

Britain: 180 years since the Newport Rising—Part 2

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This is the second part of a two-part article. The first part was posted on November 4.

There had been talk of a “sacred month,” effectively a general strike, throughout August 1839. There was some concern within the Convention whether this could be achieved, and a compromise resolution was proposed by another Irish Chartist, James Bronterre O’Brien.

O’Brien was deeply influenced by the developing ideas of French socialism, above all Gracchus Babeuf’s *Conspiracy of Equals* during the French Revolution. The resolution did not advocate violent tactics, but agreed with O’Connor and Engels’s close associate, George Julian Harney, on the need for a more militant approach to winning suffrage.

O’Connor’s angry response was to proclaim September 29, 1839 the date for violent action if parliament did not grant the six points. Lovett and Hetherington were outraged and excluded him from the platform of an LWMA mass meeting. O’Connor, however, was closer to proletarian reactions: underground preparations for a rising do seem to have been made.

In Wales, Chartist cells had been springing up all year, mostly in working class areas. By autumn 1839, there were some 25,000 paid up Chartists across the principality, organised in 100 lodges. Chartist leaders were subject to harassment and arrest. When three Chartists were arrested in Llanidloes in April, an angry crowd attacked the hotel where they were being held.

This incident, at a meeting largely organised by moral force Chartists, was used as an excuse to arrest and imprison many local and visiting Chartists, including the highly respected Henry Vincent. That year, Lovett was jailed for a speech in which he was wrongly claimed to have called for “blood thirsty and unconstitutional force.”

The attempted crackdown, coming on the back of escalating class oppression following the Poor Law, generated a further turn towards the Chartist movement. Workers began arming and drilling for insurrection. Over weeks of careful preparation, workers were recruited across the valleys from Tredegar to Pontypool. Evidence suggests that many joined because they understood this to be a mass movement of the whole class. In the event, some 10,000 workers marched, arms in hand, on Newport.

It also forced the hand of some of the leaders. Hitherto predominantly moral force advocates found themselves at the head of an angry working class. Some vanished, but others responded positively. Newport draper and magistrate John Frost, a moral force democrat up to this point and delegate to the Convention, described the Reform Act as “a humbug, and that it was intended as nothing else.” He joined physical force Chartism and began preparing the

rising.

There was some attempt to coordinate a broader uprising with Chartists in West Yorkshire and Lancashire. Some Yorkshire Chartists later argued that Newport was to have been the signal for a national uprising. The leaders in these areas seem to have concluded that the rising could not succeed, but the Welsh Chartists did not receive notice of this until columns of armed workers were already on the move.

In the event, the attack was not a success. William Jones’s column from Pontypool did not arrive, and heavy rainfall delayed the planned meeting of the contingents. Frost delayed entering Newport, possibly because he was hoping for further reinforcements. By the time he did move forward, the ruling class had realised the threat and had time to prepare.

The day before the rising, Newport’s mayor, Thomas Phillips, had sworn in 500 special constables and requested more troops. There were already 60 soldiers stationed in the town, and Phillips sent 32 soldiers of the 45th Regiment of Foot to the Westgate Hotel, where Chartist prisoners were being held following the earlier crackdown.

Arriving in town, local Chartist leader John Rees led his workers straight to the Westgate Hotel. They arrived at about 9:30 a.m. and demanded the release of the prisoners. There followed a brutal and bloody half-hour battle, during which the Chartists managed to enter the hotel briefly. Both sides opened fire, but the soldiers’ superior firepower and training enabled them to break the siege. Some 22 Chartists were killed and more than 50 wounded.

One of those killed was 18-year-old George Shell from Pontypool. On the eve of the attack he wrote to his parents, “I shall this night be engaged in a glorious struggle for freedom, and should it please God to spare my life, I shall see you soon; but if not, grieve not for me, I shall have fallen in a noble cause.”

The bourgeoisie wanted to make an example of Newport. They hailed Thomas Phillips as a national hero and he was knighted by Queen Victoria six weeks later. More than 200 Chartists were arrested for their involvement, and 21 charged with high treason, a capital offence. The three leaders of the march, Frost, Zephaniah Williams and William Jones, were convicted on this charge and sentenced to be hanged, drawn and quartered—the last such sentence in England and Wales.

Legal attacks were directed against *all* Chartists. O’Connor, Stephens and Harney were also imprisoned during 1839-40, but as at Peterloo 20 years before, the attempt to intimidate workers by such legal repression was not an unmitigated success. There was a mass campaign of petitioning and lobbying by most Chartists, which eventually saw the capital sentences of the three leaders commuted to

transportation for life. When the bourgeoisie no longer felt threatened by Chartism, in 1856, Frost was given an unconditional pardon and allowed to return.

The working class continued to resist and there were further proposals for uprisings, with aborted or disrupted actions in Sheffield, east London and Bradford in January 1840. Far from crushing physical force Chartism, the repression that followed Newport—and fell on *all* Chartists—reinforced the conclusion that it was necessary. By 1847, as Engels noted, the need for revolution was clear.

On April 10, 1848, O'Connor called a mass meeting on Kennington Common in South London, attended by upwards of 150,000. He presented another petition to parliament. He said it contained nearly 6 million signatures, but MPs said there were only [!] 2 million and refused to discuss it.

Moral force Chartists accused O'Connor of destroying the movement, but there remained activity and enthusiasm. There were further plots and preparations in London and Yorkshire, and the summer saw yet another wave of legislation against Chartist organisation. Even so, O'Connor still addressed a meeting of 20,000 in Leicester in 1850.

Perhaps more significant was the extent to which the ruling class had calculated how to utilise the demands—and in some cases the tactics—of Chartism in its own interests. The six points were largely implemented in the interests of manufacturing. As Engels put it, “practically, that horrid ‘People’s Charter’ actually became the political programme of the very manufacturers who had opposed it to the last.”

Engels later wrote, “The French Revolution of 1848 saved the English middle class. The Socialistic pronouncements of the victorious French workmen frightened the small middle class of England and disorganised the narrower, but more matter-of-fact movement of the English working class. At the very moment when Chartism was bound to assert itself in its full strength, it collapsed internally before even it collapsed externally on the 10th April 1848.

“The action of the working class was thrust into the background. The capitalist class triumphed along the whole line.”

The great division between the moral force and physical wing of Chartism developed historically into the battle between liberalism and the early communist movement in Britain.

Marx and Engels established relations with the Chartists from the outset, with Engels in 1843 contacting the *Northern Star* newspaper (1837 to 1852) to be a correspondent. He wrote more than 30 articles for the newspaper over the next six years. Marx and Engels were closest to Harney and Ernest Jones.

Harney was originally the editor of the *Northern Star* under O'Connor, but as Harney’s socialist ideas—under the influence of Marx and Engels—became more pronounced, he stood down from the *Northern Star*. With the backing of Jones, Harney established a socialist newspaper, *The Red Republican*, in June 1850. In November 1850, the newspaper published the first ever English translation of Marx and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*.

In 1848, surveying the decades-long struggle of the working class in England and the great significance of the first independent political movement of the working class in history, Marx wrote: “The whole struggle of the workers against the factory owners ... which has already lasted eighty years, a struggle which began with machine-breaking and then went through the stages of combinations, separate attacks on the persons and property of factory-owners and the few workers devoted to the factory-owners, through more or less big revolts,

through the insurrections of 1839 and 1842, has developed into the most conscious class struggle which the world has ever seen—the whole of this class struggle of the Chartists, the organized party of the proletariat, against the organized State power of the bourgeoisie ... is a social civil war.”

The political degeneration and intellectual stagnation that followed the defeat of the great revolutionary political movement of the British working class, Chartism, found expression in the ascendancy of trade unionism. The revolutionary fervour was replaced by a dull petit-bourgeois accommodation with the ruling class. In the words of Theodore Rothstein, “The distinguishing feature of this mental outlook was acceptance of capitalist society, which acceptance found its expression in the rejection of political action, and in the recognition of the teachings of vulgar political economy of the harmony of interests as between the employing and the working class.”

As David North noted in his 1998 lecture, *Why are Trade Unions Hostile to Socialism?*, “In England, the trade unions developed upon the ruins of Chartism and independently of the socialist movement.”

It is no surprise that in 2013 it was a Labour-controlled council that moved to destroy a 35-metre-long mosaic mural in the city of the Newport Rising. The mural was situated in an underground walkway leading to John Frost Square—named after the Chartist leader—and a couple hundred metres from the main fighting that took place at the Westgate Hotel.

The Chartists remain heroic figures in the history of the striving by the international working class for emancipation and liberation. Chartism represents a key historical lesson, in which the working class must see, as Trotsky insisted “not only its past, but also its future.”

Trotsky’s summary of the significance of Chartism for the working class today remains as true and powerful as when he wrote it in 1925:

The era of Chartism is immortal in that over the course of a decade it gives us in condensed and diagrammatic form the whole gamut of proletarian struggle—from petitions in parliament to armed insurrection ... As the Chartists tossed the sentimental preachers of “moral force” aside and gathered the masses behind the banner of revolution, so the British proletariat is faced with ejecting reformists, democrats and pacifists from its midst and rallying to the banner of a revolutionary overturn.



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