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THE CONDITION OF THE WORKING CLASS IN BRITAIN

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THE CONDITION OF THE WORKING CLASS IN BRITAIN

By
ALLEN HUTT

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

HARRY POLLITT



LONDON
MARTIN LAWRENCE LIMITED

X:9.3

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PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN BY THE STANHOPE PRESS LTD. ROCHESTER : KENT

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PREFACE

THE aim of this book is set forth in the Introduction which follows. I need only say here that my purpose has been the direct opposite of that defined by Mr. Fenner Brockway in his Hungry England. He declared: "My purpose has been to describe and not to diagnose." I have been throughout concerned to diagnose the ills of society in Britain to-day; for it is apparent that description alone is idle, if these frightful ills are to be cured. And cured they can be, but not by the methods of those who, like Mr. Brockway, reject alike the revolutionary understanding and the revolutionary methods of Marxism.

This book would not have been written if I had not had the assistance of the Labour Research Department. The Department's staff and voluntary workers gave unstinting aid in the preparation of material; and without the invaluable files and records of every kind that have been collected by the Department (the pioneer organisation of its kind in the world) in its twenty years of life, the completion of this considerable task in six months

would have been impossible.

Detailed personal acknowledgment would extend this Preface to a chapter. I must content myself with expressing my warmest thanks in general terms—to the Labour Research Department; to its affiliated Trade Unions, Trades Councils, and Union branches; to the officials and active spirits of these bodies, who were eager to give me every possible help in the course of a number of tours of investigation through the industrial areas; and to the numerous rank-and-file workers, employed and unemployed, who spared no pains to enable me to get the fullest and most accurate picture of the condition of their class. I have also to thank many friends and comrades for their help in reading proofs, for advice and criticism.

From the standpoint of sources it may be of interest to note that the present study embodies the results of what I believe is the first extensive working of the rich mine of information buried in the annual reports of the local medical officers of health. The reports for 1930 and 1931 have been examined with particular care; the first are important because it was a "survey year," and the reports are much more detailed than usual; the second are the latest available, and since they were not issued, in accordance

with custom, until the middle of the following year (1932), they embody general impressions up to that period.

Perhaps I may interpolate here two striking confirmations of certain of my contentions, which became known too late for incorporation in the text of the book. The first relates to the rising tide of revolt among the South Wales miners, discussed at the end of Chapter I, which has reached a new high-water mark in the unanimous decision of the delegate conference of the South Wales Miners' Federation on March 13 to strike in support of the miners in dispute at Bedwas colliery.

The second concerns the growth of impoverishment and the direct effect of the burden of high rents on health. This has received its most remarkable demonstration in the observations conducted during the past five years by Dr. M'Gonigle, the medical officer of health of Stockton-on-Tees.

Dr. M'Gonigle, in a paper read to the Royal Society of Medicine, has explained that during this period the death-rate of a number of families re-housed on a new Council estate rose by 8.47 per thousand, while the death-rate of families remaining in slum conditions fell by 2.9 per thousand:

On analysing this surprising situation, he found that the transfer had involved an increase in rent from 9s. to 13s. 4½d. weekly, and even with some sharing of houses the re-housed unemployed were left with only 36.7 per cent. of their income available for food. Their diet showed all-round deficiencies; fat, for example, was 34 per cent. short of normal needs. He could find no explanation of the poor health and increased mortality of this population except that the higher rents left them insufficient money to buy enough food. (Week-end Review, March 11th, 1933.)

I have thought it wise to document this book elaborately; but, for the convenience of readers, all references (which are merely bare indications of source) are collected together at the end. They are shown by superior figures, thus—2. The reader who is not immediately concerned to check the references will find his perusal more comfortable if he ignores these figures. Where sources require any discussion, or there is a subsidiary argument to develop, I have used footnotes.

G. A. H.

INTRODUCTION

In 1845 there was published in Germany a book written by Frederick Engels, entitled The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844. It was the most authentic analysis of the conditions of the working class that had been written up to that time and constituted a damning indictment of the poverty and misery of the working class in this country at that stage of capitalist development.

Engels' book has become an international classic. Thousands of active workers have drawn from it their hatred of the capitalist system and a clear understanding of the causes which produced the misery depicted by Engels. The supreme merit of his book is that it so clearly and simply foretold the inevitable development of capitalism and in particular the vital problems which would face the British working class as the capacity to produce increased and powerful rivals grew up to challenge the monopoly of British capitalism.

It is pertinent to recall that challenging paragraph in which Engels so clearly presented the situation to the workers, a situation which to-day has become a matter of life and death for the workers: "Should English manufacture be thus vanquished, the majority of the proletariat must become for ever superfluous, and has no other choice than to starve or rebel,"

There have been many doubters of the correctness of Engels' analysis, particularly among those who have for years led the Labour movement of this country. But in their writings both Engels and Marx constantly showed that the development of the capitalist system would be accompanied by ever deeper economic crises, resulting in the growing impoverishment of the mass of the working class. This was not merely doubted, but in the official Labour movement theories were developed that revolution was not necessary in Britain—that mass starvation was a figment of the imagination of Communist doctrinaires.

Ceaseless propaganda has been carried on by various schools of capitalist economists and politicians to the effect that capitalism is an ever-expanding, progressive system of society, in which the workers will be able to achieve ever-rising standards of life. But it was left to the leaders of the Labour movement actually to base their entire political line on this assumption. They, above

all, have been tireless in declaring to the British working class that Marxism is a foreign doctrine which does not take into account the special situation of Britain; that, for Britain, the forcible overthrow of capitalism is unnecessary; that, on the contrary, everything can be achieved by peaceful parliamentary means; that the growth of education and the propaganda of sane, constructive Socialist ideas will inevitably lead to the building up of a Labour movement capable of forming a Labour Government which, in the course of time, can legislate peacefully and gradually in such a way that capitalism will be unconsciously transformed into Socialism. But the ugly reality behind all this was expressed in the classic words of Mr. Herbert Morrison in a "victory" speech at Hendon after the General Election of 1929:

I want every business man and every business manager to realise that the Labour Government is not their enemy, but that every minister in this Government wants to take him by the hand, treat him as a man and brother, and help to make his commercial or industrial enterprise more successful than it has been in the past (Daily Herald, July 1st, 1929).

It is above all significant to recall that it was Ramsay Mac-Donald, now the Prime Minister of the "National" Government, who became the theoretician of the reformists. For him the class struggle was only a descriptive phrase, as for example where he stated: "The existence of a class struggle is of no importance to Socialism unless it rouses intellectual and moral antagonism.... The motive force of Socialism is therefore not the struggle, but the condemnation of the struggle by the creative imaginative intelligence and by the moral sense.... The Socialist, therefore, cannot consistently address himself to class sentiment or class prejudice.... The appeal to class interest is an appeal to the existing order, whether the class addressed is the rich or the poor" (The Socialist Movement, pp. 148-149).

To-day, as the head of the most brutal and ruthless antiworking-class Government, he carries reformism to its logical conclusion, and shows to the working class where the denial of

Marxism leads. •

The theory of the mass impoverishment of the working class was also scoffed at. The most roseate visions were conjured up of ever upward development, of ever higher standards of life and all that this implies. To-day all these false theories have been unmasked in the light of bitter experience, but not before they have had the most terrible consequences for the working class, whose ranks have been disorganised and split. The revolutionary fight against capitalism has been held back as the direct result

of the leadership of those who have denied the teachings of Mark and Engels, and have attempted to corrupt the working class by theories of a special type of "British" Socialism.

In Allen Hutt's present book we get an indictment even more damning than that which Engels penned in 1844. For since that time gigantic new forces of production have been developed, great inventions perfected, so that we can say that all the natural obstacles on land, sea and air have been conquered. But because of the capitalist basis of society, the real problems that have always confronted the working class—the problems of bread, work and peace—are more acute to-day than ever before. In point of fact, the situation is now worse than it was in 1844 as far as the mass of the working class is concerned, when we take into account the great technical developments and scientific conquests.

The growth of large-scale industry, the tremendous increase in productive capacity, the springing up of new formidable capitalist competitors like America, the impossibility of finding new markets, the contraction of existing markets, have all led to the position where to-day in every capitalist country in the world, whatever its form of government or fiscal system, attempts are being made to drive the working class into the abyss of starvation and Fascism. In this way the capitalists try to solve the crisis at the expense of the workers, who fiercely fight back to retain their existing standards and build up their revolutionary power for the overthrow of capitalism.

In order to cover up the exposure of the capitalist system, which both support in their varying ways, the capitalists and the Labour leaders are ceaselessly engaged in attempting to show that while to-day there is a certain amount of lamentable hardship, due to the temporary circumstances of the economic crisis which has suddenly struck the world, on the whole the condition of the working class, and especially that of the British working class, is better than ever it was before.

To this end we are constantly regaled with stories of Post Office deposits, large attendances at the cinemas, the great vogue of wireless, and so forth. This sort of argument is peddled round to cover up the bankruptcy of capitalism and the treachery of those Labour leaders whose false theories are entirely responsible for the position of the working class to-day. Closely allied to this type of propaganda is the impudent attempt on the part of the capitalist Press to work up indignation about disgraceful housing conditions. It is now fashionable for star feature writers to write up bad housing conditions as if some new discovery were being made. The social conscience is expected to be shocked by facts

that have always been known to the ruling class, and to the Labour movement, without a finger being lifted to get at the root causes. Every medical officer of health has been writing in vain for years about the bad housing conditions. When new housing schemes have been carried out the rents are absolutely beyond the limits of existing wages. The workers who have left slum areas and gone to the new housing estates have had less food and clothing than before because the high rents have taken a larger part of their wages.

Now, all these bold statements that there is "no limit to what we shall do to build new houses" represent but a further phase in distracting attention from the other evils of working-class life, accentuated by the capitalist crisis, and a further endeavour to deceive the workers.

The stark reality is that in 1933, for the mass of the population, Britain is a hungry Britain, badly fed, clothed and housed. Allen Hutt proves this from the actual facts and figures provided by life itself and the reports of capitalism's own agents.

In the brief period since the end of the war the working class has been through political experiences which are leading to a clearer understanding of the issues that Engels so sharply outlined in 1844. We have had the Lloyd George Coalition Government, two Tory Governments, two Labour Governments, and now a "National" Government with unprecedented power and majority. A revolution has taken place in the fiscal policy of the country. Free Trade has been abandoned and a system of high protective tariffs adopted.

In this connection it is interesting to recall how Engels, writing in the 'eighties of the problems British capitalism would be faced with as its competitors became more formidable, in spite of its basis of Free Trade, said:

But the manufacturing monopoly of England is the pivot of the present social system of England. Even while that monopoly lasted, the markets could not keep pace with the increasing productivity of English manufacturers; the decennial crises were the consequence. And new markets are getting scarcer every day; so much so that even the negroes of the Congo are now to be forced into the civilisation attendant upon Manchester calicoes, Staffordshire pottery and Birmingham hardware. How will it be when Continental, and especially American, goods flow in ever-increasing quantities—when the predominating share, still held by British manufacturers, will become reduced from year to year? Answer, Free Trade, thou universal panacea.

A fundamental change took place in financial policy when Britain was forced off the Gold Standard. And during and alongside all these changes ever-increasing attacks have been made on the standards of the working class. Where has it all led to? To prospects of better times later on? No. On the contrary, to prospects of ever-deepening capitalist crisis, the sharpening of the class struggle at home and the fierce intensification of the antagonisms of the rival imperialist powers, so that as these lines are being written mankind is already beneath the shadow of the world war which has commenced in China and South America.

The question, therefore, inevitably arises: Are the conditions depicted in this book the result of capitalism? They are. And so long as the existing system remains there is no way out of this situation. They are not the result of some "economic blizzard" which will pass away. They are the result of the fact that a robber class owns the land, rivers, railways, minerals, banks, mines, mills and factories; that this ownership is only for private gain; that the happiness and contentment of the mass of the population is not the aim of private ownership; that when commodities have to meet other commodities in competition everything that stands in the way of profitable transactions is brutally attacked and swept' aside; that there is nothing too low, too mean, too desperate, for this robber class to resort to in order to safeguard their rent, interest and profit; that sentiment, right and morality have no place in capitalist policy, and that as the crisis of capitalism intensifies, so do the attacks of the capitalists upon every standard of the working class at home and upon their foreign competitors.

Such a situation can only be overcome by the forcible destruction of the system which gives this robber class the power of life and death over the working class. To hide this fundamental fact from the workers is to commit a terrible crime against them. During the period of rising capitalism false illusions are thus created about the future, and in the period of acute crisis, such as the present, the capitalists are objectively helped to attack the working class by declarations that "It's a time for common sacrifice," or "You can't take more out of industry than there is in it," or "It's no use fighting the capitalists during a crisis." It is the latter theories which the official Labour leaders have so assiduously propagated and carried into practice, until to-day there is a growing recognition of the fact that the workers' fight is a fight on two fronts, against the capitalists and against the Labour leaders.

In regard to the present crisis, many and varied have been the explanations and conjectures. Any and every cause has been sought except the real cause. Two years ago *The Times* summed up in these words the situation then existing in America: "There

are voices crying out to know how a country can produce so much food that people starve, and so many manufactured goods that people go without." The unspeakable Churchill, who now demands still fiercer repression of the workers at home and in India, stated in his Romanes lecture in 1930:

The root problem of modern world economics was the strange discordance between the consuming and the producing power. Who would have thought that cheap and abundant supplies of all the basic commodities should find the science and civilisation of the world unable to utilise them? Had all our triumph of research and organisation bequeathed us only a new punishment—the curse of plenty?

Others protest that the crisis is caused through the wicked bankers, that it is the fault of too many inventions, the dislocation of markets through high tariff barriers, the low price levels that obtain. There is too much machinery, say others, let us go in for "technocracy"; and so they all go on. They do not see that here is the greatest contradiction of capitalism—between social production and the private appropriation of the product. And what lies behind their fine words? Savage wage cuts, the infamous Means Test, speeding-up, more workshop accidents, rotten housing conditions, an increasing number of suicides, increased infant mortality, a higher death rate of mothers in childbirth.

In all our industrial centres death and disease lay their clammy hands on whole areas and menace millions of decent working men, women and children. And as if to mock them, those who decry Communism as "destructive" and "violent" bemoan the fact that nothing is being done to stop new inventions. Ship-yards, engineering shops, textile mills and pits are bought up in order to have their machinery deliberately destroyed to limit competition. Millions of tons of food are destroyed. Wheat is burnt in locomotive fireboxes, cotton crops are ploughed into the soil—all this madness and anarchy to try and find a way out of the crisis that will ensure the continuance of capitalism, the system that has brought about the conditions exposed in this book.

At this very moment Neville Chamberlain, probably the most ruthless member of the "National" Government, calmly informs the country that we are in for another ten years of mass unemployment; a statement which made his own class gasp, as witness this comment of the Observer, on February 19th last:

The grim announcement which Mr. Chamberlain, as Chancellor of the Exchequer, felt compelled to make on Thursday that the only sure cure for unemployment is the revival of trade, and that but little relief is to be expected for ten years, visibly staggered the House of Commons. Members gasped at each other with consternation. It was so wholly unexpected. Members had met, as they supposed, to hear the much-talked-of plans of the Government for a determined frontal attack on the solid mass of unemployment, only to have this disheartening prospect held out to them. Ten years, in the circumstances, seemed an interminable time. There has hardly been a scene like it since the announcement, during the South African War, of the defeat and capture of Lord Methuen by the Boers.

It is significant that this book is being published at the time when the revolutionary working class movement is commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the death of Karl Marx, the founder of scientific Socialism, whose whole line has been so deliberately distorted by the reformists of every capitalist country. It was Marx who so clearly laid bare the cause of capitalist crises when he wrote: "The last cause of all real crises always remains the poverty and restricted consumption of the masses as compared to the tendency to develop the productive forces in such a way that only the absolute power of consumption of the entire society would be their limit" (Capital, Vol. III, p. 568).

It is true, as the capitalist and reformist leaders agree, that there have been crises before, and following them things have got better (how much better for the workers is glaringly shown in this book). But what is also true (and this decisive factor is missed) is that each crisis is deeper than the previous one. When it has been solved it has laid the basis for a succeeding crisis, until a point has been reached in the present economic crisis, occurring as it does within the general crisis of capitalism, where the end of partial capitalist stabilisation has been reached. As the events in the Dutch navy, in Rumania, Germany and China show, we are moving to a new round of wars and proletarian revolutions, in which the capitalists and the working class are both striving to find a solution of the crisis, each in their own class interests.

The value of a book such as this is that, by the facts and conditions it depicts, it uproots and entirely destroys the pernicious theory which has enabled the reformists to retard the struggle of the working class—that a workers' revolution is not necessary in Britain, that "there is an easy way out if you will vote for us." To support the "easy way out" theory, it has been their policy to depict conditions as always being on the upgrade, or to declare that the present crisis is only temporary, and soon things will be on the upgrade again.

Allen Hutt has taken the lid off Britain. He has revealed the real Britain, where, in spite of all the triumphs of science and invention, of the conquest of great natural difficulties and obstacles, our industrial centres, where the whole wealth and

power of British imperialism have been built up, are centres of mass poverty, disease, and death.

The other aspect of the problem he presents is that of the working class finding its way forward, struggling against capitalism and reformism, building up in unemployed and strike struggles the power and leadership that can go forward to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism, the establishment of the workers' dictatorship, and the building of Socialism, which will, as Marx put it, "develop the productive forces in such a way that only the absolute power of consumption of the entire society would be their limit."

Can it be done? Can the idle land, pits, shipyards, textile mills, blast furnaces, engineering shops be got going again on the basis of Socialist production and under workers' control? They can, and the proof is before our eyes. It is already being done in the Soviet Union. It would have been possible in 1914 to have written a book on the conditions of the working class in Tsarist Russia that would have seared the conscience of all who read it. It is impossible to write such a book in 1933, so far as the Soviet Union is concerned. Why? Because the workers' revolution and dictatorship have enabled a new Russia to be built. Once the political power of the old ruling class was destroyed, the land and large scale industries confiscated, then, and only then, was it possible for a planned economy to be organised.

To-day a backward agrarian country has been transformed into a land of Socialist industry and collective farming. Even the enemies of the Soviet Union are compelled to speak about the breathless advance, the conquest of unemployment, the new basic industries, factories, collective farms, the new life and culture, all carried through with enormous self-sacrifice and the conquering of almost incredible difficulties.

This is in the young Soviet Union. What we have in Britain is told in Allen Hutt's graphic language with unchallengeable facts, and arguments. It is the enemies of Communism in Britain who in this book are shown to be responsible for conditions the exposure of which will win new thousands for Communism in Britain.

It is to be hoped, therefore, that just as Engels' exposure of the conditions of the British working class in 1844 played an invaluable part in educating and creating an army of working-class fighters, so the present book will carry this work forward, enriched by all the experiences since that time, and particularly since the end of the war. It will be of value not if it merely makes some sentimental reader feel uneasy at the state of Britain to-day, but

only if it makes them want to fight the Britain of to-day, if it makes them understand that the book is as much an indictment of reformist theory and practice as it is of capitalist rule and power. Then it will lead to the strengthening of the revolutionary forces, who to-day in factory, street and trade union, are slowly building up the fighting front of the working class to beat back the attempts to worsen their conditions in order that the capitalists may find a way out of the crisis.

In the building of this front the revolutionary forces are developing the leadership and power that can, by its effective protection of the everyday interests of the workers, deepen their class-consciousness, widen their revolutionary political outlook. until, as the objective situation reaches a point where it can no longer be tolerated, mass action can be taken that will lead to the forcible overthrow of capitalism. The establishment of the workers' dictatorship, the freeing of the colonial countries, and then, in fraternity and unity, the conscious building up of Socialism by the exchange of our common resources, will bring a tremendous increase in the standards of millions of workers at home and in a Socialist India, Ireland, Africa, etc. 'In this way there would be unlimited scope for the expansion of the Socialist productive forces, the welcoming of new inventions, the wiping. out of the death-traps where millions are now compelled to live. On the basis of Socialist planned economy every idle pit, factory and shipyard in the country, could be set going.

It is the task of this book to hasten this process so that by 1934 a new page of working-class history shall have been written.

HARRY POLLITY.

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