Trades Unions

By FREDERICK ENGELS

(Note: During the two decades that spanned the intervals between 1861 and 1884 there were two principal working-class organs in England, The Beehive and The Labour Standard. The Labour Standard, according to an interesting note by Beatrice and Sidney Webb, was

"a penny weekly established by George Shipton, the secretary of the London Trades Council. It ran from May 7, 1881, to April 29, 1884, and contained articles by Henry Crompton and Professor E. S. Beesley, together with much trade union information."

It is not strange that the Webbs refer to the articles by Henry Crompton and Professor Beesley, for they were all signed and easy to identify. There was one other contributor to this eight-page paper, however, whom the Webbs apparently did not recognize, undoubtedly because his contributions were in the nature of unsigned editorials. That contributor was Frederick Engels. It is true that Engels severed his connections with the Labour Standard after the first sixteen weeks, but it is equally true that the leading articles for the first fourteen issues, with the exception of three, were written not by the editor, George Shipton, but by his collaborator, Engels himself.

The bourgeoisification of the British proletariat at this time due to the monopoly position of British industry on the world market was well known to Marx and Engels. But it is an essential characteristic of Marxism to take the proletariat as it is at each stage of its development, and, without giving up its principle, to adjust its tactics accordingly. The basic necessity of the British proletariat at the beginning of the eighties was to free itself from its bourgeois outlook, recognize its own class interests, and organize itself into an independent political party. It had to learn and do over again the first step of independent class existence which its Chartist "forefathers" had so resolutely taken half a century before.

But, while Engels knew that this could only be achieved in the long run by the operation of objective economic forces, he also knew how to evaluate the "subjective" factor in the process, and, acting upon the principle that men make history as much as history makes men, he took advantage of every opportunity to contribute towards breaking down the bourgeoisification of the British working class. This was the primary reason that Engels agreed to contribute to Shipton's Labour Standard. From the first to the last of the twelve articles that constitute his total contribution to the paper, each one is a concentrated attempt to arouse the class consciousness of the British worker, to impress him with the necessity of waging a militant class struggle for the ultimate abolition of the wage system itself.

This collaboration was facilitated by the fact that while Shipton represented a class consciousness unsupported by the guiding perspective of Marxism and incapable of distinguishing between the various tendencies in the labor movement, he still accepted the principle of

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class struggle and the necessity of independent proletarian action. He acknowledged the necessity of breaking with bourgeois illusions and insisted that the workers must fight their own battles. In formulating the "objects and policy" of his paper, he stated unequivocally that it was to express and defend the interests of the working class against the capitalists. Clearly, Engels could not have neglected to influence not only the policy of the paper but also its trade-unionist readers.

Nine years later, in a letter to Sorge dated February 8, 1890, Engels indicated the hopes that he had entertained of influencing the proletarian movement in the direction of socialism. The history of the British working class during those nine years was another proof to him that the labor movement must sooner or later assume a socialist character. Engels did not live to witness the bourgeois role of British "socialism" in the later era of imperialism. But even had he seen how social-democracy had become one of the finest props of the capitalist system, he would not have altered his conviction. The history of the working class is bound up with the development of capitalism and not merely with any one particular working class organization. New conditions compel it to create new organs of struggle, and the working-class movement as a whole is mightier and more fundamental than any one of its passing forms. The bourgeois role of British "socialism" is no invalidation of the Marxian principle, but rather a striking illustration of the complex character of the class struggle and the social forces generated by the capitalist system. To us in America, however, the most interesting feature of this letter to Sorge is the importance which Engels attached to the trade-union movement of the working class. It not only shows why Engels was particularly willing to write for Shipton's trade-union paper, but it points to the inescapable necessity of organizing the great mass of unorganized workers into militant trade unions as the material foundation of the independent class movement of the proletariat.

"Here, too," Engels wrote, referring to England, "the ground has been prepared to such an extent by the various agitations of the last eight years that the people (i.e., the trade unionists), without being socialists themselves, will have only socialists as their leaders. Now, without noticing it themselves, they have taken the theoretically correct path; they are driving ahead, and the movement is so strong that I believe it will endure the unavoidable blunders and their consequences, the frictions of the various trade unions and their leaders, without serious damage. I believe that is the way it will happen in America... And so, you must begin with trade unions, etc., if it is to be a mass movement; and each further step must be forced upon them by a defeat. But once the first step beyond the bourgeois outlook has been taken, it will move fast..."

Our own basic problem of organizing the unorganized and the coming Trade Union Unity Conference at Cleveland lend special interest to the three articles reprinted in the present number of THE COMMUNIST. As a popular statement of the Marxian theory of trade unionism, these articles make no attempt to contribute anything new of a theoretical nature. Seventeen years before, in concluding his

*Sorge Correspondence, p. 329.
lecture on Value, Price and Profit before an audience of British trade unionists, Marx had already summarized in a few lines what Engels necessarily had to say in several popular articles.

"Trade unions," Marx stated, "work well as centers of resistance against the encroachments of capital. They fail partially from an injudicious use of their power. They fail generally from limiting themselves to a guerilla war against the effects of the existing system, instead of simultaneously trying to change it, instead of using their organized forces as a lever for the final emancipation of the working class, that is to say, the ultimate abolition of the wage system."  

Engels' articles, however, are by no means negligible. But if Marx, speaking to a group of trade-union leaders, openly spoke of the necessity of substituting the revolutionary watchword, "Abolition of the wage system" for the conservative motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work"—Engels nowhere in these articles even uses the word "revolution." He proves the necessity of conquering political power without drawing attention to the inevitability of bloody civil war and armed uprising. Does this mean that Engels accepted the idea of a peaceful revolution? Such a conclusion would be entirely unfounded. Engels knew his audience. As a dialectic materialist, he also knew that if at a certain historical moment the conditions were present for a peaceful development of the revolution, the next day or the next turn in the course of events might find these conditions gone. Marxism is a guide to action, not an abstract doctrine. New conditions require new tactics and new tactics require an understanding of these conditions. We have a concrete example of this situation in the Russian revolution. During the first few months of the March revolution, Lenin persistently reiterated the possibility of a peaceful development of the revolution. The role of the mensheviks and social revolutionists, however, kept the revolution from taking this course, and a few months later the alignment of class forces compelled the Russian proletariat to take up an armed struggle for power.

If there have been very rare moments in the history of capitalist society when a combination of circumstances would have permitted a peaceful development of the revolution, had the working class taken or been able to take power without having recourse to arms, the recognition of such moments is neither an indication that Engels had suddenly become an advocate of peaceful parliamentarism nor a refutation of the necessity of conquering power by the use of arms. The conquest of power by means of arms is not the result of "gray" theory, but the practical outcome of the material class struggle. And as a dialectic thinker, Engels would have been the first to adjust his tactics to the necessities of the real situation. Only the bourgeois reformist who does not wish to see the armed preparation of the world bourgeoisie can fail to perceive that the working class will be forced to take up arms by the bourgeoisie itself.

Writing in 1881, Engels was not confronted with the perspective of an imminent revolution. The British working class, for whom he wrote, still occupied a privileged position. They had still their first step to take in the direction of an independent class policy. And Engels' task as a Marxist was to educate the working class to its own

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role in the historical process, to open its eyes to the real nature of the class struggle. As for the idea of revolution, it would take on flesh and blood, it would become a necessary means of class action, not as the exclusive result of verbal propaganda, but primarily in consequence of the material experiences of the working class. Meanwhile, the immediate task was to prepare the workers to act as a socialist proletariat and prevent the revolution from taking any but a socialist path.

Engels did not give up his revolutionary Marxism by speaking in a language that the British worker of 1881 could understand. On the contrary, when he told him that the course of history would show him the necessity of abolishing the entire wage system, he merely described the most basic aspect of the proletarian revolution. Viewed as a process, as a series of acts involving every sphere of social life, the abolition of the wage system not only constitutes the abolition of capitalist production relations, the relations of capitalists and workers to the means of production, hence of the capitalists themselves, but it also involves the political, military, ideological and other actions of the various classes. Only the most arbitrary conception of reality can fail to see that this is revolution. And that it implies revolution by force is made clear even in the present articles where Engels points to the fact that the abolition of the wage system will call forth the most bitter struggle of resistance on the part of the capitalists; that it is primarily for this reason that the workers need a state machine, the whole political power, to crush this resistance and to organize the new economy.

Four months after his first contribution to the Labour Standard, Engels indicated his intention of severing connections with Shipton in a letter to Marx of August 11, 1881. As an illustration of Engels character as a Marxist, this letter deserves to be quoted at some length.

"Yesterday morning," Engels wrote, "I informed Mr. Shipton that he will get no more editorials from me. Kautsky had sent me a pale item on international factory legislation in a bad translation, which I corrected and sent to Shipton. Yesterday the proofs and a letter arrived from Shipton, who found two passages 'too strong' and one of which, moreover, he misunderstood; would I not modify them? I did and replied, first, what did he mean sending me requests for changes on Tuesday—here Wednesday—, when my reply could be back in London only on Thursday, after the appearance of the paper? Secondly, if this is too strong for him, then much more so my articles which are still stronger, whereby it would be better for both of us if I were to quit. Thirdly, my time does not permit me to continue writing editorials regularly each week; and that I had already intended to tell him so after the Trade Union Congress (September). Under the circumstances, however, it would surely improve his position towards this congress if I were to quit now. Fourthly, it was his cursed duty to communicate the Max Hirsch article to me before it was printed. I cannot remain on the staff of a paper which lends itself to writing up these German trade unions, comparable only to those very worst English ones which allow themselves to be led by men sold to, or at least paid by, the middle class,"

3This was published as an editorial in the issue of August 13, 1881.
4Engels is referring to an article that appeared in the August 6th issue of the Labour Standard entitled "A German Opinion of English Trade Unionism" in which the Hirsch-Duncker Unions are described.
For the rest, I wished him good luck, etc. He received the letter this morning.

"I did not write him the most decisive reason: the absolute ineffectiveness of my articles on the rest of the paper and the public. If there is any effect at all, it is a hidden reaction on the part of secret free-trade apostles. The paper continues to be the same collection of possible and impossible blockheads, and in its political detail, more or less, but predominantly Gladstonian. The response which once seemed to have been aroused in one or two numbers has disappeared again. The British workingman doesn't want to go further; he must be stirred up by events, by the loss of his industrial monopoly. *En attendant, habeat sibi.*  

A. Landy

In a previous article we examined the time-honored motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work," and came to the conclusion that the fairest day's wages under the present social conditions is necessarily tantamount to the very unfairest division of the workman's produce, the greater part of that produce going into the capitalist's pocket and the workman having to put up with just as much as will enable him to keep himself in working order and to propagate his race.

This is a law of political economy, or, in other words, a law of the present economical organization of society, which is more powerful than all the Common and Statute Law of England put together, the Court of Chancery included. While society is divided into two opposing classes—on the one hand, the capitalists, monopolizers of the whole of the means of production, land, raw materials, machinery; on the other hand, laborers, working people deprived of all property in the means of production, owners of nothing but their own working power; while this social organization exists the law of wages will remain all-powerful, and will every day afresh rivet the chains by which the working man is made the slave of his own produce—monopolized by the capitalist.

The trades unions of this country have now for nearly sixty years fought against this law—with what result? Have they succeeded in freeing the working class from the bondage in which capital—the produce of its own hands—holds it? Have they enabled a single section of the working class to rise above the situation of wage slaves, to become owners of their own means of production, of the raw materials, tools, machinery required in their trade, and thus to become the owners of the produce of their own labor? It is well known that not only they have not done so, but that they never tried.

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5Meanwhile, let him have his way.
6Published May 21, 1881 and entitled "The Wage System."—A. L.
7This article, the first in the series, was omitted here for lack of space. It does not deal directly with trade unions.—A. L.
Far be it from us to say that trades unions are of no use because they have not done that. On the contrary, trades unions in England, as well as in every other manufacturing country, are a necessity for the working classes in their struggle against capital. The average rate of wages is equal to the sum of necessaries sufficient to keep up the race of workmen in a certain country according to the standard of life habitual in that country. That standard of life may be very different for different classes of workmen. The great merit of trades unions, in their struggle to keep up the rate of wages and to reduce working hours, is that they tend to keep up and to raise the standard of life.

There are many trades in the east-end of London whose labor is not less skilled and quite as hard as that of bricklayers and bricklayers' laborers, yet they hardly earn half the wages of these. Why? Simply because a powerful organization enables the one set to maintain a comparatively high standard of life as the rule by which their wages are measured; while the other set, disorganized and powerless, have to submit not only to unavoidable but also to arbitrary encroachments of their employers; their standard of life is gradually reduced, they learn how to live on less and less wages, and their wages naturally fall to that level which they themselves have learned to accept as sufficient.

The law of wages, then, is not one which draws a hard and fast line. It is not inexorable within certain limits. There is at every time (great depression excepted) for every trade a certain latitude within which the rate of wages may be modified by the results of the struggle between the two contending parties. Wages in every case are fixed by a bargain, and in a bargain he who resists longest and best has the greatest chance of getting more than his due. If the isolated workman tries to drive his bargain with the capitalist he is easily beaten and has to surrender at discretion; but if a whole trade of workmen form a powerful organization, collect among themselves a fund to enable them to defy their employers if need be, and thus become enabled to treat with these employers as a power, then, and then only, have they a chance to get even that pittance which according to the economical constitution of present society may be called a fair day's wage for a fair day's work.

The law of wages is not upset by the struggles of trades unions. On the contrary, it is enforced by them. Without the means of resistance of the trades unions the laborer does not receive even what is his due according to the rules of the wage system. It is only with the fear of the trades union before his eyes that the capitalist can be made to part with the full market value of his laborer's working power. Do you want a proof? Look at the wages paid to the mem-
bers of the large trade unions, and at the wages paid to the number-
less small trades in that pool of stagnant misery, the east-end of
London.

Thus the trades unions do not attack the wage system. But it is
not the highness or lowness of wages which constitutes the economi-
cal degradation of the working class; this degradation is comprised
in the fact that, instead of receiving for its labor the full produce
of this labor, the working class has to be satisfied with a portion of
its own produce called wages. The capitalist pockets the whole
produce (paying the laborer out of it) because he is the owner of
the means of labor. And, therefore, there is no real redemption
for the working class until it becomes owner of all the means of
work—land, raw material, machinery, etc.—and thereby also the
owner of the whole of the produce of its own labor.

II

In our last issue we considered the action of trades unions as far
as they enforce the economical law of wages against employers.
We return to this subject, as it is of the highest importance that
the working classes generally should thoroughly understand it.

We suppose no English working man of the present day needs to
be taught that it is the interest of the individual capitalist, as well as
of the capitalist class generally, to reduce wages as much as possible.
The produce of labor, after deducting all expenses, is divided, as
David Ricardo has irrefutably proved, into two shares: the one forms
the laborers’ wages, the other the capitalists’ profits. Now, this net
produce of labor being, in every individual case, a given quantity,
it is clear that the share called profits cannot increase without the
share called wages decreasing. To deny that it is the interest of the
capitalist to reduce wages, would be tantamount to saying that it
is not his interest to increase his profits. We know very well that
there are other means of temporarily increasing profits, but they do
not alter the general law, and therefore need not trouble us here.

Now, how can the capitalists reduce wages when the rate of
wages is governed by a distinct and well-defined law of social econ-
omy? The economical law of wages is there and is irrefutable. But,
as we have seen, it is elastic, and it is so in two ways. The rate of
wages can be lowered, in a particular trade, either directly, by gradu-
ally customing the workpeople of that trade to a lower stand-
ard of life, or, indirectly, by increasing the number of working
hours per day (or the intensity of work during the same working
hours) without increasing the pay.

Published May 28, 1881.—A. L.
And the interest of every individual capitalist to increase his profits by reducing the wages of his workpeople receives a fresh stimulus from the competition of capitalists of the same trade amongst each other. Each one of them tries to undersell his competitors, and unless he is to sacrifice his profits he must try and reduce wages. Thus, the pressure upon the rate of wages brought about by the interest of every individual capitalist is increased tenfold by the competition amongst them. What was before a matter of more or less profit, now becomes a matter of necessity.

Against this constant, unceasing pressure unorganized labor has no effective means of resistance. Therefore, in trades without organization of the workpeople, wages tend constantly to fall and the working hours tend constantly to increase. Slowly, but surely, this process goes on. Times of prosperity may now and then interrupt it, but times of bad trade hasten it on all the more, afterwards. The workpeople gradually get accustomed to a lower standard of life. While the length of the working day more and more approaches the possible maximum, the wages come nearer and nearer to their absolute minimum—the sum below which it becomes absolutely impossible for the workman to live and reproduce his race.

There was a temporary exception to this about the beginning of this century. The rapid extension of steam and machinery was not sufficient for the still faster increasing demand for their produce. Wages in these trades, except those of children sold from the workshop to the manufacturer, were as a rule high; those of such skilled manual labor as could not be done without, were very high; what a dyer, a mechanic, a velvet-cutter, a hand-mule spinner, used to receive now sounds fabulous. At the same time the trades superseded by machinery were slowly starved to death. But newly invented machinery by and by superseded these well-paid workmen, machinery was invented which made machinery, and that at such a rate that the supply of machine-made goods not only equalled, but exceeded the demand. When the general peace, in 1815, re-established regularity of trade, the decennial fluctuations between prosperity, over-production, and commercial panic began. Whatever advantages the workpeople had preserved from old prosperous times, and perhaps even increased during the period of frantic overproduction, were now taken from them during the period of bad trade and panic; and soon the manufacturing population of England submitted to the general law that the wages of unorganized labor constantly tend towards the absolute minimum.

But in the meantime the trades unions, legalized in 1824, had also stepped in, and high time it was. Capitalists are always organized. They need in most cases no formal union, no rules, officers,
etc. Their small number, as compared with that of the workmen, the fact of their forming a separate class, their constant social and commercial intercourse stand them in lieu of that; it is only later on, when a branch of manufacturers has taken possession of a district, as the cotton trade has of Lancashire, that a formal capitalists’ trades union becomes necessary. On the other hand, the workpeople from the very beginning cannot do without a strong organization, well defined by rules and delegating its authority to officers and committees. The Act of 1824 rendered these organizations legal. From that day labor became a power in England. The formerly helpless mass, divided against itself, was no longer so. To the strength given by union and common action, soon was added the force of a well-filled exchequer — “resistance money,” as our French brethren expressively call it. The entire position of things now changed. For the capitalist it became a risky thing to indulge in a reduction of wages or an increase of working hours.

Hence the violent outbursts of the capitalist class of those times against trade unions. That class has always considered its long established practise of grinding down the working class as a vested right and lawful privilege. That was now to be put a stop to. No wonder they cried out lustily and held themselves at least as much injured in their rights and property as Irish landlords do nowadays.

Sixty years’ experience of struggle has brought them round to some extent. Trades unions have now become acknowledged institutions, and their action as one of the regulators of wages is recognized quite as much as the action of the Factories and Workshops Acts as regulators of the hours of work. Nay, the cotton masters in Lancashire have lately even taken a leaf out of the workpeople’s book, and now know how to organize a strike, when it suits them, as well or better than any trades union.

Thus it is through the action of trades unions that the law of wages is enforced as against the employers, and that the workpeople of any well organized trade are enabled to obtain, at least approximately, the value of the working power which they hire to their employer; and that, with the help of state laws, the hours of labor are made at least not to exceed too much that maximum length beyond which the working power is prematurely exhausted. This, however, is the utmost trades unions, as at present organized, can hope to obtain, and that by constant struggle only, by an immense waste of strength and money; and then the fluctuations of trade, once every ten years at least, break down for the moment what has been conquered, and the fight has to be fought over again. It is a vicious circle from which there is no issue. The working class remains what it was, and what our Chartist forefathers were not
afraid to call it, a class of wage slaves. Is this to remain forever the highest aim of British workmen? Or is the working class of this country at last to attempt breaking through this vicious circle, and to find an issue out of it in a movement for the *abolition of the wage system altogether*?

In the next part we shall examine the part played by trades unions as organizers of the working class.

III

So far we have considered the functions of trades unions as far only as they contribute to the regulation of the rate of wages and ensure to the laborer, in his struggle against capital, at least some means of resistance. But that aspect does not exhaust our subject.

The struggle of the laborer against capital, we said. That struggle does exist, whatever the apologists of capital may say to the contrary. It will exist so long as a reduction of wages remains the safest and readiest means of raising profits; nay, so long as the wages system itself shall exist. The very existence of trades unions is proof sufficient of the fact; if they are not made to fight against the encroachments of capital what are they made for? There is no use in mincing matters. No milksop words can hide the ugly fact that present society is mainly divided into two great antagonistic classes—into capitalists, the owners of all the means for the employment of labor, on one side; and working men, the owners of nothing but their own working power, on the other. The produce of the labor of the latter class has to be divided between both classes, and it is this division about which the struggle is constantly going on. Each class tries to get as large a share as possible; and it is the most curious aspect of this struggle that the working class, while fighting to obtain a share only of its own produce, is often enough accused of actually robbing the capitalist!

But a struggle between two great classes of society necessarily becomes a political struggle. So did the long battle between the middle or capitalist class and the landed aristocracy; so also does the fight between the working class and these same capitalists. In every struggle of class against class, the next end fought for is political power; the ruling class defends its political supremacy, that is to say, its safe majority in the legislature; the inferior class fights for, first a share, then the whole of that power, in order to become enabled to change existing laws in conformity with their own interests and requirements. Thus the working class of Great Britain for years fought ardently and even violently for the People's Charter,

*Published June 4, 1881.—A. L.*
which was to give it that political power; it was defeated, but the struggle had made such an impression upon the victorious middle class that this class, since then, was only too glad to buy a prolonged armistice at the price of ever repeated concessions to the working people.

Now, in a political struggle of class against class, organization is the most important weapon. And in the same measure as the merely political or Chartist organization fell to pieces, in the same measure the trades unions organization grew stronger and stronger, until at present it has reached a degree of strength unequalled by any working-class organization abroad. A few large trades unions, comprising between one and two millions of working men, and backed by the smaller or local unions, represent a power which has to be taken into account by any government of the ruling class, be it Whig or Tory.

According to the traditions of their origin and development in this country, these powerful organizations have hitherto limited themselves almost strictly to their function of sharing in the regulation of wages and working hours, and of enforcing the repeal of laws openly hostile to the workmen. As stated before, they have done so with quite as much effect as they had a right to expect. But they have attained more than that,—the ruling class, which knows their strength better than they themselves do, has volunteered to them concessions beyond that. Disraeli's household suffrage gave the vote to at least the greater portion of the organized working class. Would he have proposed it unless he supposed that these new voters would show a will of their own; would cease to be led by middle class liberal politicians? Would he have been able to carry it if the working people, in the management of their colossal trade societies, had not proved themselves fit for administrative and political work?

That very measure opened out a new prospect to the working class. It gave them the majority in London and in all manufacturing towns, and thus enabled them to enter into the struggle against capital with new weapons, by sending men of their own class to Parliament. And here, we are sorry to say, the trades unions forgot their duty as the advance guard of the working class. The new weapon has been in their hands for more than ten years, but they scarcely ever unsheathed it. They ought not to forget that they cannot continue to hold the position they now occupy unless they really march in the van of the working class. It is not in the nature of things that the working class of England should possess the power of sending forty or fifty working men to Parliament and yet be
satisfied forever to be represented by capitalists or their clerks, such as lawyers, editors, etc.

More than this, there are plenty of symptoms that the working class of this country is awakening to the consciousness that it has for some time been moving in the wrong groove; that the present movement for higher wages and shorter hours exclusively, keep it in a vicious circle out of which there is no issue; that it is not the lowness of wages which forms the fundamental evil, but the wage system itself. This knowledge once generally spread amongst the working class, the position of trades unions must change considerably. They will no longer enjoy the privilege of being the only organizations of the working class. At the side of, or above the unions of special trades there must spring up a general union, a political organization of the working class as a whole.

Thus there are two points which the organized trades would do well to consider: Firstly, that the time is rapidly approaching when the working class will have understood that the struggle for high wages and short hours, and the whole action of trades unions as now carried on, is not an end in itself, but a means, a very necessary and effective means, but only one of several means towards a higher end,—the abolition of the wages system altogether.

For the full representation of labor in Parliament, as well as for the preparation of the abolition of the wage system, organizations will become necessary, not of separate trades, but of the working class as a body. And the sooner this is done the better. There is no power in the world which could for a day resist the British working class organized as a body.