

In the first article, we looked at the rise of a privileged layer of aristocratic workers in the British labour movement as a result of the world dominance achieved by British capitalism during the nineteenth century.

What changes have occurred in the composition of this layer during the twentieth century, years which have been dominated by the decline of British capitalism? What are the prospects for the labour aristocracy in Britain? These are the questions we shall examine in this article.

Technical changes which have occurred during the present century and especially those of the last 25 years have tended to undermine the leading position of the layer of skilled craft workers who formed the core of the aristocracy in the last century.

In the engineering industry, for example, 80 years ago an unskilled man's wage rate was about 60 per cent that of a skilled worker's. By 1940 it was over 75 per cent; today it is over 80 per cent.

This narrowing of differentials is connected with mechanisation and technical change which has undermined the position of many skilled workers. Production is tending to be carried out by semi-skilled, machine operators who can be trained in a comparatively short period of time.

Barrier

The continued existence of highly organised groups of skilled workers in most branches of industry now presents a barrier to the employers in their search for more 'rational' methods of production.

This factor largely explains why formerly conservative sections of the movement (notably



Bevan: salary from 'News of the World'

the engineers who occupied a premier position in the working class in the nineteenth century) have increasingly been the most militant and aggressive sections of the class.

The recent attempts of groups of skilled workers (notably the bricklayers) to preserve their position in the steel industry in the face of growing attacks from the employers is an indication of the role which these formerly conservative sections will increasingly play in the defence of the whole class.

Displace

The displacement of the skilled man by the machine can be clearly seen in the case of the office worker. Here the typewriter, the dictaphone, the adding machine, etc., have removed the highly specialised and respectable clerk and reduced him to little more than a semi-skilled machine minder.

The increasing use of the computer in the largest offices threatens to wipe out even this category of office work. Computers are currently used by Lyons and the Yorkshire Electricity Board and their impact upon the size of the clerical staff is a grim warning of the disastrous effect of unplanned

The new image of the labour aristocracy

by Peter Jeffries

technical change for office workers.

In the USA where rationalisation of office work has reached a high point, unemployment amongst clerical workers has roughly doubled over the last five years. Once more, the gap between the earnings of clerical and manual workers has narrowed considerably during the post-war years.

Unaffected

Some highly paid groups have, of course, remained intact since 1945, either unaffected to any great extent by technical change—as in the building industry—or else protected by monopoly and State regulation from foreign competition—as in the steel industry and to some extent in motors.

In industries like steel where, until recently, markets have been assured, groups of workers—in this particular industry the oldest, longest-serving sections—have managed to share to some extent in the rising productivity of the industry.

But even in these cases, important changes are taking place which threaten to undermine the gains of these groups.

In steel, for example, the emergence of the Common Market and increased competition abroad is forcing the employers to carry through drastic schemes of reorganisation which are bringing them into inevitable conflict with the craft workers of the industry. In the building trade, new methods of prefabricated construction demand large-scale attacks upon the craft sections of the industry.

Perhaps the most important trend in the twentieth century has been the rise of a privileged group of workers centred around the State and its many activities and institutions and the giant monopolies such as ICI, Unilever, Shell, Ford, etc. To a large extent this group has replaced the highly skilled sections as the core of the labour aristocracy in Britain.

Monopolisation

Since 1914 there has been growing monopolisation in the leading sectors of British capitalism and the State has increasingly intervened to speed up and regulate this process.

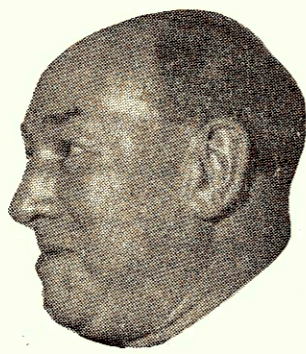
During the Second World War the State assumed overall responsibility for the functioning of the capitalist economy and afterwards, under the direction of the right-wing Labour leaders, stepped in to salvage the more

backward parts of the economy by nationalizing coal and the railways.

Apart from its direct involvement in production, the State has assumed increasing responsibility for education, the medical and welfare services and for the varied activities of local government.

In addition the State is now actively involved in the promotion of scientific and technological research, centred mainly around the war industries.

As a result, a layer of tech-



Carron: knighthood for the faithful

nicians, administrators, scientists, social workers, teachers, etc., has been created around the State apparatus which, until recently, enjoyed greater privileges than the majority of the working class—privileges in terms of greater security, stable employment, pension and sickness schemes, better working facilities and conditions, longer holidays. These benefits were denied to the majority of the working class, even during the post-war period of full employment.

Tradition

This is largely why these workers have traditionally considered themselves to be separate from the mass of the working class and why, politically, they have tended to identify themselves with the Conservative Party.

Another important aspect of the changed composition of the labour movement since Lenin has been the expansion of the full-time, semi-permanent bureaucracy in the trades unions and the Labour Party.

Seventy years ago the officials of the unions were largely confined to those craft unions which had emerged during the hey-day of British capitalism.

Today there are over 2,600 full-time officers of the unions in Britain, compared with about 1,300 40 years ago. The Transport & General Workers' Union employs over 500 full-time officers; the Amalgamated Engineering Union and National Union of General

'The truth is this: during the period of England's industrial monopoly the English working class have, to a certain extent, shared in the benefits of the monopoly. These benefits were very unequally parcelled out amongst them; the privileged minority pocketed most, but even the great mass had, at least a temporary share now and then. . . . With the breakdown of that monopoly, the English working class will lose that privileged position; it will find itself generally—the privileged and leading minority not excepted—on a level with its fellow workers abroad. And that is the reason why there will be socialism again in England.'

(Engels, Preface to the 1892 edition of 'The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844')



some particular monopoly position.

Finally, we have to examine that stratum in the trade unions and the Labour Party—the full-time bureaucracy—and its place as a section of the labour aristocracy.

What of the future for these sections of the working class? Can this aristocracy hope to maintain its benefits and privileges?

Changed

As Engels stresses in the passage above, the main consideration is the changed position of British imperialism and its loss of world dominance.

Reformism was rooted in the dominant position of Britain as the leading capitalist power. This was the economic basis for the creation of an aristocracy in the working class.

It is now clear to all that British capitalism is currently facing severe problems; the loss of markets and the falling share of world trade; the slow rate of growth and persistence of high, uncompetitive, prices and a smouldering balance of payments crisis which threatens to burst into flames during the summer months when the Labour leaders are put into office.

In many industries workers have been able to achieve comparatively high levels of earnings on the basis of the post-war boom. With markets on the whole easy, employers have, under organised pressure, been willing to grant wage increases, to raise price lists and introduce bonus schemes and so on.

With the increased struggle for markets, Britain's exclusion from Europe means that the employers must beat down the high level of earnings achieved in areas like the Midlands and Sheffield. The movement of industry to low wage areas such as Scotland and the north-east is an integral part of this campaign.

Leadership

The lack of any firm political leadership in such areas (as opposed to one based simply upon conceptions of militant trade union activity) leaves these highly paid groups of workers in motors, engineering, steel, etc., dangerously exposed to attacks from the employers and the State.

Wilson's plans for a 'scientific revolution' will only assist the employers in their battle against these highly organised and paid layers of the working class. No one now denies that

World' and his leading follower, Michael Foot was, until recently, a regular feature writer for Cecil King's 'Daily Herald'.

Alongside the Labour MPs stands the Transport House machine with its collection of full-time officials, Youth (!) Officers, Agents, research workers, etc.

Bureaucratic

This bureaucratic layer, largely removed from all form of control by the active Party workers is an important feature of the development of the labour movement in this century.

On a local level, the bureaucracy digs very deeply into the working-class movement. Hundreds of Labour councillors and aldermen, together with trade union and Labour Party representatives, sit on local employment, welfare, housing and many other committees. Time off work is arranged and wage losses and other expenses paid.

This layer of national and local officials and functionaries rests upon and draws strength from the labour aristocracy and is, in fact, a vital part of it.



Foot: worked for the Press Lords

Only if the 'leaders' of the trade unions and the Labour Party can win concessions for a privileged minority in the class can their reformist politics have any power.

Balance

Their role is essentially to strike a balance between the capitalist State and the working class, but only if they are able to win improvements for a significant minority of workers can they hope to continue this role and have any relationship at all with the organised labour movement.

As we have suggested, the core of the aristocracy in Britain today consists of those workers centred around the State and its many activities and bodies along with those better paid workers in industries which have either been unaffected by technical change and automation or else those industries enjoying

automation and mechanisation—so close to Wilson's heart—must produce a steep rise in unemployment.

Wilson's plan to streamline and modernise British industry, while leaving it in the hands of the private owners, must bring growing redundancy for those craft sections who will inevitably be displaced by machinery.

New processes in engineering, steel, motors, and printing threaten to wipe out large sections of craft workers. The impact of unplanned technical change is being clearly seen in the USA where there is a permanent pool of five million unemployed with the possibility of this doubling by the end of the decade.

Privileged

How will the state employees fare under the coming Labour government? Will they retain their privileged position?

Recent experience has shown that the State, in an attempt to impose a wage freeze upon the working class, has turned first of all upon workers engaged in nationalized industries and other state employees.

By imposing a wage freeze upon such groups as civil servants, postmen, school-teachers, doctors, etc., the government hopes that this will make it easier for the trade union leaders to argue for wage restraint and 'moderation' in the private sector.

It is clear that Wilson and the 'lefts' in the Labour Party intend to use the National Economic Development Council as a major instrument of policy when they are elected to power.

Clashes

This must entail increasing clashes between the State and its employees. Much of the deep dissatisfaction amongst such groups as civil servants, teachers and postmen stems from these new developments and the changed position of these formerly leading groups of workers.

If the case argued here is substantially correct, the possibility for a real exposure of social-democracy now exists.

Traditional methods of the Labour leaders—negotiations around the table for minimum concessions for a small minority of workers—are now drawing rapidly to a close.

The Labour leaders are being driven more closely into an open alliance with the State. A conscious fight, led by the Marxist movement, against these people can drive them out of a position of influence in the labour movement.

Trade unions in the epoch of imperialist decay

By Leon Trotsky

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