

THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT

FREDERICK ENGELS

Reprinted from THE LABOUR STANDARD, models of revolutionary journalism, these articles made many converts. To-day they are of extreme interest, dealing with such subjects as a "Fair Day's Wage," "Trade Unions," Free Trade, a working man's party, etc.

ONE SHILLING

THE BRITISH. LABOUR MOVEMENT

FREDERICK ENGELS

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PREFACE.

FREDERICK ENGELS, from the day he first came to England in 1842, was body and soul in the great Labour Movement of the country. A contributor to Robert Owen's *New Moral World* and afterwards to the *Northern Star* and other Chartist newspapers, he, along with Marx, was regarded by the workers' leaders of his time not as a "foreigner," but as a leader and comrade whose help was invaluable.

From Owen's paper down to *Justice* and the *Commonweal*, the organs of the first English Social Democrats, there was hardly a British labour paper of importance which did not have articles from Marx or Engels, or reproduce their speeches.

In the period after the Paris Commune in 1871 the independent labour Press in Britain practically disappeared and the movement became the tail of the middle-class Liberal Party of Gladstone. With the coming of the 'eighties, however, a change could be felt and the best and most conscious of the workers' leaders began to feel the absolute necessity for a working-class party independent of all capitalist parties.

The London Trades Council was among the first organised bodies to respond to this feeling and the *Labour Standard*, founded in 1881, was the result. Its editor, George Shipton, was secretary of the Council on which were several militant trade unionists who had been connected with the First International. Engels had never lost his connection and influence among these militants and it was quite natural that Shipton should turn to him to write the editorials for the new weekly paper. From May 7 to August 6, 1881, Engels wrote ten articles which we reproduce in this book.

The movement, however, was premature, and the leaders of the London Trades Council, and particularly Shipton, were far from free from liberal influences themselves.

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The last of these articles caused Shipton to be alarmed and he asked that two passages in it be toned down. In his reply Engels said that if these were too strong for him, "then my more forceful articles should appear to be much more so. Therefore, it is better for both of us if I stop writing." (Letter of Engels to Marx dated August 11th, 1881.) He then went on to inform Marx that: "I did not give him the most important reason, namely, that my articles exercise no influence whatever on the other sections of the newspaper. . . . The newspaper has remained the gathering-place of all possible and impossible muddleheads and in its concrete policy . . . inclines towards Gladstone."

Engels' articles deal with the period when mass socialist parties were arising in the countries of Europe and America. The idea that runs through these articles is—the need for a political workers' party in England, which would fight for the dictatorship of the proletariat. Engels presents this idea to the English workers in a very popular form. He begins with the time-honoured slogan of the English labour movement—"A Fair Day's Wage for a Fair Day's Work"—and shows the absurdity of such moral appraisals in the conditions of the class struggle. In capitalist society "that fairness is all on one side—on that of capital." For decades the trade unions have fought for this slogan and what did they achieve? It is true that only through this fight could the working class obtain the most necessary means of existence to maintain its ability to work and propagate its race. But every industrial crisis compels this fight to be commenced anew and the working class remains a "class of wage slaves." The only solution is the destruction of the system of wage labour itself. The most important slogan is: Place the means of production in the hands of the workers themselves!

Using the experience of the labour movement in Germany, Belgium, Holland, Italy and France, and the Chartist movement in England to illustrate his case, Engels demonstrates to the English workers the necessity for the political struggle, for the struggle for power. "We live in a world where everybody is bound to take care of himself. Yet the English workers allow the

landlord, capitalist and retail trading classes with their tail of lawyers, newspaper writers, etc., to take care of their interests." The entire working class of England must rally around its political class party, free from bourgeois influence, and then there will be "no power on earth which could for a day resist the British working class organised as a body!"

In the article on *American Food and the Land Question*, Engels demonstrates the powerlessness of the small-scale farming of Europe in the struggle against the large-scale farming of the American prairies. And he points out to the English workers that the labour movement had a new ally in the shape of the peasantry, and observes that the working class, after taking political power into its own hands, will have to organise the cultivation of the land "by co-operative societies under national control." In another article Engels likewise points to the Irish as allies of the English labour movement.

In a number of articles Engels reveals the class nature of the Free Traders of the Anti-Corn Law League, and draws the very important conclusion that: "England's industrial monopoly is fast on the wane" and this "will break the last link which still binds the English working class to the English middle class." Bourgeois rule is leading England to bankruptcy.

In his last article Engels clearly shows that the existence of the bourgeoisie was not merely superfluous but even harmful. Not one useful economic function has remained for the capitalist to perform. He is doomed to "slow death from over-feeding." Engels' conclusion is simple and clear: "Stand back! Give the working class the chance of a turn!"

The traditional histories of the British working-class movement have always concealed the great part which Marx and Engels played in it, not as theoreticians only, but as practical fighters. Actually, from the Chartist movement in the 'forties down to the Eight Hour movement in the 'nineties, Engels was actively participating in every struggle of the British workers. From the Chartists—George Julian Harney and Ernest Jones—down to John Burns and Tom Mann, the leaders of the great Dock Strike,

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and the founders of the modern labour movement, all the most militant leaders knew and respected Engels and went to him for advice.

It is generally and quite incorrectly assumed that H. M. Hyndman was the first man to try to form an independent socialist party on a class basis in Britain. But the S.D.F. was not founded till 1883 and as we know, Hyndman was deeply influenced by Marx. Engels' articles, appearing in 1881, had a deep effect upon the young and active trade unionists of the day who were turning away from the class co-operation policies of their leaders. It is only necessary to read the famous series *Why I Became a Socialist*, which later appeared in *Justice*, to find overwhelming proof of this.

Workers who have now got an opportunity of reading these articles after an interval of so many years and after such tremendous events have happened in our movement will be struck by two things. First, Engels' deep understanding of the British movement and especially of the important part played in it by the trade unions. Secondly, that the leader of the world working class, and along with Marx its greatest teacher, was able to write in a form so clear and popular that his articles are to this day a model of revolutionary journalism.

These articles, so rich in content and simple in form, are bound to find once more a wide circulation among the British working class and to serve them as a weapon in fighting to carry out those tasks and build that party for which Frederick Engels gave his life.

A FAIR DAY'S WAGE FOR A FAIR DAY'S WORK

THIS has now been the motto of the English working-class movement for the last fifty years. It did good service in the time of the rising Trades Unions after the repeal of the infamous Combination Laws in 1824; it did still better service in the time of the glorious Chartist movement, when the English workmen marched at the head of the European working class. But times are moving on, and a good many things which were desirable and necessary fifty, and even thirty years ago, are now antiquated and would be completely out of place. Does the old, time-honoured watchword too belong to them?

A fair day's wage for a fair day's work? But what is a fair day's wage, and what is a fair day's work? How are they determined by the laws under which modern society exists and develops itself? For an answer to this we must not apply to the science of morals or of law and equity, nor to any sentimental feeling of humanity, justice, or even charity. What is morally fair, what is even fair in law, may be far from being socially fair. Social fairness or unfairness is decided by one science alone—the science which deals with the material facts of production and exchange, the science of political economy.

Now what does political economy call a fair day's wages and a fair day's work? Simply the rate of wages and the length and intensity of a day's work which are determined by competition of employer and employed in the open market. And what are they, when thus determined?

A fair day's wage, under normal conditions, is the sum required to procure to the labourer the means of existence necessary, according to the standard of life of his station and country, to keep himself in working order and to propagate his race. The actual rate of wages, with the fluctuations of trade, may be some-

times above, sometimes below this rate; but, under fair conditions, that rate ought to be the average of all oscillations.

A fair day's work is that length of working day and that intensity of actual work which expends one day's full working power of the workman without encroaching upon his capacity for the same amount of work for the next and following days.

The transaction, then, may be thus described—the workman gives to the Capitalist his full day's working power; that is, so much of it as he can give without rendering impossible the continuous repetition of the transaction. In exchange he receives just as much, and no more, of the necessities of life as is required to keep up the repetition of the same bargain every day. The workman gives as much, the Capitalist gives as little, as the nature of the bargain will admit. This is a very peculiar sort of fairness.

But let us look a little deeper into the matter. As, according to political economists, wages and working days are fixed by competition, fairness seems to require that both sides should have the same fair start on equal terms. But that is not the case. The Capitalist, if he cannot agree with the Labourer, can afford to wait, and live upon his capital. The workman cannot. He has but wages to live upon, and must therefore take work when, where, and at what terms he can get it. The workman has no fair start. He is fearfully handicapped by hunger. Yet, according to the political economy of the Capitalist class, that is the very pink of fairness.

But this is a mere trifle. The application of mechanical power and machinery to new trades, and the extension and improvements of machinery in trades already subjected to it, keep turning out of work more and more "hands"; and they do so at a far quicker rate than that at which these superseded "hands" can be absorbed by, and find employment in, the manufactures of the country. These superseded "hands" form a real industrial army of reserve for the use of Capital. If trade is bad they may starve beg, steal, or go to the workhouse; if trade is good they are ready at hand to expand production; and until the very last man, woman, or child of this army of reserve shall have found work—

which happens in times of frantic over-production alone—until then will its competition keep down wages, and by its existence alone strengthen the power of Capital in its struggle with Labour. In the race with Capital, Labour is not only handicapped, it has to drag a cannon-ball riveted to its foot. Yet this is fair according to Capitalist political economy.

But let us inquire out of what fund does Capital pay these very fair wages? Out of capital, of course. But capital produces no value. Labour is, besides the earth, the only source of wealth; capital itself is nothing but the stored-up produce of labour. So that the wages of Labour are paid out of labour, and the working man is paid out of his own produce. According to what we may call common fairness, the wages of the labourer ought to consist in the produce of his labour. But that would not be fair according to political economy. On the contrary, the produce of the workman's labour goes to the Capitalist, and the workman gets out of it no more than the bare necessities of life. And thus the end of this uncommonly "fair" race of competition is that the produce of the labour of those who do work, gets unavoidably accumulated in the hands of those who do not work, and becomes in their hands the most powerful means to enslave the very men who produced it.

A fair day's wage for a fair day's work! A good deal might be said about the fair day's work too, the fairness of which is perfectly on a par with that of the wages. But that we must leave for another occasion. From what has been stated it is pretty clear that the old watchword has lived its day, and will hardly hold water nowadays. The fairness of political economy, such as it truly lays down the laws which rule actual society, that fairness is all on one side—on that of Capital. Let, then, the old motto be buried for ever and replaced by another:

POSSESSION OF THE MEANS OF WORK—RAW MATERIAL, FACTORIES, MACHINERY—BY THE WORKING PEOPLE THEMSELVES.

The Labour Standard, London.. May 7th, 1881.

THE WAGES SYSTEM

IN a previous article we examined the time-honoured motto, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work," and came to the conclusion that the fairest day's wages under present social conditions is necessarily tantamount to the very unfairest division of the workman's produce, the greater portion of that produce going into the capitalist's pocket, and the workman having to put up with just as much as will enable him to keep himself in working order and to propagate his race.

This is a law of political economy, or, in other words, a law of the present economical organisation of society, which is more powerful than all the common and statute law of England put together, the Court of Chancery included. While society is divided into two opposing classes—on the one hand the capitalists, monopolisers of the whole of the means of production, land, raw materials, machinery; on the other hand, labourers, working people deprived of all property in the means of production, owners of nothing but their own working power; while this social organisation exists the law of wages will remain all-powerful and will every day afresh rivet the chains by which the working man is made the slave of his own produce monopolised by the capitalist.

The Trades Unions of this country have now for nearly sixty years fought against this law—with what result? Have they succeeded in freeing the working class from the bondage in which capital—the produce of its own hands—holds it? Have they enabled a single section of the working class to rise above the situation of wage-slaves, to become owners of their own means of production, of the raw materials, tools, machinery required in their trade, and thus to become the owners of the produce of their own labour? It is well known that not only they have not done so, but that they never tried.

Far be it from us to say that Trades Unions are of no use because they have not done that. On the contrary, Trades Unions in England, as well as in every other manufacturing

country, are a necessity for the working classes in their struggle against capital. The average rate of wages is equal to the sum of necessaries sufficient to keep up the race of workmen in a certain country according to the standard of life habitual in that country. That standard of life may be very different for different classes of workmen. The great merit of Trades Unions, in their struggle to keep up the rate of wages and to reduce working hours, is that they tend to keep up and to raise the standard of life. There are many trades in the East-end of London whose labour is not more skilled and quite as hard as that of bricklayers and bricklayers' labourers, yet they hardly earn half the wages of these. Why? Simply because a powerful organisation enables the one set to maintain a comparatively high standard of life as the rule by which their wages are measured; while the other set, disorganised and powerless, have to submit not only to unavoidable but also to arbitrary encroachments of their employers: their standard of life is gradually reduced, they learn how to live on less and less wages, and their wages naturally fall to that level which they themselves have learnt to accept as sufficient.

The law of wages, then, is not one which draws a hard and fast line. It is not inexorable with certain limits. There is at every time (great depression excepted) for every trade a certain latitude within which the rate of wages may be modified by the results of the struggle between the two contending parties. Wages in every case are fixed by a bargain, and in a bargain he who resists longest and best has the greatest chance of getting more than his due. If the isolated workman tries to drive his bargain with the capitalist he is easily beaten and has to surrender at discretion; but if a whole trade of workmen form a powerful organisation, collect among themselves a fund to enable them to defy their employers if need be, and thus become enabled to treat with these employers as a power, then, and then only, have they a chance to get even that pittance which according to the economical constitution of present society, may be called a fair day's wages for a fair day's work.

The law of wages is not upset by the struggles of Trades

Unions. On the contrary, it is enforced by them. Without the means of resistance of the Trades Unions the labourer does not receive even what is his due according to the rules of the wages system. It is only with the fear of the Trades Unions before his eyes that the capitalist can be made to part with the full market value of his labourer's power. Do you want a proof? Look at the wages paid to the members of the large Trades Unions, and at the wages paid to the numberless small trades in that pool of stagnant misery, the East-end of London.

Thus the Trades Unions do not attack the wages system. But it is not the highness or lowness of wages which constitutes the economical degradation of the working class: this degradation is comprised in the fact that, instead of receiving for its labour the full produce of this labour, the working class has to be satisfied with a portion of its own produce called wages. The capitalist pockets the whole produce (paying the labourer out of it) because he is the owner of the means of labour. And, therefore, there is no real redemption for the working class until it becomes owner of all the means of work—land, raw material, machinery, etc.—and thereby also the owner of THE WHOLE OF THE PRODUCE OF ITS OWN LABOUR.

The Labour Standard, London. May 21st, 1881.

TRADES UNIONS I.

IN our last issue we considered the action of Trades Unions as far as they enforce the economic law of wages against employers. We return to this subject, as it is of the highest importance that the working classes generally should thoroughly understand it.

We suppose no English working man of the present day needs to be taught that it is the interest of the individual capitalist, as well as of the capitalist class generally, to reduce wages as much as possible. The produce of labour, after deducting all expenses, is divided, as David Ricardo has irrefutably proved, into two

shares: the one forms the labourer's wages, the other the capitalist's profits. Now, this net produce of labour being, in every individual case, a given quantity, it is clear that the share called profits cannot increase without the share called wages decreasing. To deny that it is the interest of the capitalist to reduce wages, would be tantamount to saying that it is not his interest to increase his profits.

We know very well that there are other means of temporarily increasing profits, but they do not alter the general law, and therefore need not trouble us here.

Now, how can the capitalists reduce wages when the rate of wages is governed by a distinct and well-defined law of social economy? The economic law of wages is there, and is irrefutable. But, as we have seen, it is elastic, and it is so in two ways. The rate of wages can be lowered, in a particular trade, either directly, by gradually accustoming the workpeople of that trade to a lower standard of life, or, indirectly, by increasing the number of working hours per day (or the intensity of work during the same working hours) without increasing the pay.

And the interest of every individual capitalist to increase his profits by reducing the wages of his workpeople receives a fresh stimulus from the competition of capitalists of the same trade amongst each other. Each one of them tries to undersell his competitors, and unless he is to sacrifice his profits he must try and reduce wages. Thus, the pressure upon the rate of wages brought about by the interest of every individual capitalist is increased tenfold by the competition amongst them. What was before a matter of more or less profit, now becomes a matter of necessity.

Against this constant, unceasing pressure unorganised labour has no effective means of resistance. Therefore, in trades without organisation of the workpeople, wages tend constantly to fall and the working hours tend constantly to increase. Slowly, but surely, this process goes on. Times of prosperity may now and then interrupt it, but times of bad trade hasten it on all the more afterwards. The workpeople gradually get accustomed to a lower and lower standard of life. While the length of working

day more and more approaches the possible maximum, the wages come nearer and nearer to their absolute minimum—the sum below which it becomes absolutely impossible for the workman to live and replace his race.

There was a temporary exception to this about the beginning of this century. The rapid extension of steam and machinery was not sufficient for the still faster increasing demand for their produce. Wages in these trades, except those of children sold from the workhouse to the manufacturer, were as a rule high; those of such skilled manual labour as could not be done without were very high: what a dyer, a mechanic, a velvet-cutter, a hand-mule spinner, used to receive now sounds fabulous. At the same time the trades superseded by machinery were slowly starved to death. But new-invented machinery by-and-by superseded these well-paid workmen; machinery was invented which made machinery, and that at such a rate that the supply of machine-made goods not only equalled, but exceeded, the demand. When the general peace, in 1815, re-established regularity of trade, the decennial fluctuations between prosperity, overproduction, and commercial panic began. Whatever advantages the workpeople had preserved from old, prosperous times, and perhaps even increased during the period of frantic overproduction, were now taken from them during the period of bad trade and panic; and soon the manufacturing population of England submitted to the general law that the wages of unorganised labour constantly tend towards the absolute minimum.

But in the meantime the Trades Unions, legalised in 1824, had also stepped in, and high time it was. Capitalists are always organised. They need in most cases no formal union, no rules, officers, etc. Their small number, as compared with that of the workmen, the fact of their forming a separate class, their constant social and commercial intercourse stand them in lieu of that: it is only later on, when a branch of manufacturers has taken possession of a district, such as the cotton trade has of Lancashire, that a formal capitalists' Trades Union becomes necessary. On the