

William Morris and the Socialist movement

Last month was the fiftieth anniversary of the death of William Morris. He is principally known to the world as a poet and the founder of a new movement in arts and crafts. To us he is significant as a pioneer in the Socialist movement in this country. Born into the circle of the comfortable, he was revolted by the ugliness which he saw around him; an ugliness that he gradually realised was due to the profit-making principle that guided production and brought poverty and misery to the producers. In an article he wrote, 'How I became a Socialist', he tells of his discontent with the existing system : –

“What shall I say concerning its mastery of and its waste of mechanical power, its commonwealth so poor, its enemies of the commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organization—for the misery of life! Its contempt of simple pleasures which everyone could enjoy but for its folly? Its eyeless vulgarity which has destroyed art, the one certain solace of labour? All this I felt then as now, but I did not know why it was so.”

Then he asked himself were the past struggles of mankind which had produced this “sordid, aimless, ugly confusion” to end in a “counting house on the top of a cinder heap”. But it dawned on him that the seeds of a great change were beginning to germinate. “The whole face of things was changed to me by that discovery, and all I had to do then in order to become a Socialist was to hook myself on to the practical movement.”

Morris confesses that when he joined the Democratic Federation, founded by Hyndman in 1881, he was “blankly ignorant of economics”; this he immediately set out to remedy by tackling Marx’s works, including *Capital*. He did not stay long in the Democratic Federation, which had become the Social Democratic Federation, as he soon became disgusted with the reformism that permeated it. In December, 1884, along with Belfort Bax, Eleanor Marx, Frederick Lessner and Edward Aveling, he left the Federation to form the Socialist League, and in February, 1885, the first issue of the *Commonweal* was published, edited by Morris and Aveling. This first number contained the Manifesto of the League and also an “introductory” by Morris, the beginning of which is worth quoting as an example of the attitude of the new body towards its official organ : –

“We beg our readers’ leave for a few words in which to introduce to them this Socialist journal, The Commonweal. In the first place we ask them to understand that the Editor and Sub-Editor of The Commonweal are acting as delegates of the Socialist League, and under its direct control; any slip in principles, therefore, any mis-statement of the aims or tactics of the League, are liable to correction from the representatives of that body.

“As to the conduct of The Commonweal, it must be remembered that it has one aim – the propagation of Socialism.”

This was certainly a promising start; a few paragraphs from the League’s Manifesto will further indicate how far Morris and his associates had progressed in understanding : –

“Fellow Citizens,

“We come before you as a body advocating the principles of Revolutionary International Socialism; that is, we seek a change in the basis of Society – a change which would destroy the distinctions of classes and nationalities.

“As the civilised world is at present constituted, there are two classes of Society - the one possessing wealth and the instruments of its production, the other producing wealth by means of those instruments but only by the leave and for the use of the possessing classes.

“These two classes are necessarily in antagonism to one another. The possessing class, or non-producers, can only live as a class on the unpaid labour of the producers – the more unpaid labour they can wring out of them, the richer they will be; therefore the producing class – the workers – are driven to strive to better themselves at the expense of the possessing class, and the conflict between the two is ceaseless.

Sometimes it takes the form of open rebellion, sometimes of strikes, sometimes of mere widespread mendicancy and crime; but it is always going on in one form or other, though it may not always be obvious to the thoughtless looker-on.

“We have spoken of unpaid labour: it is necessary to explain what that means. The sole possession of the producing class is the power of labour inherent in their bodies; but since, as we have already said, the richer classes possess all the instruments of labour, that is, the land, capital, and machinery, the producers or workers are forced to sell their sole possession, the power of labour, on such terms as the possessing class will grant them.

“These terms are, that after they have produced enough to keep them in working order, and enable them to beget children to take their places when they are worn out, the surplus of their products shall belong to the possessors of property, which bargain is based on the fact that every man working in a civilised community can produce more than he needs for his own sustenance.

“This relation of the possessing class to the working class is the essential basis of the system of producing for a profit, on which our modern Society is founded.”

“Nationalisation of the land alone, which many earnest and sincere persons are now preaching, would be useless so long as labour was subject to the fleecing of surplus value inevitable under the Capitalist system.

“No better solution would be that of State Socialism, by whatever name it may be called, whose aim it would be to make concessions to the working class while leaving the present system of capital and wages still in operation: no number of merely administrative changes, until the workers are in possession of all political power, would make any real approach to Socialism.

“The Socialist League therefore aims at the realisation of complete Revolutionary Socialism, and well knows that this can never happen in any one country without the help of the workers of all civilisation.”

There is little wanting in clearness in the above and the last paragraphs quoted are certainly not out of date. Unfortunately the adherents were few and it was largely on money supplied by Morris that the organisation was able to carry on until an influx of anarchists swamped those who stood with Morris, modified the policy of the League and compelled Morris and his group to resign in 1890. The Anarchists had found an opening in the fact that the League eschewed political action for the time, concentrating upon educating the workers.

Morris did a vast amount of lecturing, street-corner speaking and writing. He constantly harped upon a theme that was of abiding interest to him – the introduction of conditions that would enable the producer to find joy in his labour and would thus enable him to make articles that were both useful and beautiful. Morris has been charged with looking back to the hand labour of mediaeval times and building an utopia out of touch with the realities of his time. This is not so. An essay he wrote on ‘A Factory as it Might be’ dispels this view. The essay opens up as follows: –

“We Socialists are often reproached with giving no details of the state of things which would follow on the destruction of that system of waste and war which is sometimes dignified by the lying title of the harmonious combination of capital and labour: many worthy people say, ‘We admit that the present system has produced unsatisfactory results, but at least it is a system; you ought to be able to give us some definite idea of the results of that reconstruction which you call Socialism.’

“To this Socialists answer, and rightly, that we have not set ourselves to build up a system to please our tastes; nor are we seeking to impose it on the world in a mechanical manner, but that we are assisting in bringing about a development of history which would take place without our help, but which nevertheless compels us to help it: and that under these circumstances it would be futile to map out the details of life in a condition of things so different from that in which we have been born and bred.”

From the quotations we have given it will be seen that Morris had got a grip of the fundamentals of the working class position and was not just an artistic expression of revolt against ugliness. Many of those who eulogise him to-day, and gloss over his sturdy championship of the real working class position, he would have scorned as associates in his day. He was a worthy pioneer even though he had not yet worked out the full implications of an independent working class policy. The Socialist Party had sufficient regard for his views to publish, as one of their first pamphlets, his *Art, Labour and Socialism*, now unfortunately out of print.

We would have liked to have given a full and critical estimate of Morris’s relation to the Socialist movement, but, with our restricted space, the above fragment will have to suffice for the present.

(November 1946)