

Chartism

The "People's Charter," drafted in 1838 by William Lovett, was at the heart of a radical campaign for parliamentary reform of the inequities remaining after the Reform Act of 1832. The Chartists' six main demands were:

1. votes for all men;
2. equal electoral districts;
3. abolition of the requirement that Members of Parliament be property owners;
4. payment for M.P.s;
5. annual general elections; and
6. the secret ballot.

The Chartists obtained one and a quarter million signatures and presented the Charter to the House of Commons in 1839, where it was rejected by a vote of 235 to 46. Many of the leaders of the movement, having threatened to call a general strike, were arrested. When demonstrators marched on the prison at Newport, Monmouthshire, demanding the release of their leaders, troops opened fire, killing 24 and wounding 40 more. A second petition with 3 million signatures was rejected in 1842; the rejection of the third petition in 1848 brought an end to the movement.

More important than the movement itself was the unrest it symbolized. The Chartists' demands, at the time, seemed radical; those outside the movement saw the unrest and thought of the French Revolution and The Reign of Terror. Thomas Carlyle's pamphlet *Chartism* (1839), argued the need for reform by fanning these fears, though he later became increasingly hostile to democratic ideas in works like "Hudson's Statue" Historians theorize broadly about why this revolutionary movement died out just as the revolutions of 1848 were breaking out all over Europe, but from this distance we can only suppose that the English had a confidence in their government and a sense of optimism about their future possibilities which suggested to them that patience was better than violence; and in fact most of their demands were eventually met — specifically in the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884. The threat of unrest surely influenced such otherwise unrelated reforms as the Factory act and the repeal of the Corn Laws. The radicalism that surfaced in the agitation for the Charter and a desire for a working-class voice in foreign affairs eventually channeled itself into related areas like the Socialist movement.

Causes that led to the Rise of the Chartist Movement

Economic

1. Industrial and agricultural workers disliked the new conditions of nineteenth-century factory discipline, low wages, periodic unemployment and high prices. There was much resentment at the widening gulf between rich and poor. There was discontent because of exploitation in factories. Traditional hand-workers were facing extreme distress in the face of competition from machines. There were few alternatives: they could join the factory workers or go in the workhouse. Grievances existed in mutually hostile groups from declining and rising industries.

2. The 1815 Corn Laws and a protectionist economy still prevailed despite Huskisson's reforms of the 1820s. The Corn Laws kept food prices artificially high and therefore depressed domestic markets for manufactures — thus depressing employment. Foreign markets were also undercut, further reducing factory output and exports. Reforms were also needed in banking, customs and taxation. The 1830s also saw a series of bad harvests.

3. Taxation fell mainly on the working classes in indirect taxation. At least 16% of real wages were consumed by taxes. The abolition of income tax in 1816 worsened the situation. The real value of wages was diminished and bad harvests made things worse.

4. There were a series of fiscal crises in the 1830s. The Whigs were in power from 1830 to 1841: they were weak in economic strategy and left a huge deficit on leaving office. They made no attempt to reform banking or the currency.

5. Between 1836-38 about 63 banks crashed in England. Little money was available for investment, which led to unemployment at a time of high food prices. Much bullion had been invested in America where good returns could be made. Federal governments borrowed and Britain invested, then in 1837 President Jackson refused to re-charter the Bank of the United States, and caused a financial panic in America. Also the 1838 harvest was poor so bullion was exported to buy food. Industry suffered; there was massive unemployment and higher food prices.

By the later '30s, the home demand for the products of industry, together "with the available export market, was insufficient to consume the whole of the potential... The contrast between the economic potential and the condition of the people was at its sharpest" (Checkland).

Contemporary writers pointed out the disparity in the distribution of wealth in this period. Disraeli, later leader of the Tories, drew in his novel *Sybil or The Two Nations* a picture of England sharply divided into the haves and the have-nots (1845); Dickens exposed conditions in his books, such as *Hard Times* (1854) and *Oliver Twist* (1837); Thomas Arnold, headmaster of Rugby School echoed these sentiments and saw the grave possibility of class revolution; Friedrich Engels wrote *Condition of the English Working Classes* in 1844, acquiring his raw material from evidence in Manchester. Karl Marx used Engels' work as a basis for his own *Das Kapital*.

The Anti-Corn-Law League was affected by the same economic conditions but sought to solve the problem with economic ideas: i.e. repeal of the Corn Laws and the introduction of free trade.

Political

1. The working classes had given massive support to the middle-class campaign for the 1832 Reform Act because they had been drawn by the possibility of the franchise, or legislation to help them. The working class was dissatisfied because the 1832 Act did not enfranchise them, and also they were unhappy with the 'finality' attitude of the Whigs and Tory hostility to reform, all of which offered no prospect of the future achievement of the vote for the working classes.

2. Subsequent Whig reforms came as a bitter disappointment and actually hurt the working man. Middle-class representation led to middle-class legislation, so Chartists sought a political solution to their economic and social problems. Whig reforms were institutional rather than social or economic:

- the 1833 Factory Act regulated child labour but not adult hours, and applied only to textile factories. It was a bitter disappointment to the 10-hour movement.
- the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act treated poverty as a crime and aimed at cutting poor rates. Workhouses were hated — they were known as "poor law bastilles" — because of the brutal conditions. The Anti-Poor-Law campaign of 1834-36 failed.

3. Early trades unions failed. Legislation in 1824 and 1825 repealed the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 and unions were again allowed, subject to many restrictions. Many unions had been established after 1825 but failed to bargain effectively with employers:

- 1829: moves were made to establish national T.U.s covering whole industries, e.g. John Doherty's Spinners' Union and an attempted Builders' Union. They failed because they were too big and contained mutually hostile members.
- 1833: Robert Owen, a philanthropic early 'socialist', founded the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union which aimed to unite all workers in one vast union. By 1834 the G.N.C.T.U. had 1/2 million members. It failed.
- Schemes were easily defeated by employers who countered strikes with lock-outs. It was an employers' market anyway. In 1834 employers began to issue 'The Document' for mutual assistance against strikers and trade unionists. They aimed at rooting out T.U.s in their workshops, but caused continuing bitterness and conflict in industrial relations. The government supported the employers. Perhaps the best example of this was the case of the Tolpuddle Martyrs in 1834. Chartism may have seemed a better alternative to transportation to Australia.
- economic slumps meant that workers could not afford the strike weapon: high prices and the dread of workhouses; fear of transportation. Unions had small and inadequate funds for strikes; the rising population and restricted employment created an employers' market.

Although Chartism failed in the short term, it was a significant movement in the development of working class organisation.

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