

WHAT
SOCIALISM
MEANS;
A CALL TO THE UNCONVERTED.

A Lecture delivered for the Fabian Society

BY

Sidney Webb, L.L.B.



"It is, indeed, certain that industrial society will not permanently remain without a systematic organisation. The mere conflict of private interests will never produce a well-ordered commonwealth of labor." *Article on Political Economy in Encyclopædia Britannica, vol. XIX, 1886, p. 382, by J. K. Ingram, L.L.B., Librarian and late Professor at Trinity College, Dublin.*

PRICE ONE PENNY.

LONDON:
THE LEAFLET PRESS, CURSITOR STREET, E.C.
1888.

WHAT SOCIALISM MEANS; A CALL TO THE UNCONVERTED.

BY SIDNEY WEBB, LL.B. *

Nothing is more universal than the widespread illusion as to what Socialism really means, and as to how Socialists intend to obtain its adoption. It seems almost impossible to bring people to understand that the abstract word "Socialism", denotes like "Radicalism", not an elaborate plan of Society, but a principle of social action. Socialists easily recognise that the adoption of the principle can only be extended by bringing about a slowly dawning conviction in the minds of men; it is certain that no merely forcible "revolution" organised by a minority, can ever avail, either in England or elsewhere. We seek therefore to influence only convictions, so as thereby to bring about the great bugbear of our opponents, the "Social Revolution"—a revolution in the opinions men form of the proper Society in which to live, and in the kind of action to which these opinions lead them.

There are many who desire to help in social reconstruction, but who are not quite decided to act; many who sympathise, but who are timid; many, indeed, who are Socialists, but are not conscious of their Socialism. It is to these especially that we must address ourselves asking them always to remember that Socialism is more than any Socialist, and its principles more than any detailed system or scheme of reform. The Fabian Society has no such plan or scheme; its members are led by their Socialist principles to work for social reform in a certain definite direction, but the future evolution of Society no man can exactly forecast, and to human evolution no final goal can be set. The moment will never come when we can say, "Now Socialism is established; let us keep things as they are," Constant evolution is the lesson of history: of endings, as of beginnings, we know nothing.

Socialism inevitably suffers if identified with any particular scheme, or even with the best vision we can yet form of Collectivism itself. In this, as in many other cases, the public are so much concerned with details, that they miss the principle: they "cannot see the forest for the trees." But it is no more fair to identify Socialism with any modern prophet's forecast of it, than it would be to identify Christianity with the "New Jerusalem" of the Swedenborgians. Nevertheless, such misconceptions will inevitably persist, and those who may embrace Socialism, must be warned that they are not likely to receive "honour among men" in consequence; they are certain to be misconstrued, misrepresented, and reviled, and to be regarded as advocates of dynamite outrages or childish absurdities, even by those who are gradually learning their very doctrines.

Socialism is emphatically a new thing, a thing of the present century—and one of the unforeseen results of the great industrial revolution of the past 150 years. During this period man's power over the rest of nature has suddenly and largely increased: new means of accumulating wealth and also new means of utilising land and capital have come into being.

* Reprinted from the report of a lecture delivered for the Fabian Society 7th May 1886, corrected and revised by the author, but (from the want of time) not rewritten. January, 1888.

Many do not realise what a change has resulted from this industrial revolution. At the beginning of the last century, the whole value of the land and capital of this country is estimated to have amounted to less than 500 millions sterling; now it is supposed to be over £9,000 millions; an increase eighteenfold. Two hundred years ago, rent and interest cannot have amounted to 30 millions sterling annually—now they absorb over 450 millions. Socialism arose as soon as rent and interest became important factors; it began with our own century: in its birthplace in England it was, however, it was beaten back for a time by the hasty misunderstandings of Malthus, followed by the “acute outbreak of individualism unchecked by the old restraints, and invested with almost a religious sanction by “a certain soulless school of “writers”, from which even Professor Foxwell† asserts England to have suffered for the last century.

This hasty misinterpretation of economic science was set right by John Stuart Mill, (who describes in his “Autobiography” (p. 231) his own conversion from mere extreme Democracy to a complete Socialism), and at the present moment Socialism, which had never ceased on the Continent, permeates the whole world of thought and politics here as elsewhere. Even the tide of “Orthodox Political Economy” is now running strongly in its favour, and we have Cambridge professors publicly claiming to be Socialists, and turning out Socialists by scores as their pupils.

What is the cause of this new criticism of the existing order? It has arisen because the great increase in wealth has been allowed to flow mainly to individuals, so that the enormous increase per head of the wealth production has failed to exterminate or even to alleviate poverty. In this London, the wealthiest city of the world, there is also the greatest mass of poverty and misery. It has miles upon miles of palaces, serried ranks of costly carriages in Hyde Park, such signs of abundant wealth as no other land can show. Its mere rental value is nearly forty millions sterling annually. Yet in this city homeless little children beg for bread, strong men die of starvation and want every night, and there is an array of over 300,000 persons, as many as would make the whole city of Brussels or Birmingham, in frequent receipt of workhouse relief. We should dwell a little on this. So dazed are we by the perfection of the organisation, that we are only too unconscious of the misery around us. Think of this army of 300,000 strong men, brave women and little children, absolutely destitute in this city where we are so comfortable; an army of 300,000 unable to get bread, or to obtain shelter from the cutting blast, and obliged during any one year to resort to the cold mercy of official charity. One in every five of the population dies in the workhouse or hospital. This is not a picture of London alone: things are much the same throughout the Kingdom. We have a total of over 3,000,000 in the pauper class; one in ten of the population, or one in eight of the wage earning classes.

These men, our brothers, were not born paupers; they, too, had once hope, and some youthful aspirations, which the hard world has gradually quenched in the pitiless struggle from which we favoured ones have reaped so much of the benefit; the iron has entered into their souls during that dreadful losing fight down the hill of poverty, until our brother once erect and toiling for our benefit, is borne down before us to a pauper's grave.

Not only do we exact life-long labour from the poor, for which, as we have seen, so many receive in return just sufficient to keep them alive: we take their lives also. In the worst parts of London the death rate is four times that of neighbouring “respectable” districts, and any doctor who has practised among the poor knows that their most fatal disease is poverty.

“At present the average age at death among the nobility, gentry and professional classes in England and Wales was 55 years: but among the artisan classes of Lambeth it only amounted to 29; and while the infantile death-rate among the well-to-do classes was such that only 8 children died in the first year of life out of 100 born, as many as 30 per cent. succumbed at that age among the children of the poor in some districts of our large cities. The only real cause of this enormous difference in the position of the rich and poor with respect to their chances of existence lay in the fact that at the bottom of society wages were so low that food and other requisites of health were obtained with too great difficulty” (Dr. C. R. Drysdale, “Report of Industrial Remuneration Conference” 1886, p. 130).

† “Facts for Socialists,” from the “Political Economists and Statisticians” (Fabian Tract 1887 No. 5—189 Portersdown Road, London. Price One Penny).

† “The Claims of Labour”, 1886 page 240.

Our Society, it appears according to this non-Socialist, robs the wage workers of Lambeth of 26 years of life each; they die before their time, like worn-out draught horses, and their innocent children like flies. They die in their own slums of diseases, which we, in our wealth, know how to prevent; one or two will die to-night in London alone of actual starvation.

This is not all. Year by year our comforts and our pleasures increase, and year by year those iron-monsters, the never ceasing machines, grow in number and complexity. Do we realise that year by year the accidents to the workers also increase, the number of fatal accidents doubling every 20 years? Last year we raised more coal than 20 years ago, smelted more iron, made more journeys, and all at less money cost: but we also killed many thousand of the workers, unhonoured martyrs of our civilization. How many we merely maimed is not to be ascertained. The cheap fuel with which we warmed ourselves last winter was not coal but lives of men.

This is what we have come to after 150 years of the greatest wealth-production the world has known; not only a greater aggregate production, but also an increased production per head of population. There is a small rich class endowed with every comfort the mind can describe; a middle-class, well-off, educated, leisured, powerful, and all roads open to it. These two, taken together and including all above the manual labour class *make up less than one fifth of the population.* On the other hand, is the great mass of the people (of whom one-eighth are actually in the pauper class), earning on an average perhaps 25/- per family per week. These are with necessarily rare exceptions, condemned to a life of unremitting toil; without leisure or higher education, no opportunity for real improvement, and also no hope of better things.

"To me, at least, it would be enough to condemn modern society as hardly an advance on slavery or serfdom, if the permanent condition of industry were to be that which we behold, that 90 per cent. of the actual producers of wealth have no home that they can call their own beyond the end of the week; have no bit of soil, or so much as a room that belongs to them; have nothing of any kind except as much old furniture as will go in a cart: have the precarious chance of weekly wages which barely suffice to keep them in health: are housed for the most part in places that no man thinks fit for his horse; are separated by so narrow a margin from destitution, that a month of bad trade, sickness or unexpected loss, brings them face to face with hunger and pauperism. . . . *This is the normal state of the average workman in town or country*" (Mr. Frederic Harrison, p. 429 "Report of Industrial Remuneration Conference", 1886).

What is the remedy of Socialism! We search—and have not to search long—for the causes of this misery. Nature itself has not, it is true, been exceedingly kind to us, and we Socialists, as strongly as the Economists, demand that no useless mouths grow up to consume the too scanty store we can produce. We too, insist that there is no place at nature's table for any one who cannot or does not produce his quota, and we too, assert that there is—especially just now—grave danger that the number of such mouths may increase. We claim, indeed, that only in a Socialist community can any general limitation of population really be brought about. But we also call for a proper administration of that which is produced, so that if we must go upon short rations, these may at any rate be fairly shared.

Political Economists show us the causes of the existing poverty, and explain clearly enough the nature and extent of the deductions that go for rent, interest and the monopoly wages of exceptional ability. Official statisticians themselves enumerate these—in England at present—at two thirds of the annual produce of the workers.

There is no mystery about these things, though it may suit those who benefit by them to pretend that there is. The operation of unrestrained competition, with private ownership of land and industrial capital, is fully explained by Karl Marx, but even better by such writers as Mill, Cairnes and Walker. Economic rent and interest, they say, consists in reality of a toll levied upon production by the monopolist, and in exchange the monopolist, as such, gives nothing but permission to use the land and already accumulated capital.

"That useful function, therefore, which some profound writers fancy they discover in abundant expenditure of the idle rich, turns out to be a sheer illusion. Political economy

furnishes no such palliation of unmitigated selfishness. Not that I would breathe a word against the sacredness of contracts. But I think it is important, on moral no less than on economic grounds, to insist upon this, that no public benefit of any kind arises from the existence of an idle rich class. The wealth accumulated by their ancestors and others on their behalf, where it is employed as capital, no doubt helps to sustain industry; but what they consume in luxury and idleness is not capital, and helps to sustain nothing but their own unprofitable lives. By all means they must have their rents and interest, as it is written in the bond; but let them take their proper place as drones in the hive, gorging at a feast to which they have contributed nothing" ("Some Leading Principles of Political Economy" p. 32, by the late John Elliott Cairnes, M. A., Emeritus Professor of Political Economy at University College, London; 1874).

Yet it is clearly inevitable that, so long as land and capital are in individual ownership rent and interest must continue to exist, creating what Mill called "the great social evil of a non-labouring class." For them the great mass of the workers are deprived of at least half the product of labour.

This is the Socialist case. It is founded on no new system of political economy, upon no new statistics. It is mainly the emphatic assertion of two leading principles. We recognise first, as the central truth of modern society, the interdependence of all. No man now works alone; by division of labour and mutual exchange all are sharing in each one's toil. Each worker, by the marvellously complex exchange-system shares in the fruits of the labour of those in the most remote parts of the earth, and is in unconscious partnership with every other worker. No individual can now claim as his own the product to which he is in reality giving only certain final touches.

We claim, in the second place, to apply the doctrines of economic science to the art of Government in insisting on the ethical right of the joint workers, *and the workers alone*, to the whole produce of their labour, without any deduction for rent and interest, or any other form of mere monopolist's toll. We contend for the full recognition of the admitted fact that the whole produce of labour is created by labour alone—whether labour of hand or labour of brain—and that any form of society which enables idle owners of certain social products to exact for personal consumption a toll from helpless fellow citizens, although perhaps useful in the earlier stage of social evolution, is now bad; guilty as Mill and Cairnes themselves have in effect said, of causing unnecessary deaths and misery to the poorer classes.

This is essentially the Socialistic platform. We do not expect to realise this ideal all at once. Society is evolving fast under our eyes, and it is in this direction that it is changing. We have but the option of helping or resisting the change.

It is obvious that the scope of unrestrained private owners' interests will be once more altered. The limits, which have already gradually excluded slaves, public offices, highway tolls, post offices, "sound dues," and other monopolist freaks, must now be drawn so as to leave in the hands, or at least under the full control, of the community, that without which no man can live—the great means of wealth production, land and industrial capital.

Individual Socialists, whilst agreeing in this necessity, entertain different views as to the form of the social organisation to which we are now tending. There are three main schools of Socialist thought.

1. *Collectivists* lay stress on the necessity for equality of opportunity lest some be otherwise compelled to lead lives unnecessarily cramped and fettered. They wish with this end to extend public administration and public control of the means of production, the tendency to which has marked off modern society from the extreme individualism of the earlier part of the century.

2. *Anarchists* lay more stress upon the moral objections to any government coercion, and contend for private administration in a state of free co-operation with no other than moral regulation. Consumption is to be eventually according to real social needs, and to be regulated by voluntary restriction. Most Anarchist admit, however, that a period of Collectivism will precede the attainment of their ideal, during which humanity will gradually learn to become fit for it.

3. *Positivists*, so far as they have thought out their economic system, come clearly under this definition of Socialism. They would leave administration ostensibly in private hands

but under increased government regulations; equal personal consumption, and by workers only, being realised chiefly by an advance in personal morality, and by the influence on public opinion of a philosophic priesthood. It is fair to add that most Positivists repudiate the name of Socialists. On the other hand the extreme Radical party in England is now practically Socialist of this type, often without being conscious of the fact.

But all forms of Socialism agree in the two general principles stated above. All agree in repudiating any claim by particular workers to the competitive exchange value of their particular products, which could be set up only by ignoring the unconscious co-operation by their fellows all over the world or by reverting to the wild individualism which is a characteristic of barbarism. And all agree with the Economist, in repudiating any moral claim in the monopolist as such, to the toll which he can levy.

It may be said that that these are mere ideals which we hope to realise one day—not perhaps in our own lives, but living again in lives to come. What has Socialism hitherto done for the workers? What is its remedy for the present distress? The Socialist is, in the meantime, the most practical of politicians, the truest opportunist. While repudiating as unscientific, the idea that any mere palliative of existing evils can effect a cure of them, he is constantly urging the adoption of every practical measure of immediate relief. It is in his principles rather than in his practical politics that the Socialist differs from the mere "social reformer." But principles are the only lasting springs of action.

Socialism, therefore, does not mean any particular plan or scheme of social re-organisation, nor the vain dream of equality of wealth. It means no contempt for machinery, no dislike of education or culture, no enmity to brain work or invention. It is, in fact, because we want more of these things that we are Socialists.

It is easy to bring objections against Socialism. There are always a thousand reasons against every social change. Yet the change comes, and the objectors silently learn wisdom. We need hardly trouble to reason with the man who says merely that he means to keep what he has got. Dawning conscience and increased social intelligence will bring the sons of such men over to our ranks. But may not the clever artisan or the skilled brain worker who now earns huge wages because of the scarcity of his talent, be justly allowed to consume the whole wages of his labour? There need be nothing to prevent him from doing this, in a society organised on a Socialist basis, but he should remember that countless other workers are helping him, and that his brain or skill is not his alone; it is the result of past ages; a social and not an individual product; while his training and education are essentially the fruit of social capital expended upon him.

Loss of liberty and independence, what of these? This is perhaps felt by most of those who enjoy a fair share under existing arrangements to be the weightiest objection to any increase in the present tendency to collectivism. On questions of personal liberty, Mill may be allowed some weight, and Mill emphatically declared that "the restraints of Communism would be freedom in comparison with the present condition of the majority of the human race."* As to the present liberty and independence of the comfortable classes, on what are they based? The king's house at Dahomey stands solid on its mighty corner piles in the African sand, but their solidity is secured—so the natives will tell you—by the blood of the slave girls, crushed in the holes in which the piles were driven. The smiling landlord or mill-owner leans back in his saloon-carriage, rejoicing in the freedom to travel given by his long holiday, but he heeds not the extra hours of toil which his very liberty thus adds to the task of his serfs all over the world. There is economic servitude for the ordinary worker as unrelenting in its impersonal grip as the harshest trammels of the slave-owner.

* Yes, Socialism means a loss of such liberty. Freedom which can only be enjoyed by the oppression of the rest is but the license of the tyrant, and

"True freedom is to share

All the bonds our brothers wear."

any loss of personal liberty which the few may suffer, (in any case, the liberty only to control the labour of others) will be far outweighed by the greater safety, independence and leisure of the many. Socialism necessarily implies by its fairer distribution of social resource, an aggregate gain in personal freedom.

* Principles of Political Economy, p. 129, last Edition.

But, whatever the seeming objections, those who recognise the economic causes of social evolution, are constrained, of necessity, to join forces with the Socialist movement.

It is not a comfortable gospel that we preach to the middle and upper classes—no glad tidings of great joy—but it is one of which you will not be able to escape the unpleasant conviction. Perhaps those are happier who do not know, who have never thought of the source of their income: coming to them like manna from heaven. But you who do know whence comes your rent and interest, will see discomfoting visions. As you feed the fire, you will see the miner, bent double underground, in his toil, giving up his life that you may be warmed. As you look upon your daughters growing up around you in your sheltered and cultured home, you will see behind them the daughters of other mothers, slaving seamstresses, working sixteen hours for "eleven pence ha'penny"; nay, selling themselves into a life of infamy, for want of that bread which you, by your position of social vantage, are forcing them to give up to you.

Then there will be no escape. Those of you who do know, those of you who are no longer in blissful ignorance; those of you who realise this economic toll levied on the scanty earnings of the poor—will be compelled to come over to us for very shame, and work with all your might to stop the sooner this fearful drain upon the insufficient average pittance, which is all that we can as yet extract from the rest of nature.

You have but one alternative. By steadily turning away your eyes, and caring only for your own comforts, by luxurious and selfish living, by making to yourself a false idol of art, or religion, or literature you may perhaps be able in time to stifle your conscience, and drown the despairing cries of the misery which you are taking your part in creating. But then do not be surprised if the long suffering masses, roused at last from their ignorant patience, and deserted by those who ought to have been their leaders, shake in their despair the whole social structure about your ears, crying of your class, of its good as of its evil, "cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground?" It is to prevent matters coming to such indiscriminate ruin that we are, and you should be, Socialists.

* Alas the history of the Bolshhevik revolⁿ seems to confirm that socialism may mean the loss of liberty. How far are Nazi-socialists socialists? It is clear that they hate the principle of individual liberty.

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A Committee appointed by the conference of Anglican Bishops at Lambeth (1888) reports:—"No more important problems can well occupy the attention—whether of clergy or laity—than such as are connected with what is popularly called Socialism. To study schemes proposed for redressing the social balance, to welcome the good which may be found in the aims or operations of any, and to devise methods, whether by legislation or by social combinations, or in any other way, for a peaceful solution of the problems without violence or injustice, is one of the noblest pursuits which can engage the thoughts of those who strive to follow in the footsteps of Christ."

T. Bolas, Leaflet Press, Curfitor Street, London. E.C.