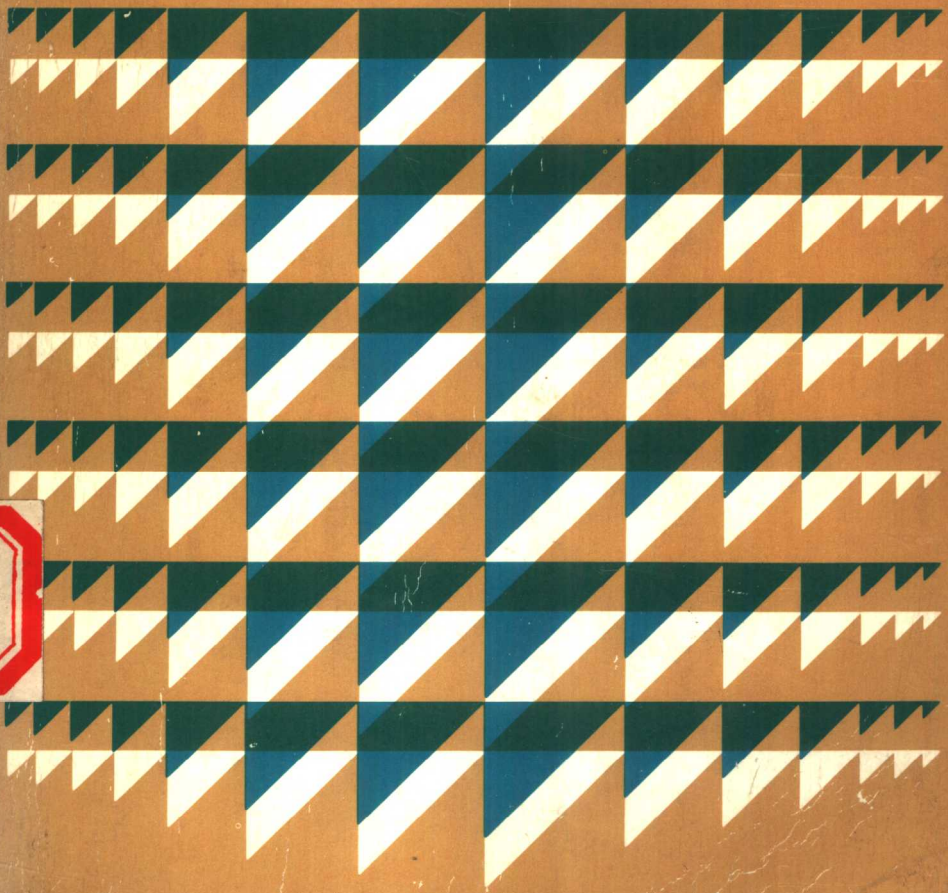
The Working Class in Modern Europe

Edited and with an introduction by
Mary Lynn McDougall



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INTRODUCTION

Until the end of the nineteenth century, workers rarely appeared in historical writing. When they did appear, it was usually in the guise of the faceless "rabble" or "mob." The very terms aroused fear and repugnance in the "respectable" reader, and in case the terms alone did not produce this effect, conservative historians such as Hippolyte Taine went on to define them as the "many-headed brute" or the "band of savages."[1] Beginning in the 1840s, republican historians like Jules Michelet introduced the no less faceless but considerably less fearsome "crowd" or "people." About the same time, early Socialist and Communist theorists—Blanc, Marx, Proudhon—were popularizing the terms "proletariat" and "working class." For these social theorists, the words had a positive denotation; for many of their readers they had negative connotations. Either way, though, the ideas were abstract. Very few *engagé* Socialists actually attempted to portray individual workers, and even then these workers were singled out only because they were important political activists.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century, the working class began to figure prominently in certain historical studies. A completely new field of history developed: the field of labor history. This development was tied to the advent of large Socialist parties. In Britain two Fabian Socialists, Sydney and Beatrice Webb, wrote their *History of Trade Unionism;* in France the Socialist Emile Levasseur published his history of the working class and industry in France; in Germany the Social Democrat Franz Mehring put out the standard history of the Social Democratic party. Later the Hammonds, Mark Hovell, G. D. H. Cole and Raymond Postgate expanded on the work

[1] *The French Revolution* (New York, 1878), vol. I, pp. 66, 67.

of the Webbs; E. Martin Saint-Léon, Pierre Louis, Georges Duveau and Jean Bruhat carried on the work begun by Levasseur. German labor historians tended to confine themselves to histories of the Social Democratic or Communist parties, but the East German Communist, Jurgen Kuczynski, like his French contemporary, Eduard Dolléans, even extended his work beyond his native country to the whole of Western Europe.[2]

Over a half-century, the labor historians accomplished a great deal. Labor history was accepted as a legitimate (if not quite genteel) field of scholarly inquiry. The working class was shown to be an important force in modern European history, and more significantly (since the workers' impact on certain periods could hardly be ignored), workers were portrayed as capable of independent, rational and positive action. The labor historians did not just introduce the "working class" into historical studies; they introduced them *sympathetically*. In so doing, they opened new areas of research, discovered new sources of information and new ways of using old sources.

Along with their numerous accomplishments, the early labor historians had certain limitations. Because all of them were connected directly or indirectly with the Labor, Social Democratic or Communist party of their respective countries, each tended to focus upon those aspects of labor history that contributed to the development of his party and related institutions such as trade unions. Their focus was not dictated by their parties, for few submitted their work to their parties for approval. Rather, their subject matter was determined by their interest in the growth of their parties, and more generally in the movements to which they belonged. The crucial point is that they either ignored or paid scant attention to whole areas of what can rightfully be considered labor history, even given the most narrow interpretation, that is, a history of the labor movement.

For example, virtually all of the early labor historians omitted or passed quickly over those elements of worker activism that did not foreshadow or add to the labor movement as it appeared in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. Archaic or unacceptable forms of worker protest and organization were rarely discussed. When they were, it was with little empathy and sometimes with con-

[2] For more complete bibliographical information, see the Suggestions for Additional Reading at the end of this book.

descension. As the most telling critic of the first generation of labor historians expressed it, they were writing about the winners, not the losers, in the labor movement.[3]

Related to this omission, but going beyond it in scope, was the early labor historians' preoccupation with institutions or organizations. To read many of their histories is to read about the infrastructure and in-fighting of one association or committee, one federation or congress, after the other. The difficulty with this kind of history (other than the confusion it can cause) is that it excludes working-class protests such as machine-breaking, early strikes, street demonstrations and insurrections, which were not institutionalized or organized in very explicit ways. More important, this kind of history excludes consideration of the workers other than the outstanding working-class leaders, whether these workers participated in the movement, or, especially, if they did not. These histories were definitely not concerned with the apathetic worker.

Part of the problem stemmed from the early labor historian's interest in the development of national and international labor movements. The chronological format and the national or international focus precluded in-depth analysis, particularly at a local level.[4] This lack of analysis did not affect the study of labor organizations as much as it did the study of the people who made up the organizations—and the people who did not belong to any organization. Few of the first generation of labor historians went beyond the classic economic explanation of labor militancy to the broader social preconditions for militancy or nonmilitancy. Only Georges Duveau and the Hammonds made a real effort to carry the search for the intellectual roots of militancy beyond the ideas of predominantly bourgeois Socialists and Communists, into the minds or mentality of the workers themselves. Duveau and the Hammonds also stood alone in their broader concern with the workers' society and culture. Generally speaking, the older labor historians were not open to the methods being developed in other social sciences.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s, a new generation of labor historians entered the field. While this new generation respected the accomplishments of their predecessors, they were also critical

[3] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York, 1963), p. 12.
[4] G. Rudé, *Debate on Europe* (New York, 1972), pp. 187–188.

of their limitations. More positively, these historians tried to fill in the gaps and expand the field. Although many of them were affiliated with the Labor, Socialist or Communist parties of the period—and still more considered themselves Marxists—they were not solely or even primarily interested in the growth of their parties and organized labor. Historians like E. J. Hobsbawm, E. P. Thompson and George Rudé wrote about archaic forms of worker protest, trying to prove that these types of protest had rational goals, informal organization and, occasionally, some short-term success. They did so by studying the workers who participated in these actions. They carefully analyzed the local political, economic and social contexts in which the actions occurred, and Hobsbawm and Rudé also drew comparisons between local conditions across national borders. Most important, all three tried to reconstruct the protestors' perceptions of their context and their reasons for protesting. E. P. Thompson summed up their efforts as an attempt to view history "from below."[5]

Hobsbawm, Thompson and Rudé were all undogmatic Marxists. Consequently there is little resemblance between their work and the stereotype of Marxist history. Indeed, the aspect of their work that has attracted the most attention is their innovative methodology. If Eric Hobsbawm continued to give great weight to long-term, structural changes in the economy as a factor producing militancy, he did not confine himself to such an explanation. Instead he went on to the broader institutional context of militancy. Along the same lines, he employed statistical evidence but warned of the inadequacy of the fragmentary and gross statistics of the past. Here he was surpassed by Edward Thompson, who doubted whether the most complete and accurate statistics could tell us what is important about working-class life. Thompson drew on a wide variety of impressionistic source materials, including police and judicial records, to recreate the working-class society, culture, mentality and politics. Rudé tended to rely more exclusively on police and judicial records to analyze the composition and expectations of worker crowds.

These three Marxists are probably the most widely known of the new generation of labor historians, but there are many non-Marxists who have brought fresh methods and insights to the writing of working-class history. In some respects, the non-Marxists have more

[5] E. P. Thompson, "History from Below," *Times* (London) *Literary Supplement*, April 7, 1966, pp. 279–280.

seriously questioned the old orthodoxies. Asa Briggs, who has contributed to so many fields of history, has performed a valuable service in encouraging local studies and using them to point out the deep-seated divisions within the national Chartist movement. An American scholar, Peter N. Stearns, has compiled data on long periods of strike activity, analyzed these data and used the results to question some of the earlier, more ideological interpretations of strike activity. In his study of the German Social Democratic party, Guenther Roth used a sociological approach to show how the party became a "state within a state." Perhaps his most interesting findings were those concerning what Marxism and the party meant to the average working-class member. James Joll, whose brilliant work on anarchists follows the more traditional pattern of a study of leaders, their ideas and actions, nevertheless indicates how working-class "syndicalists" (unionists) were able to persuade the more bourgeois leadership.

While most working-class histories still focus on "the movement," there have been some notable exceptions. The debate on the standard of living of workers during the Industrial Revolution has been the most famous (or infamous, given the sharpness of the attacks in this most ideological exchange). This debate has been the subject of another book in the Problems in European Civilization Series.[6] But the topic has not been exhausted—and not only because the ideological undertones and statistical problems seem unavoidable. Rather, whole areas of research have been ignored in the constant concern with wage, price, consumption and mortality figures. The problem of working-class housing, a major problem, has only recently been explored by historians like Anthony Wohl. The effect of industrialization and urbanization on the working-class family only began to be studied systematically in the 1950s, when the sociologists Michael Young and Peter Willmott examined contemporary kinship patterns in a London working-class district. Now Michael Anderson has employed some of their concepts, as well as his own very sophisticated statistical methods, to reveal an unexpected strength in the working-class family in a typical industrial town in Lancashire during the nineteenth century. Other historians have begun to ex-

[6] P. A. M. Taylor, *The Industrial Revolution in Britain: Triumph or Disaster?* (rev. ed.; Lexington, Mass., 1970).

amine the assumptions about working-class sexuality. A few highly articulate "veterans" of working-class ghettos—children of workers who managed to get a higher education and leave those ghettos—have written memoirs that vividly recreate the society of the ghetto and call into question some of the accepted interpretations of it.

In the past twenty-five years, the new labor historians have produced much fine work and upset many complacent opinions. As yet they have not offered a comprehensive view of modern European labor history. The coincidence of the rich variety of the new labor history and the lack of an overall framework makes it difficult to choose a limited number of examples. The selections collected here were made on the basis of four principles: (1) that each of the three main areas of research be included; (2) that within each of these categories, some of the outstanding events and issues be discussed; (3) that different approaches appear; and (4) that the major new labor historians and some of their interesting younger colleagues be represented. Important omissions are inevitable and unavoidable. Wherever possible, the omissions will be noted and the relevant source indicated. Where more work might be done—and there is much work to be done—that too will be mentioned.

The principles of selection require some elaboration. The first one, that the three main areas of research be included, has informed the division of the text into three units: on economic activism, political militancy, and working-class life. However, the units are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some selections subsumed under the heading economic activism discuss organizations and actions that have a basic economic motive, but also have political overtones. Similarly, some contributions on political militancy mention economic factors. Contributions to both of the units on "the movement" connect whatever aspect of the movement they are studying to general economic, political or social developments. On the other hand, the sociologists and historians represented in the unit on working-class life tend not to deal with the movement.

These sociologists and historians are not alone; most scholars who study working-class life avoid the movement. The reason is understandable: so little work has been done on working-class life that they have had to confine themselves to it alone. The results of their work have substantially altered our conception of working-class

life, except as it interacts with the movement. The only authors interested primarily in working-class society and culture who have addressed themselves to this interaction have been workers or former workers. These authors are usually too *engagé;* they exaggerate the importance of the movement. Others, like Robert Roberts in the last selection, seem to be hostile witnesses. (But Roberts's idea that intra-class divisions were more significant than class consciousness is a good antidote to the facile assumptions of universal class consciousness.) As a result, there is a need for dispassionate studies of the whole range of working-class life, a part of which is activism. At present these studies will have to be local in scope; later the results can be correlated and the outline of the broader working-class experience be revealed.

The second principle of selection—that some of the outstanding events and issues be discussed—also calls for elucidation. In many ways the French Revolution was a starting point for modern labor history. Unfortunately its long-term impact on the labor movement and on workers in general has more often been assumed than examined carefully. For this reason it is assumed here, not examined. Other "milestones" are omitted. Instead, the emphasis has been on typical methods of organizing and acting over the century and a half since the French Revolution. In the section on economic activism this means a focus on primitive industrial protest, early strike patterns, transitional unions, and modern strike activity. The section on political militancy includes work on early political organization, the "crowd," a turn-of-the-century Socialist party, a twentieth-century anarchist group and a Labor party in and out of power. But it is the unit on working-class life that best illustrates the stress on issues, for here housing, the family, sexuality, morality and communities are discussed.

The last two principles of selection (diversity of approach and representation of the most interesting "new" labor historians) need little comment. With the exception of the first two selections, there has been no attempt to present contrasting interpretations of the same phenomenon. Moreover, almost all of the contributors attempt to view history "from below." Nevertheless, the contributors do give different weights to different factors. For example, E. P. Thompson is inclined to give an important role to radical political ideologies in economic activism; Peter N. Stearns is not. Arthur Mitzman credits

the 1936 and 1937 sit-in strikers in France with important political concerns, but denies that the Communist party molded these concerns. The examples could be multiplied. The only serious divergence that may not be readily apparent can be discerned in Thompson's belief that a single working class emerged in England after 1832 and took political form in the Chartist agitation, and Briggs's belief that divisions within the working class continued to be significant after 1832, especially among the Chartists. In this case the contrast may be explained by Thompson's national purview and loose definition of class, versus the local focus and stricter definition of class that Briggs uses.

Thompson's and Briggs's differences over the definition of class raises a question of overriding importance to this book: what is meant by working class? As all the selections on the early period of the movement will indicate, the early movement was not one of the industrial proletariat. Rather it was composed of artisans, some of them independent masters, more of them dependent masters, and many, journeymen. The independent masters cannot even be considered wage laborers, although the dependent masters' and the journeymen's piece-rates were, in effect, wages. Nor were all of the workers in Robert Roberts's slum "conscious" of themselves as members of a class in opposition to another class. Thus neither the older, simpler concept of the working class as the industrial proletariat, nor the newer, more sophisticated version of a class conscious of itself and its opposition to another class, can cover the phenomena described hereafter. Instead the term working class has been used in its broadest, most flexible sense, to mean all those who have had to do physical labor to earn a living.

Each unit and each selection poses particular problems. The unit on economic activism not only introduces types of economic organization; it poses problems about their causes and their relationships with other organizations. The unit begins, appropriately enough, with an excerpt from E. P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class.* In the excerpt, Thompson criticizes the Hammonds and other early labor historians for seeing Luddism (early nineteenth-century machine-breaking) as a purely industrial activity, and not seeing its political, indeed revolutionary, aims. He uses the same sources as the earlier historians, but refuses to accept their interpretation that

widespread reports of revolutionary schemes can be attributed solely to *agents-provocateurs.*

It is precisely this emphasis on the more primitive types of activism and the propensity to see political goals in them that has aroused Thompson's critics most. Many of their criticisms have been as speculative as they claim Thompson's arguments to be. Now, though, there is a good study, based on solid, specific research, that questions one of Thompson's links between the Luddites and the constitutional reformers. A section of this study by Roy Church and S. D. Chapman appears as the second selection. The study carefully considers a single but important constitutional reformer's attitude toward Luddism. Much more of this very precise research, particularly on less prominent working-class leaders, remains to be done.

In the third selection, Professor Stearns explains the lack of industrial strike activity in France during the 1830s and 1840s by reference to governmental and industrial repression, economic insecurity and fears, and social and psychological disorientation. He goes on to attribute what strike activity there was to particularly well-paid male artisans, working in prosperous industries and accustomed to their surroundings. This dual approach—asking why some workers did not strike while others did—has rarely been pursued so methodically, nor produced such interesting results. Professor Stearns's suggestions about the negative effects of immigration and the positive effects of a pre-existent working-class community on worker activism, deserve more attention, especially in more local contexts. Work on early economic and political activism in Marseilles and Toulon (not reproduced here) has modified the purely negative view of immigration by showing that immigrants can also be most open to new ideas—and most in need of change. By contrast, a study of the glassmakers of Carmaux insists on the necessity of immigrants settling down before they could organize and act effectively.

Other scholars make other correlations. Professor Hobsbawm's work on general labor unions in Britain, part of which forms the fourth selection, suggests that these unions arose and developed in the way they did because of a number of economic, social and political factors: the level of industrialization, especially in certain industries; the rhythm of the business cycle; the willingness of employers to negotiate; the amount of social tension; and the presence

of Socialists. The fifth selection, derived from an article by Arthur Mitzman on the French sit-in strikes of 1936 and 1937, indicates that strikes could have important political motivations and consequences in the period when the Socialists first came to power. (The French sit-in strikes of 1968 and the British coal miners' strike of 1974 prove that widespread or crucial strikes continue to have political implications.)

The unit on political militancy is also eclectic, for the contributors are not solely concerned with describing political behavior. Professor Briggs's excerpt explains the difference between the "physical-force" Chartists and the "moral-force" Chartists in terms of different geographic and professional constituencies. The physical-force men were centered in the north and drew support from the despairing textile workers; the moral-force men came from the south and recruited among the relatively prosperous artisans. George Rudé's article analyzes who—what professional categories—joined the crowd in the French Revolution of 1848 and why they did. Professor Roth's contribution underscores the role of German Social Democracy as a subculture, a whole way of life that satisfied worker resentments and desires, particularly their desire to belong to and to participate in collective action. James Joll shows how the anarchists who directed their attention to political leaders learned from the syndicalists to emphasize economic activism. The final article in this unit, by W. Campbell-Balfour, deals with the labor movement in Britain during the depression of the 1930s, and so can hardly avoid the degree to which economic and political actions overlapped.

The selections in the last unit either challenge older interpretations of aspects of working-class life, or offer new interpretations of previously unstudied aspects of that life. Anthony S. Wohl's excerpt on working-class housing in nineteenth-century London points out the critical problem of overcrowding and the way in which legislation and institutions designed to mitigate its effects actually intensified the problem. Michael Anderson's contribution on the working-class family in a new industrial town during the Industrial Revolution seriously undermines earlier assumptions that the worker's family disintegrated under the impact of industrialization, by proving that many families had to stick together in order to cope with recurring crises in an age lacking bureaucratized forms of assistance. Michael Young and Peter Willmott, on the other hand, show that the resulting form

of working-class kinship in Britain, based on daily contacts between mothers and their married daughters, began to break down when families moved to housing estates in the suburbs. In a pioneering article, part of which is reproduced here, Robert P. Neumann looks at lower-class sexuality and morality in Imperial Germany and concludes that urban workers were not as "immoral" by comparison to agricultural laborers as is often suggested. Furthermore, he doubts whether the decline in traditional morality can be attributed to industrialization alone. Finally, a highly articulate product of a working-class slum, Robert Roberts, examines the slum he grew up in and underlines its rigid caste structure and morality.

Other more specific issues are raised by these selections, and they are left to the introductory remarks preceding each selection.

CONTENTS

III WORKING-CLASS LIFE

I ECONOMIC ACTIVISM, 1811-1937