Class and Socialism

The English working class is the subject of one of the most influential social theories— Marx communist manifesto. Marx claimed that the poor working conditions of the proletariat would lead them to question their position in the social structure and then abolish class all together in a socialist revolution. History has proven him wrong. His pivotal error was his assumptions about class in the late Victorian era. Marx was a foreigner making it hard for him to distinguish the Victorian concept of class as a political force from the notion that it was only the “structural position within productive relation.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Often leftist historians such as Edward Thompson, Eric Hobson, Royden Harrison, amongst others have endeavoured to wed Marx’s view of class to the English peculiarities— blinding them to the contemporaries concept of class.[[2]](#footnote-2) Some Victorians to suffered the same blunder. Engels’ is one such Victorian who upon witnessing the great dock strike rejoined exclaiming: “ If these poor downtrodden men, the dregs of the proletariat, … , if they can combine, and terrify by their resolution the mighty Dock Companies, truly then we need not despair of any section of the working class…If the dockers get organised, all other sections will follow.”[[3]](#footnote-3) Truly, the dockers' success did lead to a great spike in union membership from 750, 000 in 1888 to over 2 million by 1900.[[4]](#footnote-4) However contrary to Engels’ holes and other socialists anticipations no revolution took place in the late Victorian era.

Gareth Stedman Jones claims this was so since the working class itself had no political roots, nor did they have any radical ambition to abolish class.[[5]](#footnote-5) They were only in a struggle to improve their bleak conditions, supporting whoever provided solutions to their problems. Socialism at the time seemed to provide a working solution— new unionism. By pioneering the framework of new unionism, they gained the working classes attention. However, this attention is not equivalent to an ideological empathy. After all, the working class only joined after they had seen Unionization success in granting them their demand, after the Matchgirls strike’s successes. A strike which had no socialist roots. So we must see the middle-class militancy of the time as the product of their bleak conditions. These poor conditions inspired support from the general public— who acted only out of sympathy and pragmatic motives. For instance, the majority of support came from Australia which would have been harmed if the strike failed, inciting many of then to support the strike regardless of their political views. In fact, socialist regions gave less support than their anti-socialist counterparts. Others supported unions as solutions to the issue of the poor. They saw unions as agents of self-help which would divide the deserving poor from the residual. Thus, socialism had, in essence, propelled its way to prominence in society on the back of new unionism, believing to have the support of the general public and the working classes. In reality, it had only become a tool in a wholly different struggle— that of society in dealing with the issue of the poor and not the from of the poor in reforming society.

The 1880’s, the decade that preceded the Dock Strike is known as the socialist revival; it saw the birth of the socialist democratic federation and an increase in Fabians’ membership. The grand success of socialism in this decade gave rise to a Psychological Myopia, which led some of their leaders to convince themselves that they were on the verge of the socialist revolution. In other words, that society had evolved and adopted socialist principles as opposed to the dominant laissez-faire ideology. As Engles wrote “ it will not help the bourgeoisie much if they do succeed in enticing some of the leaders into their toils. The movement has been far enough strengthened for this sort of thing to be overcome.”[[6]](#footnote-6) However, this was a delusion. The success of the previous decade and the strike was due to a momentary alignment of certain elements, chiefly bad economic conditions, which led to a wave of mass strikes but did not result in the ideological reform of society.

Jones, claims that socialism’s failure to impact the working class of the late Victorian era was due to the fundamental character of working class life.[[7]](#footnote-7) He contends that “the working class … was hidden away and removed from [society].”[[8]](#footnote-8) Their loyalism was a product of their apathy. They had no political roots, no allegiance to left nor right, but simply supported whoever promised them what they needed.[[9]](#footnote-9) This led to waves of instability in hard economic times. Economic conditions in Britain had taken a turn for the worse after the depression of the 1870’s leading to mass unemployment.[[10]](#footnote-10) In their effort to solve unemployment casual labours gather to list to the conservative-inspired appeals for protections in Trafalgar Square on February 8th, 1886 only to riot under the red flag of socialist revolution that same afternoon.[[11]](#footnote-11) Therefore, we must see the rise of socialism amongst the working class as a means to improve their economic condition rather than an empathy with the ideology of the movement. Indeed, Patrick Joyce and Keith Burgess point to severe economic circumstances as the explanation for the rise of unions and socialism’s popularity.[[12]](#footnote-12) Social order in the Victorian era was too deeply entrenched to be questioned. “Class was a life sentence,”[[13]](#footnote-13) and the working class had no aspiration to abolish class— unlike the socialists. In fact, The Dockers leaders were not chosen on the ground of their socialism but inspite of it.[[14]](#footnote-14) The working class apathy towards socialism becomes apparent when we examine music hall culture.[[15]](#footnote-15) At the zenith of socialism, political lectures in music-halls did not attract large audiences regardless of the lectures charisma.[[16]](#footnote-16) Furthermore, the socialist democratic federation only had 3000 members, a minute figure when compared to the population of 6.5 million in London by 1900.[[17]](#footnote-17) Songs in music-halls in 1889 supported dockers tanner but never spoke of the issue as a propertarian struggle against capital; it was all about getting a fair days pay for a fair days work.[[18]](#footnote-18) But they did portray socialist “as a lot of hot air.”[[19]](#footnote-19) however, the dockers would unionize in their struggle against poverty and would choose socialist as their leaders— not out of an ideological motive but simply since those socialist leaders had become the best union organizers willing to help.

Beatrice and Sidney Webb, argue that socialist were the ones who had put new unionism into motion.[[20]](#footnote-20) I concede this point, adding that its organizational origins lay with Tom Mann’s publication of *what a compulsory Eight-hour Working Day Means To the Workers* in 1886.[[21]](#footnote-21) However, the socialist had only created the organizational structure. Their membership, as mentioned in the previous paragraph, was not socialist but merely joined in hopes to improve their economic conditions and not bring forth a socialist revolution. The Webbs portray the docker strike as “that brilliant victory over employers which changed the whole face of the Trade Union world.”[[22]](#footnote-22) This portrayal has been overturned by A. E. P. Duffy who claims that the strike was not the pivotal moment in Unionism.[[23]](#footnote-23) Rather, she argues that it was the product of changes that had occurred in the previous decade. Hugh Armstrong Clegg seconds her hypothesis but traces the origins of new unionism past the previous decade. Though, it may be true that the structure of new unions precedes the late 1880’s it was only then that it had picked up— transforming from a hollow edifice into a vibrant one. The working class joined in mass ones its effectiveness had been proven. Ironically, was done not but a socialist union or the dockers' strike but the Bryant and May Matchgirls Strike of 1888. As Ben Tillett wrote in his memories: “[the match girls strike] was really the beginning of the social convulsion which produced the ‘new Unionism.'”[[24]](#footnote-24) Other contemporaries such as Mann also held Tillett's view proving the vitality of the Matchgirls’ strike.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Tillett’s claim is seconded by John Charlton, who see the match girls strike as the spark that initiated a chain reaction of various strikes that conclude with the dock strike.[[26]](#footnote-26) However, Paul Thomson claims that the match girls strike is given exaggerated publicity and that it was an isolated event which could not have any impact on the dockers' strike. Thus, it did not play a role in the rise of new unionism.[[27]](#footnote-27) Thompson is mistaken. Not only did the match girls provide advice to the docker on how to organize and protest, it was indeed their strike that evoked a wave of various labour strikes— the grandest of which was the dock workers strike. In fact, there were five strikes in the first quarter of 1888. In the first quarter of 1889, which ensued the match girls strike, the figure jumped to thirteen[[28]](#footnote-28)— proving Engels’ comment that the strike was a “light jostle needed for the entire avalanche to move.”[[29]](#footnote-29) This contradicts Thomson’s hypotheses that there had been a “secession of struggle” in the period following the Matchgirls Strike and proves the integral role of that strike in the formation of new unionism. However, Engels was referring to a wave a socialist reform when he claimed an “avalanche” will ensue— it did not, only a series of individual fight for better conditions followed. Closer investigation into the role of socialism in the Matchgirls Strike reveals that it was not at all involved in the start it. Hence, the working classes rise of interest in new unionism was detached form socialism.

Annie Besant, a socialist, is seen as the leader of the Match girls strike. However, she did not start it. In fact, she only became aware of the strike a few days after it had begun. She reacted in dismay when she discovered that so many women were without financial support. Her initial reaction in combination with the fact that no funds were raised to alleviate the burden of the women proves that she had not planned a strike. In fact, it was the girls themselves that had organized and began the strike.[[30]](#footnote-30) According to Louise Raw, Besant had only planned a consumer boycott and dismissed, what she thought to be absurd, unionizing the girls of Bryant and May.[[31]](#footnote-31) Though the times and some historians, like Helen Lynd, claims the strike was a result of Besant’s inflammatory,[[32]](#footnote-32) Raw argues that it was the brutal conditions of the girls that drove them to strike and not Besant's article.[[33]](#footnote-33) His claim is supported by family traditions of the working classes which saw the matchgirls as the leaders. Jim best the grandson of Eliza Martin, a match girl, claims his father told him “Eliza [said] that she and her friends started the strike. There was never any doubt in our minds it was their strike, the girls' strike, not anyone else’s.”[[34]](#footnote-34) Hence, although the official leadership of the strike might have been socialists, the real leadership, the girls themselves, had no ideological standpoint. This proves that the working class interest in new unionism started in isolation of socialist ideology. Its roots being the brutal conditions of the Victorian working class, which bread militancy within them— in other words the militancy was not a product of socialism.

Socialism had little to do with the popularity of the strikes of the late 1880’s. In fact, when examining the motives behind the stakeholders of the dock strike, we quickly see that at their heart was pragmatism and sympathy and not an ideological philosophy. Indeed, the public's massive support for the strike was not at all driven by socialist beliefs. In England, financial donations totalled 15967.83 pounds,[[35]](#footnote-35) a minute fraction of what was needed to feed the men on strike. In fact, the strike would have crumbled if not for the 30,000 pound from Australia. Veritably, two-thirds of all funds raised came from Australia.[[36]](#footnote-36) Though, as P. F. Donovan claims “there seemed to be almost as many reasons for the [Australian] support as there were people contributing.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Engels believed that one of the principal motives was to "ward off a sudden mass importation of English workers.”[[38]](#footnote-38) After all the prior-year the Bryant and May Matchgirls Strike resulted in the mass importation of Matchgirls into the Australian sub-continent. Surely there must have been fears of a similar importation of dock workers. This would have undoubtedly made the precarious conditions of the Australian dockers bleaker, and in an effort of self-preservation they would surely support the London docks both by financial donations and raise support for their cause. Although the Aberdeen Weekly Journal reported “many societies are sending [the dockers] pecuniary help,”[[39]](#footnote-39) further investigation of the break down of the Australian donations reveals that the per capita contribution of both New South Wales and Queensland, the more socialist of the colonies, were lower than that of South Australia and Victoria. This, in essence, highlights the fact that great mass of support came not out of an ideological empathy, but a sympathy for the Dockers' bleak conditions.[[40]](#footnote-40) This is summarized by the South Australian Register’s words: “ In no place are socialistic and revolutionary sentiments less favoured than in South Australia. . . . But if Socialism means aiding the distressed and starving . . . South Australians will be proud to be called Socialists”[[41]](#footnote-41)— proving their support was not ideological in nature.

Further, a paradigm shift in the middle-class outlook on trade unionism had taken place— instead of being seen as harbingers of class conflict they had come to be regarded as agents of self-help and moral improvement. The latter belief was furthered by Burns speeches which instigated patience, orderly conduct, and self-policing.[[42]](#footnote-42) Thus, the support the unions received is not due to a rising socialist undertone in Victorian society but rather to the entrenched doctrine of self-help, a near antonym of socialism. As Jones argues, the middle-class support was not altruism but because they saw the strike “as a means towards decasualisation which would enforce the separation of the ‘respectable’ working class from the residuum, the fit from the unfit”[[43]](#footnote-43)— enabling Victorian only to support those who deserved it. For they believed aid should not be given on the basis of needs but only to the deserving— an antithesis of socialist ideology.

By placing themselves at the head of new unionism, Socialists acquired prominence. Indeed they had become a dominant force in the Trade Unions Congress as the leaders of the new unions, controlling over a quarter of voters at the TUC in 1890.[[44]](#footnote-44) However, the success of new unionism was short lived, as it as besieged by old unionism and capital (employers)— weakening socialisms position in the labour movement. The shipowners, the wealthiest of the capitalists, formed the shipping federation to crush the seamen's and port workers unions. They used lockouts in Cardiff and Hull to break the unions there.[[45]](#footnote-45) The times commented; “ at at Hull, as elsewhere, the new unionism has been defeated.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Employers nation wide united and followed the shipowners' example.[[47]](#footnote-47) In fact, the offensive was so successful that the membership of the National Dockers Union dropped from fifty thousand in 1890 to merely 8463 two years later. In fact, the offensive, effectively brought new unionism to a full retreat by 1893-4[[48]](#footnote-48)— putting an end to the advance made socialist by coopting with new Unionism.

Socialism had a limited ideological influence over the working-class, it dissipated with the retreat of new unionism as it had ceased to grant the working classes victories in their struggle against poverty. In the general public, it had never really held much sway. The support they had once given socialist was either in the name of sympathy for the poor, pragmatic self-preservation or a self-help doctrine associated with unions. With the fall of unions disappeared the public support, ending the movement that many believed would lead to the great socialist revolution.

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8. Jones, *Language Of Class*, 184. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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10. Patrick Joyce, *Work, Society, And Politics* (brighton: The Harvester Press Limited, 1980), 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Jones, *Outcast London,* 343. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
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    Joyce, *Work, Society, And Politics*, 76. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Jones, *Language Of Class*, 228. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. which according to Jones is an institutions as important as the pub, had be come an extension of the working-class home page

    Jones, *Language Of Class*, 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Jones, *Language Of Class*, 210. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
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47. Raw, *Striking A Light,* 165. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Adelman, *The Rise Of The Labour Party, 1880-1945,* 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)