

**THE CHALLENGE OF LABOUR**

Keith Burgess

Croom Helm 1980 269pp £12.50

THE GENERAL STRIKE OF 1842

Mick Jenkins

Lawrence and Wishart 1980 300pp £9.50

A number of writers have used terms like 'labourism' and 'corporatism' to refer to the political limitations of the British labour movement. This certainly points to a deep-rooted characteristic, and a key problem for the Left. Yet it is a gross over-simplification — and a politically dangerous one — to ignore the conflicts and crises through which the terms of working-class subordination have been fought out.

The process of challenge and re-definition is the theme of *The Challenge of Labour*. Keith Burgess focuses on the de-stabilising pressures that upset the 'accommodation of

labour' established in the third quarter of the nineteenth century, and consequent shifts in ruling-class strategies and ideologies. The development of the ruling class and the state are placed in the centre of the historical stage. State intervention, just before and more strongly during the First World War, was shaped by, and in turn shaped working-class struggles. While aspects of the argument are open to question and qualification the book is a stimulating attempt at an overall interpretation, which hopefully will initiate further discussion.

The core of the book, and its most

convincing part, is an analysis of the new 'pressures experienced by British capitalism from the 1880s to the 1920s, and the shifts in the forms of class rule they necessitated — shifts which were by no means automatically guaranteed. The treatment of the periods before and after this central crisis is less satisfactory. Here Burgess does not entirely escape the static and fatalistic implications of some accounts of 'labourism'. The book ends, rather enigmatically, with the re-consolidation of 'labourism' following the General Strike, and a suggestion that 'Keynesian corporatism' has held undisputed sway down to the present, when it is under challenge; this seems to over-simplify and foreshorten the intervening years.

Similar problems arise in the treatment of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, where Burgess gives a rather schematic account of differences within the working class (the 'labour aristocracy') and exaggerates class collaboration and the influence of bourgeois ideologies. While he rightly emphasises the role of a variety of agencies outside the 'political' sphere narrowly defined, his account of this underplays the real conflicts which threatened the stability of mid-Victorian society, notably working-class resistance to direct and manipulative forms of control.

The continuing presence of labour organisation was a permanent gain from the bitter confrontations of the first half of the century. *The General Strike of 1842* investigates a high point of struggle, when resistance to wage cuts developed into a general strike for democracy. Mick Jenkins sets out to demonstrate the scope and coherence of the movement. This is in some ways an uneven book, with a tendency to lapse into over-rhetorical polemic, but its main case is important and well argued.

It is clear from the evidence presented here that historians have under-estimated the movement of 1842. The links with Chartism were not a reflex of blind protest but part of an organic tradition of working-class activity and leadership, reflecting a 'solemn and conscientious conviction'. This conviction influenced factory operatives and the skilled trades, who are often portrayed as less committed to Chartism than depressed out-working trades like weavers.

Questions remain, however, about how widely these aspirations were shared, and the uneven development of the movement in different trades and regions. Jenkins emphasises the role of the new factory proletariat in cotton and metals. While this is clearly important, it has to be seen in the

context of the radical political culture which had developed over a long period among out-workers and the urban workshop crafts. Factory trades like the spinners and skilled engineers had much in common with the 'old' crafts. More could be said about divisions within the working class, and the depth of mobilisation and unity. For instance the role of women in pickets and demonstrations is noted, yet attitudes to female labour often reflected patriarchal values, with demands for the exclusion of women from spheres of employment. The Charter itself demanded male suffrage only, and images of 'suffering wives and helpless children' and appeals to 'be men' recur in the Chartist documents quoted here.

The book argues that these events represent a historical turning-point in class relationships. They mark a change in ruling-class strategy, with the toleration of limited kinds of protest and concessions on the economic front. The aftermath of the confrontation thus contributed to the separation of 'industrial' from 'political' spheres and the growth of reformist labour organisation in limited sections of the working class.

It is probably valid to identify a broad shift in approach, and to detect signs of it from the mid-1840s, following the period of acute

crisis culminating in 1842. The very volume of anguished debate about the 'condition of England' indicates, not so much the depth of crisis, as the increased confidence that social tensions could be controlled and alleviated. 1842 undoubtedly made a material contribution to this process, but it may be too simple to identify a single turning-point. As the author rightly points out, divisions within the ruling class were an important factor, with other groups showing deep suspicion of the manufacturers. Changing approaches to labour reflect shifts in the balance of interests and opinions, not simply changes in the strategy of a homogeneous ruling class. Specific values and attitudes in government and the state, for instance the inhibitions placed on outright repression by traditions of constitutional legality, also helped determine responses to working-class activity.

But reservations about some of the answers apart, the questions asked are significant ones. And the central case for the importance of these events is well made. Perhaps the most important feature of the strike was the organisational capacity and self-confidence of the workers. That particular advance was a permanent one, even if it could no longer be linked to political programmes.

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