

forcing them to reduce their wages also, some workers decided to break his machines. On June 28th, 1816, a night attack was made by seventeen men, and the machines were all destroyed. Unfortunately, a watchman who threatened to shoot was himself wounded, though not fatally. One man was identified, and was hanged. The crowds at his funeral show that the daring methods of the old Luddites still held their respect. Some time later, one of the other raiders gave away his companions, and six more men were hanged and three transported for life. It was this disastrous incident of 1816 which roused Cobbett to write his "Letter to the Luddites" - an argument in favour of machinery, which is obviously written in complete misunderstanding of the issues involved. (He admitted he did not know "very clearly" what the dispute was about.)

"Nothing to lose but their lives"

In 1816; in the depth of the post-war depression, there were other examples of machine-breaking, in this case of threshing-machines. But these occurred as part of a campaign of direct action against starvation, a series of "riots" that began in late May and continued into July. What is noticeable is that on the whole these were successful in their limited objectives.

In Suffolk, where there had been individual cases of rick-burning and breaking of threshing-machines, a crowd of people marched into the market town of Brandon demanding a reduction in prices of bread and meat. After some disturbances and violence, the leading inhabitants "guaranteed the price of flour at 2/6 per stone, with an advance of wages of 2/- per head" until the millers would reduce their prices.

At Bideford in Devon, a crowd tried to prevent the export of potatoes from this little port. At Frome, crowds in the market prevented an increase in the price of potatoes. At Norwich, flour was taken from the new mills and thrown into the river. Pitmen in Durham went on strike against the high price of corn; but the magistrates, accompanied by two troops of soldiers, "induced" them to return to work.

Into Downham Market, in Norfolk, came a demonstration of 1500 people, who entered all the shops of millers, bakers and butchers, and carried away their goods. Magistrates called in the cavalry and read the Hot Act, and the crowd dispersed. Next day the townsmen went out with the cavalry "to meet the rioters, who armed themselves with guns, pitchforks, clubs and other weapons ready for a general attack." But battle was avoided by the "gentlemen" present making an agreement to advance wages and to release prisoners already taken which victory "induced them to return peaceably to their homes."

At Ely "an immense body of armed Fen-men" attacked a magistrate's house, and went round demanding money. Troops were called in to deal with this "desperate insurrection", and in a pitched battle at Littleport the Fenmen were routed and many prisoners taken.

These actions did not involve machinery. But at Freshingfield, in Essex, 200 men "armed with implements of agriculture as their weapons" destroyed the threshing-machine at one farm and at another "a plough of a new construction that did not please them", and pro-

proceeded to a third farm to destroy another machine. At Hockham in Norfolk a threshing-machine was destroyed by a crowd of 100. While at Bury in Suffolk a hostile crowd demonstrated outside the premises of a hosier who had installed a spinning-jenny.

These riotous proceedings were reported, as they happened, by William Cobbett in his weekly "Political Register", when they began he writes

"Some weeks back I observed that it was impossible for things long to go on quietly as they were then going on, I said that millions of people could not starve; that it was impossible for things to go on till the highways were strewn with dead bodies

"It may be proper to call the offending persons 'insurgents, savages, villains, monsters, etc.' as the "Courier" newspaper does. But then, there are great numbers of Englishmen who are insurgents, savages,, villains monsters. There is no getting out of this dilemma. The fact is, they are people in want. They are people who have nothing to lose, except their livesj and of these they think little, seeing that they have so little enjoyment of them."

Effect of the threshing-machine

Destruction of threshing-machines has a special significance, because it became for a time, together with rick-burning, the recognised method of struggle of the farm labourers. Threshing (by flail) was the main winter occupation when the weather was unfit for other jobs; without it, life in the villages became practically impossible for landless labourers.

The threshing-machine was invented in Scotland about 1786 and came into use during the Napoleonic War when farmers could afford new machinery. Its obvious effect in the post-war depression was to drive people from the land, and in this way the threshing-machino added to the troubles of the handloom weavers in the towns. In 1810 Thomas Smith, sent from Glasgow by a committee of mechanics and weavers to give evidence to a Parliamentary Committee on the cotton trade, said that the number of cotton workers had been inflated by redundant farm-workers:

"I remember well enough two men wore necessary for one plough, one man does that business now. I remember likewise when it took perhaps four men to thrash the corn, that is all done by machinery."

In 1830 J.W. Groaves wrote in "A Reply to Mr. Geary's Appeal to the Weavers of Norwich" (i.e. an appeal to accept a wage-cut) that

"in consequence of machinery superseding the use of manual labour in agricultural pursuits, the country inhabitants have flocked into the city to weaving, and caused a redundancy of hands for the work."

Norwich was a good place to observe the effect of machinery on agriculturo. The handldom weavers, struggling against low wages and unemployment in their ancient trade which was hit, not by machinery directly (for their own organisation was strong enough to prevent this) but by the competition of the West Riding, could sympathise with the farm-labourers. When a number of these were brought into Norwich in 1822, after their campaign against threshing-machines, to be lodged in the Castle for the

Assizes, a crowd turned out to greet them, and as the Suffolk Cavalry came out of the Castle again "they were received with a shower of stones and brickbats, and were stoned completely through the city."

These labourers came from the villages between Attleborough and Diss. For about ten days they had marched around, destroying every threshing-machine they could find. Magistrates and other mounted gentry dispersed them wherever they could, but the crowd would reappear in another parish, re-assembled by the sound of a horn. In the end they were overtaken in the village of Buckenham "by a party of gentlemen, farmers and others.....accompanied by the Eye (Suffolk) Yeomanry Cavalry.... The insurgents scrambled over the hedges, and some into ditches,; the pursuit was most actively carried on, and they succeeded in securing about thirty." (Norwich Mercury, March 9th,1822)

Parliament refuses to intervene

Destruction of machinery was not, of course, the only way of showing opposition to it. Attempts were made from time to time to get Parliament to pass restrictive legislation. None of these were successful. In fact, the aristocratic Parliament of the pre-1832 days was quite as determined as later Parliaments not to interfere in industrial matters.

In 1817 the Petition of the cloth-dressers of the West Biding against the use of gig-mills and shearing-machines was ignored. Mr. (later Lord) Brougham, of the Opposition, said that "to check the use of machinery" would be "as unpolitic as it would be impracticable." No one disagreed with him.

In 1820 a Petition from the cotton weavers for a tax on "a machine called a power loom" and for a fund to provide land for unemployed weavers, was turned down. David Ricardo, the economist, said the duty of the government was "to give the greatest possible development to industry...". The weavers' proposal would "violate the sacredness of property, which constituted the great security of society."

In 1821 the ropemakers of London sent in a Petition with 70 signatures to say that machinery had put two-thirds of thorn out of work. They complained particularly of a machine called "The Devil" which, employing only half a dozen men, could do the work of 97 men. But "the work so done was extremely imperfect, and would of course injure the character of that manufacture in foreign countries". They then asked for a tax on the machine. All that happened was that Mr. Curwen reminded the House that on a previous occasion they had decided that "the discouragement of machinery would be highly injurious to the country."

In April 1823 the Manchester cotton weavers complained of their distress caused by machinery. Mr. G. Philips "denied that the weavers were injured by the use of machinery", and Peel assured the House that after making inquiries he was sure "that the weavers could afford to live in comparative comfort".

A month later the Stockport weavers sent a similar Petition. The local M.P. who presented it declined to support it. Mr. Philips - who seemed incapable of distinguishing between handloom weavers and factory

workers - said that "where machinery was used the wages were the highest... they were paid more for managing machinery than for the mere labour of ... their own hands". Another M.P. referred with approval to Cobbett's "very useful publication on the subject of Machinery" (i.e. his "Letter to the Luddites" of 1816). But Ricardo rebuked him by pointing out that in fact machinery, by "throwing a large portion of labour into the market" without creating a corresponding demand for labour elsewhere did "operate prejudicially to the working classes". All the same he "would not tolerate any law to prevent the use of machinery".

It is not surprising that the unresponsive attitude of Parliament drove the working class at times to direct action,

"We've nothing to eat and nothing to do"

The next example of direct action against new machinery was the "Power-loom Riot" in Lancashire in 1826. The trouble began on April 18th in Accrington, with the stoning of some manufacturers and the breaking of windows at Sykes's power-loom factory. Large-scale attacks on power-loom mills in the whole area then developed; and continued for a fortnight.

The first warning of trouble was an assembly of some thousands of handloom weavers on a hill at Henfield, not far from Blackburn. People who saw them march into Blackburn said; "They came in good order and quietly into the town; about 500 were armed with pikes, several with fire-arms (and these were called captains); some with large hammers, and the remainder with various weapons."

During the whole campaign, which was executed in a disciplined fashion, it was estimated that 20,000 men and youths, with some women, were marching from place to place, dividing up at times to deal with several mills at once. They would demand admittance, then storm the doors and make for the weaving shop. Only power-looms were destroyed; spinning machines (no longer a threat, since hand-spinning had already died out) were left alone. Sometimes cloth woven on power-looms was also destroyed. But nothing was stolen, - on one occasion a man seen removing a strap from the gear was firmly told by his "captain" to put it back, "for we have not come here to plunder."

After the first shock of surprise, the magistrates and manufacturers took action. Urgent messages set troops of cavalry in motion, fetched from this place to that place, and then on to somewhere else; sometimes actually meeting and passing through enormous crowds of weavers en route. With Peterloo in their minds, the people stoned the soldiers when they tried to prevent entry into the mills. Only rarely were the soldiers able to save the power-looms from destruction, for with a planlessness that may not have been altogether unintentional, they usually arrived just too late, and the weavers would escape through windows on the far side of the building.

However, this was not just a "phony war". The soldiers did shoot on several occasions, and at Chadderton seven people were killed, including a woman who "bled to death", and a large number of people were wounded. The magistrates, more enthusiastic than the soldiers, arrested many weavers, and in the Assizes that followed ten were sentenced to death, but sentence was commuted to transportation for life.

One magistrate, more kindly than the rest, tried to remonstrate with the men on their way to Chadderton. The gentlemen of the county had met, he said, and "we are going to send people round to inquire into your situations, to inspect your habitations, and to see what you stand in need of". The men answered: "We are starving now, and our children are famishing at homo. We have nothing to eat and nothing to do. Speaking will fill no bellies. We will break looms whatever may be the consequences, and if one half of us are shot, the other half will break the looms. Away! Away, lads!" and down the hill they rushed to the mill.

The revolt spread to Manchester, where meetings of 15,000 or more in St. George's Fields argued about the best course of action. A certain Jonathan Hodgkins, a journeyman spinner, who advised yet another petition to Parliament, was heckled with cries of "We've petitioned long enough", and one man called out "Will you let me eat at your table till the answer comes?" A majority decided for direct action against the power-looms, and several factories were attacked and one set on fire. Then the movement seems to have got out of hand. Individual weavers went round to shops demanding money or foods and numbers of common thieves and criminal elements started looting and robbing, so that for several days the city was in a state of chaos. But eye-witnesses distinguished sharply between the original action of the weavers and this later development.

Results of the "Power-loom Riot"

Meanwhile the campaign in the cotton towns, having achieved its immediate object, was petering out. But before looking at the results of the campaign, the circumstances should be noted.

1826 was a year of depression, particularly in the cotton trade. Handloom weavers were already driven very low, partly by the direct competition of factory power-looms, and partly because their numbers were inflated by immigration from the countryside and from Ireland. There was a large pool of unemployed weavers, and those still at work were paid very low wages. The slump of 1826 meant that factory owners, to keep their machines running, employed still fewer handloom weavers.

Before the destruction of the power-looms began, Blackburn was known to be completely destitute. On April 5th the Vicar had appealed in the local paper on behalf of "the afflicted poor at this time of unparalleled distress". The Home Office had been informed on April 18th that 14,000 people, out of a population of 26,000, were only kept from actual starvation by the charity of others. Food prices were rising however. On April 13th a Mr. Whitmore moved in the House of Commons for a "revision of the Corn Laws", This motion was defeated by 215 votes to 81. So 250,000 quarters of imported wheat continued to lie in bonded warehouses, while the people starved.

In these circumstances, the campaign against the power-looms takes on the character of an unemployed demonstration backed by force. It was in fact soon in somewhat this light at the time. The "Times" on April 22nd called the riots "one of the most usual and fearful consequences of famine", and while insisting that "Property must be protected", the "Times" continued to comment on the day-to-day events with some sympathy.

It noted with approval that "a part of the master manufacturers have entered into resolutions to pay higher wages". It criticised the Government:

"What has Government done? They have sent soldiers to quell the riot. Have they sent nothing else? It is hard to give men who ask for bread, bullets and bayonets, and only bayonets and bullets."

Being an Opposition paper, the "Times" was pleased to report that "the circumstance - which appearsto have driven the poor weavers at length to desperation is the extinction of all hope of an alteration in the Corn Laws. We have been informed by several manufacturers that they have heard a number of their weavers say they have been waiting to see what would bo done as regards the corn laws..*.." When, after a fortnight of power-loom destruction, the Government reversed its own decision and released some of the bonded corn, the "Times" commented}

"This is the first indication of fear, or of fooling, on account of the distresses which have driven the manufacturers" (in this context the word means hand-weavers) "into their present unhappy state of riot."

Sympathy for the "distressed poor" of the manufacturing districts was very general. The City of London, at a meeting presided over by the Lord Mayor and addressed by the Home Secretary and- the Archbishop of Canterbury, raised £12,000 for "relief to the working classes now suffering distress through want of employment". In Liverpool a Town's Meeting was requisitioned to raise money for the unemployed weavers of Lancashire. At Yeovil in Somerset, then a wool-weaving town, money was collected specifically for the weavers of Blackburn (the centre of the riots). It seems, then, that far from being a failure, the campaign of direct action did draw attention to the needs of the unemployed weavers.

Sympathy was shown in other ways too. As hinted above, the soldiers called out to protect the power-loons and break up the crowds showed no keenness for the job. Most reporters noticed that the cavalry only struck with the sides of their swords that the soldiers took "every opportunity of expostulating with the mob", and that they refrained from shooting even when stoned, or shot over the heads of the crowd. At Chadderton, where the fighting was most serious and the seven deaths occurred, the mill-owner, Mr. Aitkin, tried to stop the soldiers, while his wife had hysterics, and both of them "have since said that they would rather have had their property destroyed than that the life of one human being should have been sacrificed," In other words, while no doubt the real ruling class were more concerned with imposing the usual "Law and Order", the weavers did succeed in winning a considerable amount of public sympathy.

These things should be taken into account in assessing the, effect of the "Power-loom Riot" of 1826. The handloom weavers had little choice as to method. They had never had regular trade unions, and the now trade unionism that was now growing up in Lancashire was amongst the factory workers. In any case, with most of the handloom weavers out of work, the problem was really one of organising the unemployed. That such a degree of solidarity was achieved in 1826 is something worthy of respect.

As for the actual object of the campaign, it was said that not a single power-loom remained in Blackburn or for six miles around. Total damage was estimated at a thousand looms, valued at £30,000. This is a reminder that the power-loom, although invented many years before, was only just beginning to take a hold on the industry. The destruction allowed a breathing space for the handloom weavers in the depths of a slump. It slowed down mechanisation for a short while, for apart from the expense of replacement the mill-owners proceeded with a little caution.

The campaign also brought to the fore the discussion about unrestricted mechanisation. Just as the campaign was subsiding the "Bolton Chronicle" wrote:

"Machinery may be extended too far. And we think it incumbent on Government to lay a heavy tax upon it. It consumes neither food nor clothing? but the shopkeepers, publicans and others in the manufacturing districts obtain the greater part of their livelihood by the money which the working people lay out with, them from their wages."

Criticisms of "unnecessary machinery"

The proposal to tax the new machinery was popular with many manufacturers who could not afford mechanisation or saw no need for it. The new machinery was also opposed by ratepayers in general, who bore the burden of Poor Relief necessitated by the displacement of handloom weaving. The social upheaval caused by this displacement, with its possible dangers for established authority, was also in the minds of some.

Those three trends came together at a meeting held in Rossendale, then still a woollen district, in November 1822, when the "merchants and woollen manufacturers" condemned the application of steam or water power to weaving as "unnecessary as it is uncalled for." They deplored the "evil consequences" to the numerous hand-working population, if machinery were not restricted. They viewed with "painful apprehension" the increase of "unnecessary machinery (which is calculated to rob the poor of their domestic employment, and thereby endanger the peace of the country)". They strongly recommended legislation "for the protection of manual labour", and thought that the best method would be "an assessment upon power looms for the relief of the poor", the assessment to be laid by the Vestry upon the "extra profit derived" by the use of power.

The resolutions passed at this meeting were later published in a pamphlet, the writer of which (probably the chairman of the meeting) enlarges on some of the arguments. Naively telling us that he himself is far from having "radical principles", and that "domestic employment and good morals are, in my opinion, the best cure for sedition and dis-loyalty", he goes on to distinguish between those "mechanical improvements" which increase the employment of the "labouring poor", and those which have the opposite effect. If power-loom weaving is adopted, what substitute is to be provided for handloom weaving? Until this question is answered practically, he says, "the peace of the country may be endangered and a lawless rabble will make it a pretext for committing all the mischief in their power." He then produces an economic argument:

"The pecuniary advantage which speculative adventurers may derive from the first introduction of power looms will be but temporary; and it will eventually recoil upon themselves, by overstocking every markets producing ruinous competition, and ultimately that want of employment which was so seriously experienced throughout the manufacturing districts not three years ago."

"Starvation is her offspring"

This fear of a glut on the market - plenty in the midst of poverty - appears in other pamphlets. In 1832 G.C.Burrows wrote "A Word to the Electors" (of Norwich) "on the Unrestricted Use of Modern Machinery", in which he asked

"How is it that starvation stalks among us while plenty stares us in the face?.....Machinery is the hydra of the present day, starvation is her offspring, and as long as the land is cursed with unrestricted machinery., machinery vying with itself, the inhabitants of the whole earth cannot consume the produce. Every market must be glutted, the industry of the human race be of no avail"

He points out that "nations compete with nations, machinery with machinery; to get this gold, mankind are slaves to things inanimate.... their sustenance, to make cheap goods to meet this competition, reduced to just starvation's point". He blames Machinery for having reduced wages and caused unemployment, and he warns that human subsistence can be driven very low indeed. Already in Scotland "cabbages and barley form the principal article of diet? in the North of England, rye, oats and vegetables, in Ireland, potatoes; to the same fare the people here (Norwich) are fast approaching."

However, his gloomy picture is relieved by a vision of an alternative]

"Societies of men can form communities of common stock, have all things in common, and use machinery, no one aggrieved, all equally receiving the benefit of its use - all equally enjoying the leisure by it produced - all will find time to cultivate the arts, the sciences, philanthropy, philosophy. . . ."

Ruin of a rural industry

So far it might seem that the ratepayers, non-mechanised employers, and mere on-lookers were more vocal than the distressed handloom weaver himself, who was more likely to take to direct action than to reasoned argument. But this impression is mainly due to the fact that the middle classes had easier access to the printing press. Discussions of working men in this period were not normally recorded.

We get a little nearer to their point of view when they themselves are associated with other sections in their protests. In 1827, for example, the "manufacturers, workmen and others" of Frome, a centre of woollen weaving in Somerset, sent petitions to King and Parliament on the distress caused' by new machinery in their trade. They begged for the prohibition of

"gigs, shearing frames, and the whole mechanical apparatus for dressing of cloth, power and single handed spring broad looms, and

a newly invented machine called the mule...because they are of no real advantage, either to the manufacturers or the purchasers of woollen cloth, while they operate most fatally on the labouring classes, and have already deprived upwards of sixty thousand honest and industrious men and their families of their customary employment."

In a pamphlet they make a clover appeal to many interests. Smaller manufacturers find the market glutted by the machine-made goods and have to sell at a loss. Craftsmen like dyers, carpenters and smiths, are put out of their trade because the "great manufacturer" employs his own finishers and maintenance men. Shopkeepers lose by the general depression. Farmers and landowners are hit by the heavy Poor Rate. At last we come to the "minor and subordinate classes of the people", otherwise known as "the labouring poor". This pamphlet, for its own polemical purposes, gives a somewhat idealised picture of a Past that has been destroyed by Machinery, a Past in which every weaver "had boiled or roast meat almost every day, a firkin or two of fat ale in the pantry, and a brawny grunter grunter in the sty" - a state of prosperity, one should add, that was only attained because "every man, woman and child in the woollen trade had their hands full of employment".

But now, says this pamphlet, not only are the weavers, their families and journeymen, out of work, but because of this they are not able to pay the rents of their houses with weaving shop attached. Four hundred of these houses lie empty, while in others two or more families of weavers have crowded together in their poverty. In an outburst that rings true, the writer of this pamphlet attacks the school of thought that preaches the "march of the intellect";

"With the haggard and wo-begone skeletons of our once happy neighbours every where around us, this heartless and inhuman cant about 'the march of intellect and mechanical ingenuity' is as disgusting as it is wicked."

They hoped to find friends

It becomes obvious that opposition to the new machinery was based on the observed results of Capitalism: unemployment and under-employment, the ruin of the home market in the interests of Profit, the squeezing out of small capitalists by their big brothers. For lack of economic and political theory, the blame was laid on machinery as such - or, more accurately, on the "unrestricted use" of machinery.

Yet technical progress itself was accepted, provided it was adapted for use by the hand workers themselves (e.g. the flying shuttle on the loom), or that the dislocation caused by it was temporary and soon overcome (e.g. the spinning inventions which increased total production of cloth and provided more employment in the towns - though, it is true, at the expense of the rural industry)

The power-loom was in a different category because it not only competed With the handloom weaver but made his product uneconomic. However many more hours the weaver and his family toiled, they still could not compete with two looms run by power and watched over by a mere girl,

Yet the handloom weavers still hoped for some mechanical invention that would put them on equal terms with the power-loom, as the following story shows. Somewhere about 1828 John Harvey Sadler, an inventor and engineer, came from London to Manchester to demonstrate his power-looms on which he had patented certain improvements. But the factory he was visiting had no steam-engine yet, so he fixed the looms temporarily to work by hand. A rumour quickly went round the mill, and very soon round the whole city, that he had invented a pair of looms that could be worked by one man. A deputation of handloom weavers came to see the new looms.

"But never shall I forget how their countenance fell at the first sight of them; they saw they were steam looms, and they found new enemies where they had hoped to find friends. The deputation remained with me nearly three hours, during which I heard a full recital of all their grievances,...."

From that moment Sadler "became "p decided adversary to power weaving" and he promised the weavers that he would try "to contrive machinery to give them all those advantages they so much needed."

The deputation told Sadler of attempts already made to adapt their looms by "fixing one warp above the other in the same loom, so as to weave two webs in one loom; but it was found on trial that a man required to have double strength to weave double work that way." One of the men said that "he with others had bought power looms, hoping that with the aid of a fly wheel they should be able to contend against their masters with their own weapons; but the action of turning a fly wheel with only two looms attached was found too laborious for any one man to stick to the whole day through, and so that attempt failed, as indeed did many others which at that time were thought of and tried."

"All this grand machinery"

Sadler kept his word. In 1830, after "many a sleepless night", he patented a pair of looms, that could be worked by one man by means of a pendulum mechanism. A weaver who had tried it wrote in the "Star" newspaper that it required only a knack which could be easily learned; he was confident that now the handloom weaver would be able to compete with steam-power. (The only advantage at that time of steam-power in the factories was that a girl could watch two looms; the looms themselves did not, it seems, operate more quickly than the handlooms.)

Sadler next demonstrated the looms in Huddersfield, where they caused a great stir amongst the handloom weavers, who foresaw the extension of power-weaving into the woollen trade. They were sure that Sadler would be induced to sell his looms to the factory-owners. To relieve their minds Sadler called a delegate meeting of woollen workers in the West Riding, (Amongst others on the platform was Richard Oastler, champion of the factory children.)

Here Sadler pledged his support for the handloom weavers in their struggle against machine-made cloth. With his looms, he believed (with the inventor's usual optimism) that "every hand weaver's cottage in England" could have an income of 12/- per week. He intended also "to bring back to

cottage labour" everything connected with spinning, and he hold up a model spinning machine worked by "a rotary motion produced by the backward and forward stroke of a pendulum". To an enthusiastic audience he expressed his belief that "a fair division of the benefits of all this grand machinery hitherto invented for, and operating to, the injury of man (Hear! Hear!) will now, I feel certain, be brought to be conducive to his wants." (Cheers).

He believed, he said, that he had shown "the men of ingenuity in Britain" that there was "another road for thorn to exercise their abilities on . . . The old road leads to the people's destruction, but the new one to their comfort and happiness. . . ." He hoped to live to see "every weaver and every spinner in the kingdom, and all others connected with them, happily employed in their cottages, with their families around them in comfort and peace."

This, then, was the ideal in the minds of the hand workers of the early 19th century - an ideal that, at the theoretical level, can be classed as backward-looking, Utopian, and fundamentally anti-socialist. But if we approach it from the earlier period, without our own acquired knowledge of later developments, we can sympathise with the aspirations of these hard-pressed human beings, for whom the sun of Socialism based on mechanised industry had not yet risen. Clearly, the handworkers had no hatred of machinery and inventions if only they could be harnessed to the simple needs of the working people.

(The end of this story is pathetic. The poverty-stricken handloom weavers could not afford to buy new looms. Sadler tried to float a company with a capital of £282,350 to supply one million looms at 1/6 per week rent. But who could be expected to invest money in an invention that could be outdated by the simple expedient of improving the power-looms themselves?)

The argument of "foreign competition"

There was an ugly side to Mr. Sadler's abortive invention. At the time when weavers were still optimistic about it (i.e. in 1831) Thomas Worsley of Stockport wrote a testimonial for Sedler which included the following passage:

"The Saxon weavers. . . . will find themselves eclipsed. France. . . . Will be an importing country. The extensive manufactures at Syria, Armenia, and Persia, and even the Chinese will be equally paralyzed, as are the calico weavers now in Hindostan; and the Pacha of Egypt, with his power-looms; will have the world to begin again."

Increased production under Capitalism, whether by power or by hand, would be at the expense of other peoples of the world, and particularly of the defenceless colonial people. At the very time when Thomas Worsley was gloating over this prospect, the "calico weavers of Hindostan" were dying of starvation. In 1834/5 the Governor-General of India reported: "The misery hardly finds a parallel in the history of commerce. The bones of the cotton weavers are bleaching the plains of India." (quoted by Marx, "Capital" vol. I, chap. 13.)

Worsley was perhaps an unimaginative man, easily impressed by nationalistic arguments. But his attitude was not typical of the hand workers of the period. It is to the credit of the victims of "unrestricted machinery" that- in spite of incessant propaganda from the capitalists, they refused to see foreign workers as their enemy. Against the argument that machinery must be introduced into British industry in order to do the foreigners down, they put the ideal of a fully developed homo market based on the well-being of the workers themselves. Continually they gave the warning that the uncontrolled introduction of machinery at the expense of the hand workers was simply ruining the home market. An anonymous pamphlet published in York in 1826 answers the criticism "What! Would you stop the progress of science and let foreigners have the advantage of us?" by sayings

"I call it a meagre sort of science, or at any rate a gross misapplication of science, if it is to be directed towards the starvation of a deserving and once-flourishing population....." (and as to the advantage to be gained by foreigners) "The advantage would not be gained over us, it would be gained over the mercenary views of a few capitalists."

This shrewd distinction between "us" and "a few capitalists" seems to be characteristic of the 1820's. The pamphlet published in 1827 on behalf of the "manufacturers, workmen and others" of Frome (referred to above) draws a clear line between themselves and "our great manufacturers" who alone could afford to install new machinery in new factories. A pamphlet of 1825 called "Manual Labour versus Brass and Iron", written by a Lancashire weaver after reading an advertisement of a "Self-acting Mule" asks the question: "What ADVANTAGE is to be expected from this invention?" and answers it by saying that "The Capitalists, after having accumulated princely fortunes from the united industry of the working classes" now hope to be able to dispense with "their labour altogether."

The "labouring animals" claim the rights of men

In 1830 arguments on paper gave way again to direct action against machinery. In a mass campaign beginning in Kent in the early autumn and spreading through the whole of the southern counties and South Midlands, agricultural labourers destroyed threshing machines, burnt corn-stacks, and forced farmers to raise their wages.

The bare facts cannot do justice to this extraordinary episode in English history, when the down-trodden villagers of a dozen counties, without any previous organisation, rose up and forced a living wage out of the gentlemen-farmers. Neither can the mere statement that as a result 9 men were hanged, 457 transported to Australia and 400 imprisoned in this country, convey much idea of the magnitude of the movement. (The story has been written with great sympathy by the Hammonds in their "Village Labourer", where they comment that "Most of the agricultural population... had made itself liable to the death penalty, if the authorities cared to draw the noose.")

Every observer seemed agreed about the desperate poverty of the farm-labourers. When the campaign was still confined to Kent, the "Times" quoted with approval a leading article in the "Kent Herald":

"The fact is that the labouring classes have been long borne down, (Oppressed in every way by their superiors, and by the political system upheld by their superiors. They have boon gradually thrust down and trampled on, despised, driven to starvation, misery and despair. . . ." (and while the farmer has become a gentleman, so that "an insuperable barrier has been raised between the 'parlour' and the 'kitchen'", the labourer has become merely "a labouring animal on the estate")

("Times" Oct. 30th)

As late as Dec 6th tho "Times" wrote: "Let the rich be taught that Providence will not suffer thorn to oppress their fellow creatures with impunity." But by December 18th the Government had already put the first batch of 300 of its fallow creatures on trial at Winchester.

During the autumn it had become obvious that on the whole the farm labourers had the sympathy of all classes in these counties - except for the most rabid believers in poverty as the natural state of the poor. Landowners like Lord Winchilsea spoke for thorn in the House of Lords, while locally the landed class mostly acted as mediators between the labourers and their employers, the farmers. The small farmers showed their opinion by refusing to act as special constables to prevent the "riots". Even the farmers who were forced to sign agreements to pay higher wages were not unwilling to cooperate with the men in inducing the vicar to reduce MB tithes. It was also noticed that in many cases the farmers had offered no real resistance to having their threshing-machines broken, and in fact had often put them out ready.

This was mainly a campaign to get wages raised to 2/6 per day (or 2/- in the poorer counties) by what can only be called mass deputations. In Sussex, particularly, whole villages, including the better-off craftsmen, turned out and demanded the attendance of all the farmers, who were then asked to sign a new wages agreement. In some places the unpopular Overseer of the Poor was run out of the parish in a dung-cart. Although in some counties money was demanded at the farms when threshing-machines were destroyed (the "charge" was normally £2 for their trouble!) absence of personal violence was a feature of the whole campaign, the only casualty being a labourer.

In some places there was destruction of other property. In Wiltshire where the domestic woollen industry was a dying trade, a woollen mill containing machinery was damaged, the leader of the attack saying "he was going to break the machinery to make more work for the poor people." A cloth factory was also destroyed. In Hampshire a factory making threshing-machines was destroyed, and two workhouses were sacked, the sick inmates being guarded from harm. In Buckinghamshire, paper-mills at Aylesbury employing machinery were attacked by unemployed men.

The reason for the destruction of the threshing-machines was - as in 1816 - because they took away the main winter employment. The men believed that if all the machines in the area could be got rid of, no farmer would suffer from competition from the quicker method, and threshing by flail could continue; the farmers seem often to have agreed. So the remarks of Mr. Baron Vaughan, one of the judges at the Winchester trials, were particularly asinine:

"The same argument which justifies or recommends the destruction of the threshing-machine could also apply to the abandonment of the use of the flail, the spade, the hoe, the axe....."

This ridiculous assumption that the working people were so stupid as to hate machinery as such is found in pamphlets of the time. Even Cobbett, the champion of the working people, had been guilty of this mistake in his "Letter to the Luddites" of 1816 - which explains why the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge had his pamphlet re-published in 1831. This Society - whose main job was the diffusion of the kind of knowledge that it was useful (for the ruling class) that the working class should have - also published in 1831 a 200-page booklet explaining to the ignorant working men how civilisation had gradually been built up by the invention of more and more tools, and how, if they now destroyed all tools and machines, the country would be reduced to state of savagery! And in the meantime, if the foolish mob continued to destroy machinery, "capital would make itself wings and fly away to other countries, where men still acted as reasonable beings."

New struggles and new methods

Why was 1830 the last occasion of machine-breaking on any considerable scale? Why was there no machine-breaking after 1826 in the basic cotton industry? The cruel sentences imposed on the farm labourers might help to account for their acquiescence in poverty after 1830 (though six men of Tolpuddle were not intimidated). But this explanation does not hold good for the industrial North. Neither does the theory that the handloom weavers lost heart, and gave up the struggle for survival, fit the facts - unless Chartism is also, like Luddism, to be dismissed as a movement of despair.'

The eventual triumph of mechanised industry, and the assimilation of the handloom weavers into other jobs, does not account for the transitional period of the 1830's and 1840's.

The explanation may be as follows: Machine-breaking, whether seen as part of an industrial struggle or as an "unemployed campaign" against the machine itself, was merely one form of the struggle against poverty. But there were many other possibilities opening out for the working class by the 1830's.

In the first place, trade unionism was legalised in 1824, and quickly became the normal method of struggle of the now factory workers. This could not fail to influence the methods of the older type of hand workers also, and in the 1830's we find Committees established in hand-weaving districts for the specific purpose of campaigning for legislation to regulate wages (as in Kilmarnock) or to protect the handloom industry (as in Bradford). (Committees representing handloom weavers were not a completely new thing, for they had been formed from time to time before the passing of the Combination Acts to get petitions signed and sent to Parliament, or to negotiate with the employers;; in Norwich the Weavers' Committee was a power even during the period of illegality.)

In the second place, the method of "direct action" could be diverted to other aims. The 457 exiled farm-labourers had scarcely left the shores of England before mass demonstrations, leading later to destruction of property., began in industrial centres - for the Reform Bill. A few years later, the industrial North was destroying workhouses, provided under the New Poor Law of 1834 very largely to drive the victims, of the Industrial Revolution into the factories.

In the third place, apart from these examples of "direct action", there were the mass campaigns that developed in the 1830's with the object of obtaining certain specific legislation - the "Short-time" campaign to reduce factory hours for children to ten per day; the campaign for the repeal of the New Poor Law; and later, the development of the Chartist movement for political rights, Handloom weavers took part in these campaigns, and in these different ways they were helping themselves.

If these campaigns were a valuable political experience for the working class, and a step forward in the class struggle, the earlier phenomenon of "Luddism" in all its forms had helped to provide the pattern of solidarity and mass action.

Short reading guide:

A carefully documented account of Luddism in the textile and frame-knitting industries is to be found, in "The Skilled Labourer" by J.L. and Barbara Hammond; who also give a sympathetic account of the farm-labourers' rising of 1830 in their "Village Labourer"

This pamphlet leans heavily on the work of the Hammonds so far as the narrative part is concerned. Contemporary newspapers, when they have been referred to, seem to confirm their view of events. For the "power-loom riot" of 1826 reference was made to the long eye-witness reports from Lancashire newspapers reprinted in the "Times".

More detailed accounts of Luddism in particular districts are to be found in

F.O.Darvall's "Popular Disturbance and Public Order in Regency England" (a scholarly but unsympathetic study);

A.Temple Patterson's article on "Luddism, Hampden Clubs and Trade Unions in Leicestershire, 1816-17" (English Historical Rev. 1948)

Frank Peel's "Risings of the Luddites" (Yorkshire - based on recollections and traditions told to the writer)

The chapters on "The Industrial Revolution and Labour" and "Intervention and Laissez-faire" in Paul Llantoux's "The Industrial Revolution in the 18th century" provide a useful background to a study of Luddism.

The contemporary pamphlets from which quotations are given are all to be found in the "London Bibliography of the Social Sciences" under the heading "Machinery in Industry". further details can be given to anyone who wants the exact references.

Correction

Two readers have written to disagree with the statement in the spring number of "Our History" ("The Class struggle in Local Affairs", page 10) that "There was more democracy in some local elections than in General Elections, for in the boroughs the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835 had given the local vote to all ratepayers. (Wives, grown-up children, lodgers and paupers, being of course excluded by this definition.)"

They point out that this question was investigated by Lady Simon of Wythenshawe in her book "A Century of City Government: Manchester 1838-1938" (which should have been mentioned in the reading guide). In Appendix I, "The History of the Municipal Franchise"; she points out that although the franchise in boroughs was intended by the legislature to be more democratic than the Parliamentary franchise, in fact the opposite proved to be the case. The residence qualification was longer, being three years; and the practice of compounding for the rates of houses of rentals between £6 and £20 (a private arrangement by which the landlord paid rates direct and recovered from tenants with the rent) meant that the tenants' names did not appear on the rates books and so they were not entitled to vote in municipal elections. In Manchester in 1838 there were 34,000 assessments to rates, but only 6,600 names on the voting list, of whom practically none were tenants paying less than £10.

A criticism has also been made that the modern (post-1918) period emphasises Communist Councillors rather than the work of Labour Councils. Any impression of sectarianism is to be deplored. But in fact, in the limited space, examples were selected for the variety of their experience. Poplar and Bormondsey Councils were not led by Communists. Bethnal Green was, but it deserves a place in history not for this fact but because it set an example in democratic responsibility to the electorate. The later housing struggles were undoubtedly initiated by Communists, who developed new forms of struggle which were quickly taken up by the working class as a whole. Communist Councillors were few, but the basis of their support was worth looking at.

These "Our History" pamphlets do not, of course, purport to be comprehensive or the last word on the subject. They should however be accurate.¹ Corrections made by readers will be published. Wider criticism cannot be printed in full for lack of space but will be summarised

This pamphlet is the second quarterly number of "Our History" published by the Historians' Group of the Communist Party. The next two numbers will deal with "The struggle for educational opportunity"

and a study of the SDP and BSP (fore-runners of the Communist Party) in the years 1900 to 1914.

The pamphlet advertised as "The Role of Law in class society" has been postponed until next year and will be amended to a study of the historical background in our country to personal liberty, legality, etc.

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