

Workers and Politics

Workers and Politics:

Studies in Labour Politics

By

R. G. Williams

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The agency of working people ... contributed, by conscious efforts,
to the making of history.
—E.P. Thompson

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PREFACE

This book is a collection of essays on working-class politics. Specifically, this book is about British labour history and politics. The essays are broadly about the politics of labour, the history of labour, the history of the British Left, the history of British Socialism, the history of British Communism, the ideas of Karl Marx, working-class movements, working-class struggles, and the historical development of Socialism as the ideology of the working class.

This book is a Socialist book about workers, labour, and Socialism. It makes a Socialist argument about modern politics – that labour politics are crucial to the struggle for human freedom. The book is about the politics and history of labour struggles. It is about how such struggles are vital to the contemporary struggle for Socialism. This book is a Socialist study. It is a Socialist Humanist study, in the tradition of Democratic Socialism.

This book is about working-class politics, but it is also about working-class history. The history of the working class has always been political — from the days of Chartism to the struggle for Socialism today. The history of the working class has given rise to a particular type of politics — specifically, Socialist politics. The ultimate argument of the essays of this book is a political argument: working-class history has created working-class Socialism, and the continuing struggle for Socialism.

This book, as a collection of essays, is a firmly Socialist study of labour politics. This means the essays are both political essays and historical essays. They argue for Socialism.

The essays of this book are about a number of different subjects within labour politics. What brings these essays together, in the end, is that they argue for the need for a Socialist labour politics — for a Socialist approach to the politics of labour and the politics of the working class.

R.G. Williams

(2022)

CHAPTER I

WORKERS, POLITICS, AND SOCIALISM

This short essay is a study of workers, politics, and Socialism. In the world, today, politics is crucial. Indeed, politics has always been crucial. If we, today, are serious about creating a better world today it is crucial that we understand workers, politics, and Socialism. It is only through workers, politics, and Socialism that we can create a better world.

Workers are people who labour. They are the basis of modern society – because their labour creates modern society. They are a class of people who labour for a wage in Capitalist society. They are people who are exploited and oppressed by modern Capitalist society. The working class is an international class – it exists across the entire world. This reality of exploitation and oppression means that the working class has an interest in creating a society without exploitation and oppression. This means that the working class has an interest in the politics of opposing exploitation and oppression. This means that the working class has an interest in the politics of Socialism.

Politics is social struggle. While politics might be many things it is always a social struggle. In the end, politics is always a social struggle. It is the social struggle between classes which changes the world. Politics, as social struggle, has always been a crucial part of modern society. If we wish to create a better society then we must struggle through politics. If we wish to create a free society then we must struggle for politics. Politics, today, is simply the struggle against Totalitarianism and the struggle for Democratic Socialism.

Socialism is the struggle for a society based on human freedom. Indeed, Socialism is the struggle for human freedom. Socialism is the struggle for a society based on the principles of the free development of each and the free development of all. Workers are crucial for the struggle to achieve Socialism. Indeed, the working class are the only class which can create Socialism – because they labour and change the world. The politics of Socialism are part of the politics of the working class. This is because the

politics of Socialism are impossible without the politics of the working class. The working class is a class which can create Socialism – through its politics, its parties, and its struggle. Today we need Socialist politics. We need to challenge the problems of Capitalist society.¹ We need to overcome the problems of Capitalist society. We need Socialism. In order to achieve Socialism, we need the working class. This shows the connected need for workers, politics, and Socialism.

We live in a time of crisis. Modern Capitalism, today, is clearly going through a period of crisis – since the crisis of 2008. The crisis of our times shows we need new and radical politics – especially if we are to solve the crisis of our times. The crisis of 2008, the crisis of the environment, and the threat of the Far-Right, show that modern Capitalist society cannot solve its problems. The scale of crisis in most societies is showing the failure of mainstream politics — on both the Left and Right. The scale of the crisis of our times is forcing societies across the world to re-engage with the realities of our times.

It is clear that the world needs to change today. The crisis of our times shows this. It is clear that we need Socialism – a society based on human freedom. We can only achieve Socialism through the struggle of the working class. This means that we, on the Left, must understand workers, politics, and Socialism. We must struggle to combine workers, politics, and Socialism in order to achieve Socialism – in order to achieve human freedom. It is through workers, politics, and Socialism that we can change the world today.

We need Socialism. We clearly need Socialism – if we look at the state of human society today. We need to achieve a society based on the free development of each and the free development of all, if we are to achieve a better humanity. Indeed, in some societies the issue of Socialism is re-emerging - as are the parties of the Left and the movements of the Left. The nature of the crisis of our times, the crisis of employment and unemployment, the crisis of wages and declining wages, the crisis of the environment, the crisis of Neo-Liberalism, and the crisis of world society, are showing the need for Socialism today.

We need human freedom. The current reality of our society shows that most people, especially workers, are not free. Capitalism and Capitalist society are clearly based on exploitation and oppression. We must change this. We must challenge modern Capitalist society. We must overcome Capitalist society. We must replace Capitalism with Socialism – with Democratic

Socialism. The politics of Socialism must become the politics of human freedom. If we can achieve Socialism, we might achieve human freedom. The freedom of the working class, in the end, is real human freedom. The working class, by achieving Socialism, will create human freedom.²

Socialist politics are advancing again, today. They are advancing because of the crisis of our times. In Britain, the example of the Labour Party, and the rise of the Socialist Left in the Labour Party, shows that Left politics is possible today. In the rest of the world there are other examples of new rising Left parties — parties which are committed to some form of major social change. In those terms, it seems, the issue of Socialism is returning to the centre of politics. The advance of Left politics shows that Socialism is possible.

Socialist politics face many issues today. Those issues need to be solved. We need Socialist politics. We need Left politics. The rise of Left parties since the crisis of 2007/2008 suggests that a new form of Socialist politics could be achieved – in the near future. The rise of the British Labour Party, La France Insoumise, the Left Party (France), Die Linke, SYRIZA, the Italian Left, the Italian Socialist Party, the Left Bloc, Podemos, the Workers' Party (Brazil), and the Democratic Socialists of America, shows that the Left can still advance today. If the Left can advance, we might be able to achieve a better society.

The working class is central to modern politics. Indeed, that has always been the case. Ever since the working class emerged, as a modern class, thanks to the Industrial Revolution, the working class has been the only class which can change the world for the better. If we are serious about creating a better world, today, we need to be serious about the working class. We need to be serious about politics. We need to be serious about Socialism. The only class which can achieve a better world is the working class. The only class which can achieve Socialism is the working class. The only hope for workers, politics, and Socialism, today, is the working class. If there is any hope for a better society it is the hope of the working class.

Notes

1. P. Anderson, *A Sense of the Left*, (1998)
2. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (1848)

(2017)

CHAPTER II

THE WORKING CLASS: HISTORY AND POLITICS

This short essay is a study of the working class. This essay is about the history and the politics of the working class. The working class is a class with a history. The working class is a class with a revolutionary politics. The working class is one of the key social results of modern society, as the class which both labours and works to produce the production and labour needed to achieve modern society. As a class, the working class has emerged from industrial society and from the reality of Capitalism. The working class has emerged from history and from politics, to become the majority of modern society. The history and the politics of the working class, as well as its ability to labour, make it a vital class in the social struggle for a better world. Indeed, in today's society, the working class is a revolutionary class — a class with the potential to overthrow Capitalism and replace it with Socialism. Ever since the emergence of modern society, industrial society, and industrial Capitalism, there has been a working class. Ever since the emergence of the working class there has been the possibility of Socialism — a society based on human liberation and human freedom. If humanity is ever to move beyond the limits of Capitalism, and Capitalist society, even today, much of that struggle will depend on the labour, activity, politics, and social reality of the working class — as the majority of the human species. The history and the politics of the working class show the possibility of Socialism. This essay, as a Socialist essay, is an attempt to suggest that the history and politics of the working class are inevitably connected to the struggle for Socialism.

The working class is a social class in modern society. Indeed, the working class, as a class, is a product of modern industrial society — specifically modern Capitalist society since the 1800s.¹ The working class, as a class, exists because of its relationship with labour and production — specifically its labour is the basis of modern society. Modern society cannot exist without the labour of the working class. Modern society, in a key sense, is a product of the labour of the working class.² The working class is the class

which uses its labour to produce the production needed to achieve modern society. It is a class which has existed since the historical rise of Capitalism and Capitalist society, after the Industrial Revolution, and after the fall of Feudalism.³ The working class is the majority of humanity under Capitalism, but it is also exploited, as the labour of the working class is exploited by the capitalist class in order to develop Capitalist society.

The working class first emerged in Britain, after the Industrial Revolution of the 19th century. The British working class is the oldest working class in the world.⁴ This working class also formed the first working class movements in history — in the form of trade unions, Chartism, and the first forms of Socialism and Socialist politics. The British working class, as the earliest example of a working class, formed the first form of working-class politics. The modern struggle for democracy, and for universal suffrage, in Britain, began as a working-class struggle, in the 1830s and 1840s. Chartism, as the first example of a working-class movement, was also the first example of a modern movement for democracy. Ever since the beginning of the modern working class the ultimate political struggle, by the working class, has been the struggle for democracy and for Socialism.

With the rise of industry and industrial society, in the 1800s, the working class spread across the world. By the end of the 19th century the working class was a major social force in modern society. This only increased in the 20th century as the working class, slowly but surely, became the majority of the world's population and the majority of modern society. Even with the breakdown of industrial society in the West, since the 1970s and the 1980s, the working class, globally, remains the majority class of modern society. Any struggle for a better world must come from the working class — for the liberation of the working class.

The working class, today, is an international class. It exists in all countries and in all societies. The working class has become a truly global and international class. It is a class that is not divided by race, ethnicity, colour, religion, creed, gender, sex, or anything else. Indeed, the working class is the most diverse and cohesive social class in the world. The working class is now both a historical fact and a political fact of every society in the world. This means that the working class can no longer be ignored — either by history or by politics. Indeed, the history of the last two centuries can be seen as the history of the working class gradually becoming an international class.⁵ History and politics, in our times, is the history and politics of the rise of the working class.

The working class, today, is a class with both a history and a politics. The working class, today, in modern society, is a class of workers. The working class is a class which is also an economic, political, social, and historical class. The working class is defined by its labour and its wage labour. A worker is anyone who sells their labour-power for a wage and who does not own the means of production, distribution, or exchange under Capitalist society. Indeed, anyone who earns a wage today, or sells their labour power for a wage, is a worker and is a member of the working class. It is the labour of the working class, whether physical labour or mental labour, and its reliance on having to sell its labour, which defines the working class in class terms. The working class is a class with a distinct social relationship with the rest of Capitalist society — it labours to create the production of that society and yet it is also exploited by that society. The working class has its own politics and its own vision of a better society. That politics, and that vision, for a better society, is the vision of Socialism. The working class, as the majority of the world's population today, is the class which can create a better society today, in real material and social terms, by creating Socialism — a society based on social freedom, human freedom, economic democracy, and social democracy. The working class is both a social class and a political class. It is a social class because its labour produces modern society. It is a political class because its political struggle is the struggle for Socialism.

The working class has major social power. Indeed, it is impossible for modern society to work or function without the labour and work of the working class. If the working class did not exist, in some form, then modern society would not exist. Modern society, and all future society, relies on the real labour of the working class. This labour translates into the real social power of the working class. It allows the working class to both make, create, inspire, and generate, the real foundations of modern society and modern humanity. This social power of the working class is the real social power of humanity.

Karl Marx, the great German Socialist thinker, believed that the working class was capable of achieving human liberation. He believed this because of the fact that the working class has the productive power to change the world — and to change society. Indeed, the working class, by its labour and its struggle, is the only class which can achieve a society based on the freedom of all — a society based on the freedom of each and the freedom of all. Marx, correctly, believed that the working class, due to history, production, society, and politics, could create Socialism — in the form of a humanistic Socialism.

The working class, in modern society, is the class which labours, in various ways, to produce the development of modern society. This means that the working class is a universal class. It exists in all societies. It exists in all parts of the world. Indeed, everywhere on earth, where human society exists today, there is a working class. In this sense the working class is both international and transnational. The working class is the international class of workers and labourers who work, for wages, to produce the production, goods, and services needed to advance modern society. The working class, in Socialist theory and Socialist politics, is a class which has nothing to sell but their time and their labour. The overwhelming majority of people, in modern Capitalist society, are workers. The overwhelming majority of people, in modern society, today, are workers. The working class is a social reality of modern society — with a huge impact on the social struggles of modern society. The working class is a class which, when organised, can achieve major social development and major social change. Every major social development of human history, since the 1800s, and every major social progress of human history, since the 1800s, for liberty, equality, fraternity, and Socialism, has been because of the working class. The working class, today, is the most important class in modern society, because it is the majority of modern society.

The working class emerged out of the social development of the Industrial Revolution. With the rise of the Industrial Revolution, and modern industry, the working class developed, mainly out of the older classes of artisans and peasants who had laboured in Feudal society. The first working class, in modern history, appeared in Great Britain, with the rise of the Industrial Revolution itself. As industrial society became the dominant form of society in modern society, from the 1850s, and emerged across the majority of the societies of the globe, between the 19th century and today, the working class also expanded. With the expansion of modern Capitalism also came the expansion of the working class itself — as the class which does most of the labour under Capitalism. Ever since the rise of Industrial society the working class has become the majority of the world's population and the majority of the labour force of the world. Even in our own times the working class remains the majority of the world's population.⁶

The working class is exploited for its labour. Indeed, the economic and political reality of Capitalism is based on this exploitation of the working class. It is this exploitation which is at the heart of the relationship between the working class and Capitalism — and which also means that the working class has an interest in overcoming Capitalism and its exploitation, by replacing Capitalism with Socialism. The reality of Capitalism, since its

beginning, has been based on exploitation and oppression. The working class, as the exploited class, under Capitalism, is exploited by the capitalist class. The working class, in its various forms, is exploited in order to generate the profits and accumulation of the capitalist class. The only way to make profit, in Capitalist society, is by exploiting the labour of the working class. As a result, the working class, while it is the overwhelming majority of modern society, across the globe, is also an exploited majority. This has been the case since the beginning of Capitalism and since the beginning of modern class society. The exploitation of the working class has produced the historical development of modern Capitalist society, making it more productive and effective than any previous form of class society, but it has also meant that Capitalism, itself, is a system based on a reality of exploitation and oppression. So long as Capitalism exists, in historical, economic, social, and political terms, the working class will be exploited, for its labour, by Capitalism.

The working class is oppressed by Capitalism. This is shown by the reality of the history of Capitalism — and by the politics of Capitalism. Ever since the emergence of modern society, and the modern working class, Capitalism has sought to undermine the struggles of the working class for a better world. This has occurred at every stage of the struggle by the working class to achieve either reform or revolution in modern society. The modern forces of reaction, the state, the Right, and the Far-Right, exist, purely, in order to keep back the forces of the working class and the struggle of the working class. The worst examples of reactionary politics in human history, such as Absolutism, Bonapartism, Fascism, Nazism, and modern Neo-Liberalism, were developed in order to oppress the social struggles of the working class — and the working class itself. The working class is clearly exploited, in economic terms, by Capitalism, and oppressed in social and political terms, by Capitalism. The modern reality of the working class, under Capitalism, is a reality of exploitation and oppression.

The working class, as a historical class, as a social class, first emerged from the Industrial Revolution. This means that the working class is a historical class, with its own history, going back to the rise of Industrial society itself — first in Britain and Europe, then in the Americas, and then across the rest of the world, from Africa to Asia, from Russia to China. In historical terms the working class came into existence from the reality of industrial production — as workers laboured, for a wage, to create modern society. This means that the working class, as a modern class, has existed since the 1800s. History has helped to create the working class. The working class, through its history and its struggle, can make history.

The working class is a revolutionary class. It is a class which can revolutionise society. As a revolutionary class it can achieve real social revolution – the revolutionary transformation of society. The history of the working class has been the history of its struggle to overcome exploitation and oppression. This is why the working class, both historically and politically, has usually been drawn to the ideology and movement of Socialism — a movement which seeks to achieve the free development of each and the free development of all. Indeed, a key part of the history of the working class can be seen as its practical attempt to overcome exploitation and oppression — through social struggle and social revolution. The fact that Capitalism produces both exploitation and oppression of the workers, forces the working class, historically and politically, to oppose Capitalism. This is why the working class, both in the past and today, is a class which is part of the universal struggle for Socialism.⁷

The politics of the working class is the politics of Socialism. Indeed, ever since the emergence of the working class, as a social and political force, in the 1800s and 1900s, the working class has tended to support the movements and struggles of Socialism. The working class, in general, tends to be aligned with the politics of Socialism and the politics of the Left. This has weakened, in recent decades, since the rise of Neo-Liberalism, but working-class Socialism remains a powerful social and political force — with the potential to achieve Socialism today.

The ideology of the working class is Socialism. Socialism, in basic terms, is the struggle for a society based on the social ownership of the means of production. Socialism, in basic terms, is workers' power and working-class power. Socialism is the struggle to achieve a society based on the democratic power of the working class. Socialism is a society based on the free development of each and the free development of all.

The political goal of the working class is to build a society in which there is no exploitation or oppression — a Socialist society. The working class, historically and politically, can build such a society because the working class does not exploit or oppress any other class in society. The working class has no economic or social interest in exploitation or oppression. This means that it can create a better society – a society with neither exploitation nor oppression. The working class is also the obvious majority of the population in modern society. This means that the working class can create a democratic society — because the working class, as a movement, is a movement of the majority in the interests of the majority. This all means that the political goal of the working class is to build a democratic, humanist,

and Socialist society — a society of Socialism.⁸

The working class, as a political class, first emerged from the first struggle for working-class politics and for working-class Socialism. This led to the rise of Socialist parties, Social Democratic parties, Communist parties, Anarchist groups, and trade unions. These parties, groups, unions, and forces remain the basis of working-class politics, in most countries, and most modern societies. They also represent the political struggle of the working class, and the labour movement, for a better society — for a society of Socialism. Ever since the days of the First International (1864) the political basis of the working class and the working-class movement has been the political struggle for Socialism. This is because Socialism remains both the ideology and the politics of the working class. Socialism, the ideal of a society based on the common ownership of the means of production, is the ideology of the working class. The struggle for liberty, equality, and fraternity, for the working class, is the struggle for Socialism. The modern Left, the political force which struggles for Socialism, in modern society, is a product of the political and social struggle of the working class.

The working class made itself. The working class made itself with its labour and its struggle. The working class made itself through its own social struggles to achieve its own liberation. This means that the working class is the class with the greatest historical and political agency in human history. It is a class with the real social potential to change the world, for the better, today. The working class, as a class, emerged from history and from social development but its real historical and social development was to create itself through the process of labour and struggle. The working class did emerge from economics, from history, from politics, from society, and from the Industrial Revolution, but it, ultimately, made itself. The working class, as a class, of itself and for itself, is a class which has created itself in the long struggles of history and the long struggles of politics. The ultimate result of this development is not only the working class but the great political ideology of the working class — the ideology of International Socialism.

The working class must achieve Socialism. The working class can achieve Socialism by seizing economic and social power, from Capitalism, and by abolishing Capitalism. This great social task is difficult, as shown by history, but the working class, if it is organised, has the economic, political, social, and historical strength to achieve it. This struggle, for Socialism and for a better world, led to the great struggles for working-class revolution in the past — the struggle for Socialism and for Socialist Revolution.

The working class has agency. It has revolutionary agency. This can be seen in both the theory and the reality of the working class today. This can also be seen in both the history and politics of the working class since the time of the Industrial Revolution. Indeed, the overall history and politics of the working class, in all places and all societies, shows the dynamism and agency of the working class. If we study both the history and politics of the working class, and see how they often combine together, we can see that the working class is probably the one class in human history which can produce agency for the majority of humanity. It is through being part of the working class, especially the modern working class, that the majority of people, today, can achieve real agency and real historical agency. The ultimate form of agency, in history and in politics, is revolutionary agency — the agency of actually making social revolution. The working class has the agency, even today, to achieve social revolution — through its struggle and its organisation. Since the majority of human beings alive today are members of the international working class, the best chance for them to achieve agency, both in their own lives and in their own terms, is through the agency of the working class. The ultimate expression of the agency of the working class, in political terms and in historical terms, is the struggle for Socialism. By struggling for Socialism, the working class can achieve its agency in a real, practical, dynamic way — achieving real agency, real change, and real social progress for humanity. The struggle for Socialism, essentially, is the struggle of the working class for freedom — but it is also the struggle of the working class to achieve its agency.⁹

The working class struggled, in the past, to achieve Socialism. Indeed, this historical struggle for Socialism is one of the key parts of the history and politics of the working class. This led to the great working-class revolutions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — specifically the Paris Commune of 1871 and the Russian Revolution of 1917. These revolutions not only showed the social and political ability of the working class to mobilise itself for social change and social revolution but also showed the possibility of Socialism. The great working-class revolutions of the past, while often defeated, still show that working-class revolution is possible today. The potential for working-class revolution still exists today — despite the defeats of the Cold War and despite the realities of Neo-Liberalism.

What defines the working class is both its history and its politics. The working class is defined by its labour — but it is also defined by its revolutionary history and its struggle for human liberation. The history of the working class is the history of a class both labouring to create modern society and labouring to liberate itself and society. The politics of the

working class is the politics of Socialism — the politics of achieving real human liberation and real human freedom. It is this combination of history and politics, as well as the material reality of working-class labour, which makes the working class a class — both in historical terms and political terms. This combination of history and politics means that the working class, as the majority of human society, has the power to revolutionise human society. The working class is the revolutionary class of modern society.

Working-class history is the history of the working class struggling for its own liberation. This is clear if we look at the historical reality of most working-class movements in human history, especially since the 1800s and since the Industrial Revolution. This has led to a series of working-class struggles and working-class revolutions — from the 1800s to the present. The power of this history, as a fact of history, means that the historical power of the working class remains a possible basis for working-class power today. The historical memory and historical legacy of previous working-class movements can still inspire working-class movements today. Indeed, some of the most powerful working-class movements, parties, and unions, today, are those movements, parties, and unions, which have been able to keep their connection to the historical struggles of the past. The history of the working class is a powerful historical and political tool for the working class today — allowing the working class to remember its own struggles and to use them to inspire future struggles. It is this sort of revolutionary connection, between the past and the present, which allows the history of the working class to inform the revolutionary politics of the working class today. Working-class history helps to inspire human progress — by showing that ordinary people can make history, and that they can make history for themselves.

Working-class politics is the politics of working-class struggle — for emancipation, liberation, solidarity, and freedom. This form of politics, since the emergence of serious working-class politics, has been crucial to some of the most important political and social revolutions, in human history, since the 1800s. Indeed, the great political struggles for modern democracy or Socialism are based on working-class politics and working-class struggle. It is when such politics are directly developed, by the working class themselves, that such politics have the real social and political power to change the world. Such politics have also allowed the working class to make some of the greatest social and political revolutions in human history — specifically the Russian Revolution of 1917. Working-class politics, today, in the form of parties, unions, and mass social organisations, remain

politically powerful — despite the serious setbacks suffered by working-class politics in the last forty years. Working-class politics, when effectively organised and when effectively mobilised, remain a formidable and powerful form of serious politics — politics which can make social revolution and lead to social change. Indeed, the serious power of working-class politics can still be seen in many countries around the world today — showing that working-class politics still have the serious ability to change society and the world. If we are serious about changing the world, in an effective and humanist way, then we must base our politics on the politics of the working class — the overwhelming majority of humanity.

The history and politics of the working class combine to make Socialism. It is this combination of history and politics which makes the working class capable of achieving Socialism — a society based on the free development of each and the free development of all. While the working class might run into historical or political difficulty, at different times in human history, the inevitable development of modern society and of modern social struggle, means that the working class will eventually liberate itself — through its labour and through its struggle. The struggle of the working class, inevitably, becomes the struggle for Socialism. The working class, today, is still struggling for Socialism — because only Socialism, as a process, can liberate the working class.

The struggle for Socialism comes, first and foremost, from the working class. Without the working class, Socialism is nothing. The whole economic, political, social, intellectual, and historical struggle for social liberation, for Socialism, comes from the working class. Their agency is vital. Their agency is the basis. Their agency is the basis by which we might transform both ourselves and the world. This is not a utopian vision — it is grounded in the real social struggles of the working class. Our struggle, for Socialism, begins as the movement of the working class, and ends as the movement of the whole of humanity. History and politics, for Socialism, becomes the process of the struggle of the working class.

The history and politics of the working class continue to develop. They continue to develop today. They will continue to develop until the working class achieves its freedom — and establishes freedom for all. Indeed, it is this development of history and politics which has allowed the working class to remain the most important revolutionary force in human history — since the 1800s. This development, in the end, will still result in the ultimate historical and political victory of the working class — the victory of Socialism.

This essay has attempted to outline the connection between the working class and its history and its politics. The history and politics of the working class draws the working class towards Socialism and the struggle for Socialism. In modern politics, today, it is crucial to recognise this political and historical connection. The history and politics of the working class are crucial today — especially if we are to build a better society and a better world. The history and politics of modern society show the need for working-class politics — in order to achieve a better world. This is why the history and politics of the working class culminate in the history and politics of Socialism. The working class has the ability to build Socialism.¹⁰

This essay has also attempted to suggest that the history and politics of the working class are completely connected to the struggle for Socialism. Only the working class is capable of building Socialism — because the working class is the only class which can abolish the economic, social, political, and historical basis of exploitation and oppression. The struggle for Socialism must begin with the working class. Specifically, the struggle for Socialism must begin with the history, the politics, the struggle, the experience, and the organisation of the working class. The task of every Socialist is to utilise the best examples of working-class politics and working-class ideas to achieve the best organisation of the working class. This is, in the end, how every idea of Socialism is developed and created — on the basis of the working class itself. This also means that the struggle for Socialism must be universal, and it must be international. The struggle for Socialism, to liberate every worker, is based on liberating every worker — regardless of their work, age, sex, gender, nationality, race, ethnicity, language, or any other distinction. Socialism is about the liberation of every man, every woman, every child, every nationality, every race, every sex, every gender, every class, and every person. This means that the real basis of the free development of each and the free development of all depends, ultimately, on the struggle of the working class — as a movement of the majority struggling to liberate the majority. This vision of the working class has the power to change the world for the better — in real social, political, and revolutionary terms. We must organise every worker on every continent — in Europe, in North America, in South America, in Africa, in Asia, and in Oceania. We must organise every worker and organise every struggle. The cause of Socialism has not yet been won — but it has not yet been lost. We can win the cause of Socialism — if we organise every worker. The cry of ‘workers of the world unite’ is still the cry of Socialism. The working class, today, is still a class of history and of politics. The history of the working class shows that it can change the world. The politics of the working class shows that it can still change the world. The working class is the revolutionary

class of modern times. The struggle for a better world depends, in the end, on the struggle of the working class. This is the real social power of the working class, in historical and political terms. Their struggle can achieve the liberation of us all.

Notes

1. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (1848)
2. R. Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (1977)
3. R. Luxemburg, *The Crisis of German Social Democracy*, (1915)
4. E.J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848*, (1962)
5. R. Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (1977)
6. R. Miliband, *Marxism and Politics* (1977)
7. E.P. Thompson, *Socialist Humanism*, (1957)
8. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (1848)
9. K. Marx and F. Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, (1848)
10. E.P. Thompson, *Socialism and the Intellectuals*, (1957)

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CHAPTER III

LABOUR'S RISE: 1880-1914

This short essay is a study of the history and politics of the British labour movement between 1880 and 1914 — the period of the birth of British Socialism. This period is still remembered as a key period in the history of the British Left. It was a period which saw the formation of a new labour movement — the New Unions of the 1880s. It was a period which saw the formation of a new Socialist movement — the Social Democratic Federation, the Socialist League, the British Socialist Party, the Independent Labour Party, the Labour Party, and the beginning of the long struggle towards a Communist Party. This period is full of great developments for British Socialism — leading to the formation of the Labour Party. It was this period which led to the rise of British Labour. These years saw the rise of British Labour.

I.

British society was changed, completely, by the social revolutions of the 19th century. The rise of the British labour movement in the late 19th century still remains the modern basis of the modern British Left. This rise of Labour occurred because of major shifts in the development of British Capitalism — as Britain reached the height of the British Empire (1875-1914) and as Britain ceased to be the only industrial power in the world (1870-1900). Britain, in the 19th century, was crucial to the development of Capitalism — the 'Workshop of the World'. Britain, in the 19th century, was crucial to the development of modern politics — Liberalism, Conservatism, and Socialism. The first working-class political movement, in Britain, in the 1830s and 1840s, was Chartism — a movement based around the struggle for democracy. British politics, in the 19th century, was dominated by the Conservative Party and by the Liberal Party. At this time Britain was the major power in the world — a position it would hold until 1914-1922 and the outbreak of the First World War — but the rise of new Capitalist states and new Capitalist powers, in the United States, in

Germany, and in Japan, had weakened the industrial power of British Capitalism. Britain, by the 1880s, was no longer the 'Workshop of the World', as it had been in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s.

The period between 1880 and 1914 was the highpoint of British Capitalism. The rise of Imperialism, and the division of the world between the new Imperialist powers before the First World War, also had the effect of shifting and weakening British Imperialism — as Britain now had to compete with other Imperialist powers. The overall structure of British Capitalism changed in this period — as Britain attempted to respond to the economic rise of Germany, France, the United States, and Japan. The response of British Capitalism was the further development of the British Empire — the expansion of the Empire into new territories and the better exploitation of old territories, such as India, South Africa, and the Dominions. Britain, and British Capitalism, came to depend on its Empire — especially its control of India. Indeed, British Capitalism relied on British Imperialism. The brutal reality of British Capitalism relied on the brutal reality of British Imperialism — especially in the 19th century and the 20th century. The overall shift of the British economy in the period before 1914 produced a shift in British society — forcing the development of new social forces and new political forces. The overall result of the period between 1880 and 1914, for the British economy, was the attempt to overcome the threats of the new industrial powers. Britain held on as the major world power, until the outbreak of the First World War, but the overall development of Capitalism itself, as a global force, rapidly overtook Britain and British Capitalism. Britain remained a key economy in this period — and is still a key economy today — but it was no longer the 'Workshop of the World'.¹

The period between 1880 and 1914 was a vital period in the history of Capitalism. It saw the shift from industrial Capitalism (1750-1840) to Imperialist Capitalism (1870-1914). This period also saw the rise of a major period of difficulty for Capitalism — despite its earlier expansion. The Great Depression of 1873-1896 limited the expansion of Capitalism — and showed that Capitalism, like all class societies, is based on crisis and the problems of crisis. The overall shifting of Capitalism itself, in the 1830s, the 1840s, the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, provoked the greatest shift in British economics and British politics since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution. This shift resulted in the rise of British working-class movements — from Chartism to Socialism. This shift resulted in the rise of new labour movements in Britain — culminating in the formation of the New Unions, the Labour Party, and the new Socialist parties of the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s. The full effects of the shifts of British Capitalism, and

International Capitalism, in the 1890s and 1900s was the economic basis of a shift to the Left within British Labour and British working-class politics. In this period, we see not only the rise of a new Labour movement in Britain — for the first time since the 1830s and 1840s — but also the splitting of the British labour movement away from Liberalism and Liberal politics. The formation of an independent working-class politics in Britain was a major victory and a major success for the British Left during this period — as it showed that the British working class could organise for itself and fight for itself. The struggle for new unions, new ideas, new politics, and the struggle for universal suffrage, highlights this period as both a period of economic struggle and political struggle. The British working class, in the 1880s and 1890s, began to engage with Socialist politics — for the first time since the defeat of Chartism. The struggle of the British working class and the rise of Labour, between 1880 and 1914, was the first major working-class advance and the first working-class struggle in Britain since Chartism. This advance, and this struggle, was as important, to the British working class, and to the British Left, as the original struggle of Chartism — the first working-class movement in British history. In many ways the British Left today is still the historical result of the historical victory of the rise of Labour between 1880 and 1914.²

II.

The development of Capitalism, between 1880 and 1914, produced a development in the politics of Britain. The rise and fall of Liberal-Radicalism, between 1750 and 1914 showed the limits of Liberalism for working-class politics. The development of Liberal governments and Tory governments, between 1850 and 1900, showed that British Capitalism was a system which was politically devoted to the British capitalist class — and to the interests of the British capitalist class. British Capitalism, at this time, was hardly democratic. Many workers, even with the Reform Act of 1832, the Reform Act of 1867, and the Reform Act of 1884, did not yet have the vote. Universal suffrage, for all men and all women, did not emerge in Britain until 1918 and 1928. Democracy, in Britain, always required working-class struggle. The struggle of Chartism, in the 1830s and 1840s, was an example of that working-class struggle. The defeat of Chartism, in 1842 and 1848, pushed back the struggle for democracy and for Socialism, in Britain, by decades — until the 1880s and 1890s. British politics, however, could not hold back all social change or all political change after 1850.

The development of British Capitalism changed British society. By the 1870s and by the 1880s, the British working class was beginning to become

organised again. The rise of new unions, after 1871, provoked some response from British Liberalism, towards working-class politics, giving rise to the Liberal-Labour (Lib-Lab) politics of the 1880s, 1890s, 1900s, and 1910s, but this did not shift the overall politics of British Liberalism — or British Capitalism itself. The politics of British Capitalism were forced to adapt to the overall shifts of British Capitalism and International Capitalism — but it ultimately resulted in the firming up of British politics, until the rise of Labour. British Capitalism, between 1840 and 1860, was in the middle of its Golden Age. This Golden Age ended with the Great Depression of 1873-1896 — forcing major changes in British politics and British society.³

The development of Capitalism, between 1873 and 1896, produced a change in the economics of Britain. British Capitalism, in the early Victorian era, favoured a *laissez-faire* approach to economic development. This became the basis of the Liberal vision of economics for much of the Victorian period. It achieved mass industrial change, but also produced an unequal industrial society. Indeed, this approach to economic development was similar to how Capitalism operated prior to the crisis of 1929 and the crisis of 2007-2008. The reality of the great depression of 1873-1896 shattered this confidence in *laissez-faire* forms of Capitalism. The reality of the great depression of 1873-1896, for British Capitalism, forced many British Capitalists to accept state intervention as a reality of effective economic development — and as a means of avoiding the problems caused by the depression of 1873-1896. Similar to the responses to the crises of 1929 and 2008, British Capitalism began to accept state support and state direction after 1900. The decline of the old Liberal Party led to the rise of New Liberalism, after 1906, and also led to the rise of a renewed Liberal Party. British politics shifted in this period, between the Liberals and the Tories, from 1874 to 1914 — but mostly within the limits of Capitalist politics. The working class, on the other hand, having won some increased suffrage after 1867, began the long process of fighting for further democracy and organisation. The end of the great depression of 1873-1896, allowed the British labour movement to renew its advance and its development — for the first time since the defeat of Chartism.

III.

The political change of the British economy produced a political change of the British working class. The British working class, in the 1880s and in the 1890s, learnt, for the first time since the 1830s and the 1840s, that it must become organised — for its interests and for its needs. The political change

of British Capitalism produced the development of the British labour movement in the 1880s and in the 1890s. The rise of the New Unions, the emergence of the Labour Party, and the organisation of new Socialist groups and new Socialist parties, between 1880 and 1914, emerged because of the British working class — as they actively sought to fight for their interests as a class. The period between 1880 and 1900 saw the rise of Labour. The period between 1880 and 1900 saw a new development of the class struggle in Britain — a class struggle between the working class and the ruling class.

The years between 1880 and 1900 provided the basis for a major change in the British labour movement — and in the British Left. In this period, we see the rise of a new confidence in the labour movement — beginning with the great London dock strike of 1889. The years between 1888 and 1891, in particular, saw a rapid expansion of both new general unions and new unskilled labour unions. We also see the rise of new unions, new specialist unions, new general unions, and new national unions — particularly among gas workers, miners, dockers, railwaymen, sailors, factory workers, and general workers. This general rise and general offensive of the labour movement, after 1888, lasted until 1894. It also led to a general offensive for new social forces in the labour movement. This produced the Trade Union Congress (TUC, 1868), the Social Democratic Federation (SDF, 1881), the Socialist League (SL, 1885) the Scottish Labour Party (1888), the Independent Labour Party (1893), and the Labour Party (1900/1906). The political rise of British labour, between 1880 and 1894, produced the political and social power to form a party of the British working class — a British Labour Party.

In the 1890s and the 1900s, the British ruling class responded to the rise of Labour — with the attempt to limit the rise of Labour. This counter-attack was mostly directed against the new unions — and the new unionism. The counter-offensive of the 1890s and the 1900s was heavily directed against the new unions — particularly against the general unions, the dockers, and the miners. It was also directed against the emerging Labour Party — by the attempt to keep the working class supporting the politics of Liberalism and the Liberal Party. This counter-attack was successful, in some ways, because it led to the rise of the New Liberalism, the Liberal government of 1905-1908, the Liberal government of 1908-1915, the Coalition government of 1915-1922, and the People's Budget of 1909/1910, but it did not prevent the rise of Labour or the rise of the modern British labour movement. Superficially the ruling class saw off the challenge of labour and the challenge of the new Socialists, in the 1880s, 1890s, and 1900s, but the same period saw a strengthening of the labour movement. It also saw a new