and a misdirection of energy that could be far better spent in organising the workers for the General Strike. He will help every act that tends to destroy the "sacredness" of "law-'n'-order" and promote a wholesome contempt for landlord and capitalist made "crimes." Rent, interest, etc., are so many devils set up for worship, and he ought to have the zeal of the theologian in striking at them on every possible occasion. He will help the workers to fight their battles in their own way, and show that by "constitutional methods" failure inevitably will be theirs. Whatever weapons the workers find at hand it is their duty to use; they cannot wait like the wealthy capitalist, for he wields the rod of starvation and will use it unmercifully.

Therefore, the revolutionist will teach that only by what is termed "lawlessness" can the workers

gain the slightest temporary concession, till co-operation takes the place of brute competition. That the workers are already learning this lesson the Leeds and Southampton strikes show, and the grand spirit of revolt that is rapidly spreading will awaken the constitutional leaders from pleasant dreams of seats in the House of Commons and debates in County Councils.

The increasing solidarity of the workers throughout the world is one of the most hopeful signs to the revolutionist of the coming change, for in that alone he sees the one thing needful to make the General Strike a success. He can look serenely on the posings of the constitutional leaders in the front ranks of the Labour movement, knowing that the truce between Capital and Labour will soon be broken, and that they will have to move more quickly or be left far behind by the onward movement of the rank and file. While our blessed Parliament is "debating," and the Labour leaders moving heaven and earth for seats in the House of Commons, the economic movement, which is far beneath all that and far beyond their influence, is steadily going on, making more naked the social war and stripping it of the fine-spun garments woven by the professors of the "dismal science." It would indeed be difficult today to come across a worker who cannot in some fashion define his position in society. The most ignorant of them will agree that he is a mere instrument used by the more cunning, and consequently more powerful sections of society, in ministering to all its real and fancied wants, his own always being strictly left out of account; and if he has soul enough in him to feel the "still small voice" of his ruined manhood, he will at once place himself in the active ranks of the rebels and declare war against a system that forcibly denies him the right to *live*.

The novice in Socialism does not see that all attempts at propping up our rotten system can only be done at the expense and still greater suffering of a large portion of the most helpless victims of society, even supposing Parliament sincere in its efforts to make more bearable the condition of the wage-slaves. Let him think of the years it would take before a "respectable minority" of Labour representatives could be sent to the House of Commons, and he will soon conclude that far more effective and practical work can be done outside in organising labour and giving direction to the growing feeling of revolt. Instead of waiting for reactionary measures, let him preach the ideal of Socialism and inculcate the spirit of rebellion wherever he goes.

In the East-end of every great city a most successful crusade could be made against the payment of rent and taxes. Much would follow from this alone, and who can doubt the success of this when the huddled-up workers will be starving in the coming depression of trade. Not all the schemes of General Booth and his army of chloroformers will be able to stem the tide of discontent, and it is for the Socialist to give it enlightenment and direction.

The time has come now for an extension of the movement in a practical way. In every city and town where Socialist societies exist, bands of young men ought to be formed and excursions made through those pasts of the country where "trespassers are strictly prohibited," and if a few rabbits or grouse could be caught it might give a zest to this new phase of the propaganda, which would soon become popular. The time is ripe for a new departure, and action like this would soon make the conditions possible for the issuing of a "No-Rent Manifesto."

Let us take every means in out power to harass the enemy, for every act of lawlessness is the preliminary to the Socialist Revolution. The resources of civilisation are great, and many are the ways of striking terror into the hearts of the enemy.