

Britain: 180 years since the Newport Rising—Part 1

By Paul Bond
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The following is the first of two-part article. The second part will be posted November 5.

On November 4, 1839, several thousand Chartists, carrying arms, marched into Newport, Wales. They surrounded the Westgate Hotel, demanding the release of fellow Chartists imprisoned there. In response, troops and special constables opened fire, killing around 22 and wounding many more. More than 200 were arrested, and the three main leaders of the march were convicted and sentenced to death for high treason. Their sentences were later commuted to transportation, or penal relocation.

The Newport Rising, as it has become known, marked an historic point in the development of the class struggle and the organisation of the working class in Britain.

The Chartist movement was the culmination of political developments in the working class in the decades following the 1789 French Revolution. Although formed under the banner of immediate demands for suffrage reform, under conditions of a deep economic crisis the Chartist movement represented the beginnings of a revolutionary development of the British working class.

Writing in 1885, Friedrich Engels described the situation:

“Every ten years the march of industry was violently interrupted by a general commercial crash, followed, after a long period of chronic depression, by a few short years of prosperity, and always ending in feverish over-production and consequent renewed collapse. The capitalist class clamoured for Free Trade in corn, and threatened to enforce it by sending the starving population of the towns back to the country districts whence they came, to invade them, as John Bright [a political representative of the free trade bourgeoisie], said, not as paupers begging for bread, but as an army quartered upon the enemy. The working masses of the towns demanded their share of political power—the People’s Charter; they were supported by the majority of the small trading class,

and the only difference between the two was whether the Charter should be carried out by physical or by moral force. Then came the commercial crash of 1847 and the Irish famine, and with both the prospect of revolution.” (Quoted in Engels’ 1892 “Preface to the English Edition,” *The Condition of the Working Class in England*)

Demands for an extension of the vote had been on the rise over the previous decades. This reflected the devastating social crisis confronting working people, and also a developing class consciousness. Initially, the suffrage movement of the period following the Napoleonic Wars had largely united the emergent working class behind the liberal demands of the disenfranchised petty bourgeoisie. However, the lessons learnt in the process—from the brutal repression meted out to those demanding it in print or, as at Peterloo, at public meetings—had begun to create a more militant movement of the working class, which was beginning to identify itself as a class.

In 1832 the Reform Act was introduced, which left the working class still disfranchised. Under the Act, high property qualifications were set to restrict the vote to those owners of land worth £10 in the cities and tenants-at-will paying an annual rent of £50. Prior to the Act, the electorate stood at around 400,000. Afterwards, only 650,000 were able to vote—about one in five eligible adult males.

The limited extension of the vote sharpened delineations, with some of those who had agitated for suffrage reform unhappy that it went nowhere near far enough. The landowner Henry “Orator” Hunt, the main speaker at Peterloo, opposed the 1832 Act. That same year, he was ridiculed in Parliament for advocating suffrage for women. Lord John Russell, one of the architects of the Act, announced that it had perfected the British Constitution, which required no further amendment.

The situation was exacerbated by the 1834 Poor Law, which created workhouses. Tory industrial reformer Richard Oastler described these as “prisons for the poor.”

It was inevitable that the working class should initially advance its demands in a democratic form. As Engels explained in 1845 in *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, “Since the working-men do not respect the law, but simply submit to its power when they cannot change it, it is most natural that they should at least propose alterations in it, that they should wish to put a proletarian law in the place of the legal fabric of the bourgeoisie.”

Engels wrote later in *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, that “the Act of 1832 having excluded them from the suffrage, they [the working class] formulated their demands in the People’s Charter, and constituted themselves, in opposition to the great bourgeois Anti-Corn Law party, into an independent party, the Chartists, the first working-men’s party of modern times.”

The demands of the Chartists found expression in the six points of the People’s Charter, formulated in 1838: Universal male suffrage; annual parliaments; payment of MPs to ensure poor men could participate; voting by secret ballot; equal electoral districts; and the abolition of property qualifications for candidates.

Although the movement still combined the working class with radical sections of the petty bourgeoisie, the formulation of these democratic demands posed different questions for workers. From the introduction of the Charter the movement came more and more to be “of an essentially social nature, a class movement” which united the working class behind it, as Engels noted. He wrote that this was “the difference between Chartist democracy and all previous political bourgeois democracy...”

“The ‘Six Points’ which for the radical bourgeois are the beginning and end of the matter, which are meant, at the utmost, to call forth certain further reforms of the Constitution, are for the proletarian a mere means to further ends. ‘Political power our means, social happiness our end,’ is now the clearly formulated war-cry of the Chartists,” wrote Engels.

He quoted the words of Joseph Rayner Stephens, a Methodist minister, to the mass rally of 200,000 at Kersall Moor, Manchester, in September 1838, that Chartism “is no political movement, where the main point is your getting the ballot. Chartism is a knife and fork question: the Charter means a good house, good food and drink, prosperity, and short working-hours.” If that was

only accepted by some Chartists in 1838, wrote Engels, by 1845 it had become “a truth for all of them.”

With the six points the movement developed two distinct wings reflecting its background. Moral Force Chartism, associated with long-term radical reformers William Lovett and Henry Hetherington, urged against any methods that might involve violence. Chartism should, in Lovett’s words, “inform the mind” not “captivate the senses” as a pressure campaign that would force concessions “without commotion or violence.” Lovett was central in drawing up the Charter and was elected an early leader of the movement.

However, the formulation of the Charter’s demands sharpened political divisions in the movement. In November 1836, the Irish MP Feargus O’Connor joined Lovett’s London Working Men’s Association (LWMA), before moving to Leeds to establish the weekly *Northern Star*, one of the most important Chartist papers.

Increasingly critical of Lovett and Hetherington, O’Connor took a more confrontational approach, and became a spokesman for Physical Force Chartism. The realities of class conflict were undeniable, given the continued disenfranchisement, the unbridled intensification of production and the escalating persecution of the poorest.

In June 1839, a petition signed by 1.3 million people was presented to the House of Commons requesting the Charter be considered. MPs voted overwhelming not to hear the petitioners.

Ahead of the petition there had been a series of mass meetings up and down the country: 200,000 attended one on Glasgow Green, more than 100,000 on Hartshead Moor in West Yorkshire. The petition was presented by a National Convention organised by the movement for the purpose. Although limited in size by legislation against popular assemblies, it was the germ of an alternative popular leadership. Anger at parliament’s dismissal went deep.

To be continued

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