JOHN STRACHEY

THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF SOCIALISM

Emancipation of labour is the only worthy object of political warfare . . . that those who till the soil shall be its first masters, that those who raise food shall be its first partakers, that those who build mansions shall live in them. . . .

GEORGE JULIAN HARNEY

Outside of socialism there is no salvation for mankind from war, hunger and the further destruction of millions and millions of human beings.

LENIN

RANDOM HOUSE

NEW YORK

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TO MY DAUGHTER

ELIZABETH

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INTRODUCTION

This book attempts to say plainly what the working-class movement of the world is striving for.

Such general re-statements of socialism and communism become necessary from time to time. For socialism and communism are living, growing concepts. Moreover, there are today special reasons for attempting to say exactly what socialism and communism are, and are not. Socialism has now been established in one of the major countries of the world. Hence a more positive, descriptive, constructive, and a less analytical, negative and critical, approach to the subject is now possible. Formerly socialism existed only as a doctrine, a critique of things as they are, and an aspiration towards things as they might be. Today it exists as the institutions of a great state. Before this incarnation the positive approach attempted in these pages was impossible; it would have led to no more than fantasy building and dreaming. Then it was necessary to put almost all the emphasis on the analysis of capitalism; now it is possible to shift the emphasis to the elucidation of socialism.

But the capitalist five-sixths of the world also supply urgent reasons for making an attempt to re-define the goal of socialists and communists. In the highly developed capitalist empires, in Britain for example and to a lesser extent in America, there exist long-established movements, based upon the working class, which have the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of socialism as their objective. These movements possess an enormous literature and a rich tradition of socialism. But some of the events of the last two decades have tended to blur the conception of socialism as the sole possible solution for the world's present agony. By a tragic paradox, at the very moment when socialism has been securely established on the face of the earth for the first time in history, and when the conditions of human life in the rest of the world cry aloud for the socialist solution, some of the oldest and

most powerful socialist movements, such as the British, have allowed themselves to become confused, to lose direction and so to slacken their efforts to produce a living realisation of the necessity of social change in the minds of men.

The causes of this extraordinary event will be discussed in the concluding pages of this book. In the case of the British movement they are not far to seek. The British labour and socialist movement has suffered severe defeats in the last fifteen years because its comprehension of both the socialist objective and of the methods necessary to social change was inadequate. This inadequacy resulted in an attempt to go forward towards socialism along a road which could only lead, and which did lead, to temporary defeat. But already it is clear that the effect of the setbacks to the British labour movement which culminated in the political defeat of 1931, could not, in contemporary conditions, last long. In 1848 the defeat of Chartism, which was the first wave of British working-class revolt against capitalism, set our movement back by nearly fifty years; the equally severe defeats of 1926 and 1931 could delay the rising of the tide by a decade at most. For the tide of British working-class resistance to capitalism is once more rising. But what is not yet decided is the vital question of the degree of political and economic clarity to which the British workers will attain in this new phase of their century-old struggle. They can only win if this time not only the leaders, but every active member of the British working-class movement attains to a higher consciousness of the goal for which he is struggling, and of the necessary methods of struggle.

There has appeared in the last five years in Britain a quite unprecedented volume of literature, both in books and in periodicals, aiming at the achievement of this higher level of political consciousness and clarity in the working-class movement. This literature is symptomatic of the fact that the events of the last fifteen years have not been in vain. Now that once again life itself is forcing the British workers to feel that socialism is their only way out, they are coming to realise also the need for the adoption of new methods and new principles of political struggle. And this is doubly necessary. For not only did the old methods prove totally inade-

quate, but also the new wave of working-class activity is rising in conditions which are far more complex and far more stormy than any which have ever before faced our movement.

The first aim of this book is to make a contribution to the creation of that sharp, clear, passionate realisation both of what socialism is and of how it may be established, without which the British working-class movement cannot triumph in the struggles that lie before it.

In America the situation is very different. There the economic and social forces capable of creating a working-class movement, determined on the abolition of capitalism and the establishment of socialism, only came to maturity with the 1929 crisis. But already such a movement is beginning to take shape. That America will possess, within the next decade, a powerful labour movement is not in doubt. Moreover, that movement will almost certainly be in some sense and degree anti-capitalist and pro-socialist. But what is not decided, and what is all-important, is the quality of the socialism of the coming American labour movement. Hence in America, even more than in Britain, though for different reasons, the need of the hour is the unceasing definition, re-statement and popularisation of the basic principles of socialism and communism. The second, and equally important, purpose of this book is to make a contribution to this work.

It may be well to define at the outset how the words socialism and communism are used in these pages. For the history of both the working-class movement and of the social science which that movement has evolved out of its struggles, may be unfamiliar to some readers. Throughout the last century Marx and Engels used the words socialism and communism almost indifferently. Moreover, up till 1917 Lenin referred to himself as a socialist or Social Democrat. It was not until the April of that year that he proposed to change the name of the party which he led. He made his proposal in these words: "I am coming to the last point, the name of our party. We must call ourselves the communist party—just as Marx and Engels called themselves communists . . . Man-

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kind can pass directly from capitalism only into socialism, *i.e.*, into social ownership of the means of production and the distribution of products according to the work of the individual. Our party looks farther ahead than that: socialism is bound sooner or later to ripen into communism, whose banner bears the motto 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs'." (The "April Theses.")

Socialism and communism are exactly defined in Chapter XI of this book. But already the reader will see that Lenin states that communists are persons who work for the establishment of socialism, and that they call themselves communists rather than socialists for certain historical reasons, and also because they look forward to a state of human society beyond socialism for which they reserve the word communism.

It is true, however, that there are important differences within the working-class movement as to the proper methods, policies, and forms of organisation by means of which capitalism may be replaced by socialism. These differences are discussed in the latter part of this book.

The problems with which this book attempts to grapple seem to me to be worthy of the attention not only of the British and American workers, but also of those whose economic existence is relatively satisfactory. For some of this fortunate minority such questions as the comparative merits of economic systems based respectively on production for profit and production for use, may seem remote from the daily business of their lives. But they are not. Those of us to whom fate has been comparatively kind would like to ignore these problems, for they put into question the very foundations of our contemporary society. We inevitably long to be allowed to lead our own personal lives against the background of a society which, however imperfect, is at any rate stable. But the society in which we live is not stable. We can no more escape its perturbations by refusing to take part in the social struggles of our times than a frightened passenger can escape from a shipwreck by locking himself up in his cabin.

Thus ever-increasing numbers of relatively well-circumstanced men and women are now finding themselves impelled to examine the basis of contemporary society. A growing number of them are beginning to find that they cannot live lives which yield them an adequate degree of either mental or physical satisfaction in the existing world. Amongst the economically privileged there are, as there always have been, men and women who find it impossible to bear in silent complacency the sufferings, which they now see to be totally unnecessary, of by far the greater number of their fellow-men. But it is the peculiar characteristic of our times that the property-owning members of society are themselves beginning to experience the effects of a contracting economic system.

In Britain and America the greater number of them have as yet maintained their incomes fairly well. But to an ever-increasing extent they find, and will find, that there are no constructive tasks left for them within the framework of capitalism. They will find that no longer can they, as did the fathers and grandfathers of the contemporary capitalist class, create both a fortune for themselves and some major productive enterprise (some new railway, some great plant, or the like) for the community. For the remaining roads to wealth lie increasingly through a mere manipulation of the ownership of existing enterprises, the merging of companies, the pushing of stocks, the shuffling and re-shuffling of shares. Gambling and the cheating which always goes with it become more and more the essential occupations of the top layer of contemporary society. To such lengths has this prostitution of the older types of economic incentive now gone that the foremost theorists of the capitalist world are themselves profoundly disturbed by it. Mr. Maynard Keynes in his most recent book,* for example, complains that "the capital development of a country" has become the "by-product of the activities of a casino."

Moreover, even in these purely financial fields, as well as in productive industry and in imperial government, the positions of power tend more and more to become hereditary.

* *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money.*

The directors' sons, and sons-in-law, and nephews, fill the avenues to promotion. They sit in the parliaments, the bank parlours, the managing directors' rooms, and in the headquarters staffs of the imperial apparatus of administration and coercion. Capitalist imperialism ossifies. With every decade the order of its hierarchy comes to have less and less relation to merit. The able serve the dull. The insensitive, the foolish and the brutal command; the intelligent and the humane obey.

It is true that in the vast apparatuses of the British and American systems many relatively important posts are still open to the claims of talent. Thousands of able architects, scientists, doctors, and civil servants are still employed on interesting and apparently constructive tasks by the great corporations and by the governmental agencies. And as yet many of these fortunate men and women feel satisfied with their work. But one by one even these workers will be unable to prevent themselves from realising that the decay of the economic system within which they work is bringing to nought, or turning to vile uses, their most brilliant and devoted activities.

The frustration of the contemporary scientist, however well paid and well employed, is now a familiar theme. A notorious example is afforded by the chemist, bio-chemist, or physicist, who sees his work used more and more exclusively to perfect the technique of slaughter. But the technical inventor who produces a device which will enable a hundred men to produce the current supply of some article, where a thousand were required before, is in a similar case. For nothing is now more frequent than that the end result of his invention should be no net increase in the wealth of the world and the ruin by unemployment and destitution of nine hundred of his fellow-men. Or again, the contemporary scientist, having developed some unquestionably useful device, may take it to market and may find a buyer. But his device is now often bought by some great trust, not for use, but in order to prevent its use—so that existing plant and machinery may not be made obsolete.

The young doctor often finds that at the end of his training he must buy the right to attend to the medical needs of the small class of persons who can afford to pay him. If he (or

she) cannot afford to buy a practice, he may well be forced into idleness, surrounded by men and women who suffer and die for lack of his services. For the invisible restraints of the economic system bar the way between his skill and their suffering. Slowly but surely the intolerable irrationality of such an arrangement must break through the formidable conditioning to an acceptance of the world as it is, which the young doctor (like every other young professional man) undergoes in the process of his training.

The situation of members of the other professions is in some ways less obviously affected by their social environment. At certain times and in certain places particular professions still enjoy periods of prosperity. In Britain, for example, the architectural profession, after some years of severe depression, is (since 1936) well employed—just as were the architects of America before 1929. But even in these periods of intermittent, if intense, activity the modern architect must surely sometimes experience disgust at the use to which his talents are put. For example, the American architects in the boom period often derived the utmost satisfaction from solving the technical problems presented by new types of buildings, such as the skyscraper. But, after all, the ultimate purpose of a building is to serve, not as an exercise in statics, but as a place in which to live or work. Hence the architect must in the end be frustrated if his building remains for ever empty.

Again modern architects can, and do, produce elaborate and technically excellent plans for the re-housing of the population on modern standards. And as yet the majority of British and American architects suppose that this is a technical problem. They cannot conceive what communists and socialists can mean when they say that the existing economic system makes the re-housing of the population economically and politically impossible. They believe that the fact that capitalism has never yet anywhere been able to undertake such an enterprise, and that the Soviets, in spite of their inferior technical and material resources, actually are doing so, must be due to some peculiar accident. And yet in this field, too, the sheer force of experience will in the end drive one archi-

tect after another to look into the question of whether the frustration of the purpose of a growing proportion of his work is no accident, but an inherent and predictable effect of the existing social and economic system.

Another category of intellectual workers whose devotion to and enthusiasm for their work attest their earnest sense of its social importance are the teachers. And no doubt many British and American teachers still feel that they can constructively contribute to human welfare. This introduction is written soon after the series of teachers' conferences which are held in Britain during the Easter holidays. In the 1936 Conferences teacher after teacher from the great distressed areas of Britain rose to report that their pupils were too undernourished to learn much.* (In America during recent years there have been states and cities [as, for instance, Chicago] where the teachers were as hungry as the pupils, for during many months they received no pay.) It must surely begin to occur to the teaching profession that the first thing which is necessary for us, and them, to learn is how to arrange our economic life in such a way that we do not keep our children's minds in the numbness of semi-starvation.

In a very few, and relatively very small, fields of human activity (of which the book-publishing trade is a good example) the able and enterprising, *if they are equipped with or can command the necessary capital,* can still find their way to success and independence in free competition with their fellows. How relatively narrow those remaining fields of genuinely competitive endeavour now are can only be envisaged by recalling that once the whole field was of this character. Once it was true that for those who had, or could obtain access to, a relatively moderate sum of capital *(but only for them)* there were great opportunities of independent success. But in one sphere after another the process of trustification and monopolisation has gone forward.

It is true that the great privately owned corporations in banking, industry, commerce, and newspaper publication, which have now largely taken the place of the freely competing individual firms, offer young men attractive careers as

* See page 341 for figures upon this point.

their officers. But these are the careers of well paid subordinates. The ownership and control remains in the hands of a more and more hereditary hierarchy of families. The broad purposes of these controlling families cannot even be questioned by the best-paid employee. If they should be antisocial, he will be as powerless to affect them as the worker at the bench.

The higher officers of the state form another large group of relatively well-paid and secure workers. Such skilled civil servants may, and often do, feel that they are performing an invaluable function. A British civil servant may help to build up a system of unemployment insurance administration which undeniably saves whole districts from starvation. He may, and often does, derive great satisfaction from such work. But in the end the fact that the decay of the present economic system has alone produced the irrational problem of unemployment, which he spends his life in alleviating, should penetrate to his consciousness. Or again, the imperial administrator may help to operate, often with devoted labours, the administrative machine which maintains peace and order in a subcontinent. Many Indian civil servants have up till now felt satisfied by such a life work. But can they ultimately fail to notice that the net effect of their work for the Indian people has been a steady, and now steep, decline in the Indian standard of life?

The truth is that a contracting economic system brings to nought the best efforts of every type of intellectual worker. If society is confined within ever narrower limits, if opportunities for constructive work grow more and more meagre, then the community must needs show those dreadful symptoms of decay which Shakespeare catalogued in his sixty-sixth sonnet.

And art made tongue-tied by authority,
And folly, doctor-like, controlling skill,
And simple truth miscalled simplicity,
And captive good attending captain ill.

The frustrations of our epoch, although not yet universal, are growing. Of those who already experience them commu-

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