

## Commitment and Working Class History

### A Review of recent Labour Movement History

THE death of G. D. H. Cole provides a good opportunity for surveying the progress of labour history, which he dominated virtually single-handed for more than a generation. Those whose memories do not go back beyond 1945 will find it difficult to realise how completely he did so. What, after all, was accessible to the student before the end of the war? The Webbs; a few books by socialist scholars; a medium-sized pile of almost valueless trade union histories written by retired officials or journalists—and the long and sober series of Cole's works: on the *History of the Working Class Movement*, on *The Common People* (with Postgate), on Owen, on Cobbett, on the Chartists, on Labour Politics and a vast range of other subjects. Except for the Webbs' *History of Trade Unionism*, Cole's were probably the only books on labour history on the shelf of even the moderately specialist reader. Few men have been so identified with a subject.

Since 1945 the situation has changed very considerably, and in the past few years it has been transformed. In the first place a younger generation of left-wing historians, largely inspired by Cole, has come into its own. In the second, the Labour movement (perhaps encouraged by the presence of sympathetic scholars) has taken a rather less cavalier attitude towards its history than in the past. In the third, it has become academically respectable\*. Publications about it cascade from the presses both here and in the U.S.A. What is more, the common academic attitude towards labour history has been revolutionised. When *The Common People* first appeared, I seem to remember at least one reviewer dismissing it with the observation that it was no doubt competently done, but who was interested in the ups and downs of such obscure organisations? Today the standard history of the 19th century, the *Age of Improvement* (1959) is by Asa Briggs, who is not the man to make this mistake.

The historical reasons for this change are obvious enough. What needs investigation are its consequences. These are partly good and partly deplorable.

They are good, because for the first time yawning gaps in our knowledge are being plugged. For instance, we have since the war acquired competent histories, worthy of the name, of the miners, of at least four printing unions, of the boot-and-shoe operatives, the first serious study of modern strikes, several books on the working of modern trade union organisation, reasonable histories of several trades councils, and a history of the T.U.C. which, biased as it is, is at least an improvement on nothing\*. We now possess at least five books on the history of the Labour Party from the origins to 1924\*\*. The dark period up to 1850 is now illustrated by a few shafts of light, though we still, and unaccountably, lack a full-scale modern history of Chartism\*\*\*. The historical study of work-

ing class conditions and working class structure has emerged from the coma in which it was not so long ago. Even the study of working class culture has made some progress. In a word, quantitatively speaking, labour history is in a remarkably healthy condition.

In the second place, the academic boom has helped to remove large tracts of labour's record from the realm of mythology. For the history of "the movement" has been more than a matter of academic interest to its members and supporters. It has been the history of a crusade; of man's fight for freedom; of the battle of the children of light against the children of darkness. It has been—especially when passed on by word-of-mouth tradition in lodges, branches and classes—something like a heroic moral epic, and in popular memory its episodes adapted themselves to their dramatic role. Some of these dramatic myths are essentially correct. However the scholar may beat about the bush, the behaviour of Macdonald Snowden and Thomas in 1931 will always be what the rank and file has called it, a "great betrayal". Some are quite phoney. Some are merely examples of epic exaggeration. Such episodes are admirably suited to the cool eye of the academic scholar, who has no great partisan feeling about them. (When he has, like R. Bassett in his treatment of *Nineteen Thirtysone* (1958), anti-myth tends to become new myth.) S. Graubard's treatment of the Zinoviev letter is a good example of this. He shows by careful investigation that it is extremely unlikely that this document—which he thinks may quite probably have been a forgery—had the disastrous electoral effects on Labour's fortunes which tradition claims. If Labour lost in 1924, it was not because the Tories pulled a publicity stunt.

Unfortunately the academic researcher, while an admirable destroyer of myth and sentimentality, is also apt to destroy a much more important quality of labour history: its commitment. For of course, the subject has been created, pioneered, and until recently almost monopolised by writers who wrote not for Ph.D.s, promotion or foundation grants, but for the movement: to inspire it, to help it learn the lessons of its past mistakes and successes, to elaborate the right political strategy and tactics for it, to defend it against its detractors. This is in no way incompatible with the most scrupulous scholarship. Indeed, few achievements of sheer scholarship are more impressive than the Webbs', whose *History of Trade Unionism*, written in the early 1890s, though supplemented and occasionally corrected, still remains in substantial possession of the field. What the commitment of the socialist labour historians ensured, was not only that they helped the movement, but also that they understood it. They wrote "from inside"; they knew what it was all about. This is precisely the quality which the purely academic students tend to lack, and this lack has sad consequences.

Moreover, in recent years such lack of contact has been reinforced by an even more dangerous tendency: the growth of non-socialist preconceptions among labour historians. They are partly those of "neutral" academics (whose neutrality often conceals a fundamental liberal reformism), partly by those of a sort of Transport House school of labour studies. Most of the recent studies of trade union structure and policy—for instance Hugh Clegg's *General Union* (1957)—seem to be in sympathy with the "moderate" side. And in his extraordinary history of the T.U.C. (which has been taken to pieces by Royden Harrison in the *New Reasoner* 6) Ben Roberts goes so far as to blame, of all people, the Webbs for excessive leftism in their treatment of the late 19th century T.U.C. moderates. The Webbs, of course, were at the time they wrote, extreme anti-marxist reformists who doubted even the need for an independent labour party. Nobody stood further to the right of the socialist movement than they. But—they were socialists, and firmly convinced also, that the trade union leaders now praised by Roberts were quite simply not up to their job of trade unionists, which is the defence and improvement of the workers' conditions. They were Fabians—but not moderate liberals.

Such tendencies do not produce wholly worthless history. No work based on the sources and dealing with new subjects

\* Those published recently include Alan Fox, *A History of the National Union of Boot and Shoe Operatives* (1958), *Sheffield Trades and Labour Council* (1958), B. C. Roberts, *The Trades Union Congress 1868-1921* (1958).

\*\* H. Felling, *The Origins of the Labour Party* (1954), F. Beaky and H. Pelling, *Labour and Politics 1900-1906* (1958), P. Poirier, *The Advent of the Labour Party* (1958), S. R. Graubard, *British Labour and the Russian Revolution* (1956), R. W. Lyman, *The First Labour Government* (1957).

\*\*\* The most recent books are D. Read's *Peterloo* (1958) and A. R. Schoyen's *The Chartist Challenge* (1958).

can fail to be of some use. But history written in this spirit will be much less valuable than it might have been, and may be downright bad. The point may be illustrated from Henry Pelling's *The British Communist Party* (1958). This is in every respect, including documentation, a much weaker and skimpier book than the author's earlier studies, one of which—*Labour and Politics 1900-1906*—is an indispensable though patchy work, which shows the academic contribution to labour history at its best. But the weakness is itself symptomatic, for it is much harder to write the history of a revolutionary party, especially one which rouses strong passions, than to trace the evolution of a reformist pressure group.

Mr. Pelling significantly confuses two propositions: the relevant one that "all the absurdities of the history of the party spring from (the) fact, that it has been a revolutionary party in a non-revolutionary situation", and the irrelevant one, that the C.P. is in some sense an alien and freak body because it is revolutionary and Marxist-Leninist. The first is a tenable conclusion from obvious facts; the second is fundamentally a statement of emotional dislike, which obscures fact. For what leaps to the eye of the observer is, that the British C.P., small and wayward though it has often been, has also been remarkably typical of the British labour movement. (The point was made some twenty years ago by Borkenau, who, though anti-Communist, had no axe to grind about Britain.) The very evidence which Pelling adduces for the party's "foreignness"—its relative lack of appeal to the English, as compared to the "Celtic fringe", actually helps to prove the opposite. The geographic distribution of leftwing strength is traditionally very uneven. And like Communism, Liberal-Radicalism and Labour have also tended to be markedly weaker in England than in Scotland and Wales, as a glance at the electoral map of the declining Liberal Party, or of Labour in times of crisis—say during the 1930s—will show.

Now the historian who starts with the presumption that the C.P. is not really an integral part of the Labour movement, like the politician who, regards all agitators as foreigners, is likely to overlook the most interesting things about his subject, especially if he also lacks the "feel" of the labour movement.

For instance, he will, like Pelling, discuss the 1930's without adequately considering the trade union side of the C.P.'s work. This is historically grotesque. The "Red Decade" was the time when the party turned itself into an organisation largely composed of younger trade union cadres: it is not a negligible fact that almost half the delegates at the 1937 Congress were "holding official positions in the Trade Union movement". It was then that it acquired large and strong bases in several important industries. In 1932 few would have predicted that after 1942—earlier figures are not available—Congresses would rarely contain fewer than 25% of engineering and electrical workers. The reasons for this, though neglected by Pelling, are simple. By 1933 the British trade union movement, after a disastrous spell, had fallen to little more than its 1913 membership. It was ready for revival. As usual, the rightwing leaders were in general neither able nor willing to provide the new ideas, the new policies, or the initiative. As usual the extreme

left did so. What the Marxists had done after 1888, the assorted rebels in 1911-14, the Communists did—and did better—in the 1930s and 1940s. In due course their rank-and-file leaders became official leaders: the rise of Stevens, Foulkes and Haxell in the E.T.U. parallels the rise of Burns, Mann and Barnes in the engineering union of the 1890s. The full results of these changes did not make themselves felt until the 1940s, when Communists were to be accepted as chief spokesmen for the "T.U.C. Left"—which extended far beyond the ranks of the "party unions". But the foundations for these developments were laid in the "Red Decade", and a history of the C.P. which pays no attention to them is wasting most of its readers' time; at least if they are interested in the working-class movement.

The rise of the "Transport House" historians and the historical cold warriors has made no contribution to labour history. The rise of an academic school of labour historians has. For one thing, it has helped to introduce adequate historical standards among "committed" labour historians of the old type, not all of whom had the technical competence of the Webbs or Cole. At least we may now hope that totally useless booklets of a type which was long familiar to us—the 1949 E.T.U. is an example—will no longer pass muster. Nevertheless, the function of the "uncommitted" historians must remain a minor one. The history of the labour movement is that of men and women who, whatever their day-to-day activities and their involvement in the status quo, have intimations of the new Jerusalem. To write the history of such a movement is, and must be, easier for those who themselves know what it is like to desire a new world, than for those who, fundamentally, view such desires with incomprehension. The "committed" historians can be expected to, go more deeply into the movement, to explore it more adventurously, for the same reason that has made the "committed" leftwing historians (mostly marxists or marxist-influenced) the transformers of French Revolutionary studies: Jaures and Mathiez, Labrousse and Lefebvre. The academics (unless too committed the other way) may be expected at best to consolidate the new territories won by the committed: for instance, their recent rediscovery of the native British socialist thinkers—William Thompson, Ernest Jones, William Morris—or the pioneering forays into the prehistory of the movement of which George Rude's work on British eighteenth century riots (summarised in his excellent *Crowd in the French Revolution*, 1959) is a striking example.

Nevertheless, an honest survey of recent labour history must conclude that neither the advances nor the consolidation are as yet very impressive. One or two ideas have been put forward. Gaps have been filled. But the adequate modern synthesis of labour history, which will make the Webbs and Cole obsolete—to relegate them to the museum is the best compliment we could pay them—is still not in sight. Nor has anybody of the younger generations written or begun a work of the scope or sweep of that *History of Socialist Thought* which will probably remain G. D. H. Cole's most lasting monument. Perhaps the time for the new synthesis has not yet come. Until it has, Cole will continue from his grave to dominate his subject.

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## G. D. H. COLE

With the death of G. D. H. Cole, British Socialism has lost its best scholar and teacher. In his daily life and in his teaching he held fast to an idea of Socialism which was both revolutionary and humanist. This journal in its origins owed so much to Cole's example and encouragement that it is difficult for us yet to assess the true degree of our debt to him.