

Stepping stones to nowhere

Reform and Revolution. Three Early Socialists on the Way Ahead. William Morris, John Carruthers, Fred Henderson. Edited and introduced by Stephen Coleman. Thoemmes Press. £9.75

The first organisation in Britain to put forward Marxian views was the Socialist Democratic Federation which had been founded in 1881 as a federation of Radical (i.e. leftwing Liberal) political clubs and which two years later adopted socialism as its aim and added “Social” to its title. The second was the Socialist League, formed as a breakaway from the SDF in 1884.

The main difference between the two organisation was over reforms (legislative measures within capitalism aimed at improving social conditions or extending political democracy). The SDF believed that a socialist organisation should advocate reforms as “stepping stones to socialism”, but the reforms it advocated were the same as it used to when it had still been a leftwing Liberal organisation.

The concept of reforms as stepping stones to socialism implied that socialism would come about as a result of a gradual accumulation of reforms passed by parliament. The Socialist League disagreed with this position, arguing not only that reforms were not stepping stones to socialism (they were more inclined to regard them as measures to consolidate capitalism) but also that a socialist organisation should not advocate reforms at all but should concentrate exclusively on propagating socialist ideas with a view to building up a mass class-conscious working class organisation to challenge capitalism.

Until now, with the publication of this book which reproduces three contributions by members or ex-members of the Socialist League with a modern introduction, the anti-reformist arguments of the League have not been readily available. Many people have heard of Morris the poet, Morris the craftsman, Morris the wall-paper designer, even Morris the socialist, but few will be aware of the grasp of political realities and analysis that Morris revealed as the main defender of the Socialist League’s anti-reformist position, Morris the socialist theoretician, if you like.

In his talk “The Policy of Abstention”, first given in 1887 and reproduced here, Morris argues against the SDF position of trying to get elected to parliament in order to get reforms passed as supposed stepping stones to socialism. Socialism, he argues, would not come through parliament (which he regarded as part of the government of capitalism) but through the mass action of workers outside parliament. This was why, in his view, socialists should “abstain” from parliamentary action and seek instead to build up a mass anti-capitalist workers’ organisation. This would be political but not parliamentary and have socialism as its aim. As a mass organisation able to organise strikes and demonstrations it would be in a position to extract reforms from the ruling class, though not as stepping stones to socialism but as concessions to try to stop its growth. Reforms, in other words, could be obtained (if that was what was wanted) without needing to go into parliament, as a by-product of uncompromising agitation and organisation for socialism.

Although he came close to it, Morris’s position was not totally anti-parliamentary (he clashed with and opposed the anarchists, who eventually took over the Socialist League and committed it

to “propaganda of the deed” as they called bomb-throwing). He always envisaged the possibility, as he repeats here, of the mass Socialist organisation sending delegates into parliament on the eve of the socialist revolution, with a view to neutralising it and depriving the pro-capitalist minority in society of any legitimacy for violent resistance to the establishment of socialism that having a parliamentary majority might give them. What Morris was saying was that socialists should abstain from going into parliament to get reforms rather than they should abstain from going there altogether.

John Carruthers, in his talk on “Socialism and Radicalism” that was published as a pamphlet by the Hammersmith Socialist Society in 1894, argues that, even were the sort of reforms advocated by the SDF, ILP, the Fabians and others to be achieved (as they had been to some extent in countries like New Zealand), this would not solve working-class problems as their cause – the capitalist ownership of the means of production – would be left unchanged.

Carruthers saw clearly that nationalisation of certain industries would only benefit the rest of the capitalist class and not the working class, and so should not be supported by socialists. As to political reforms, he made the point that sufficient political democracy already existed in Britain for workers to be able to use it to gain power peacefully to establish socialism once they had come to want it. So there was no need for socialists to campaign for political reforms either. The real issue was that most workers didn’t yet want socialism, and that was what socialists should concentrate on trying to remedy.

Fred Henderson’s contribution “The ABC of Socialism” was written some fifteen years later, long after he had ceased to be a member of the Socialist League and indeed long after the League had gone out of existence. By then he was a member of the ILP – he was later to become the Labour Lord Mayor of Norwich – and so was not opposed to campaigning for reforms. But even he argues that as long as the cause of working-class problems remains – the private, or class, ownership of the means of production – then so will the problems. Reforms, in other words, can’t solve these problems; only Socialism can do that.

Henderson’s contribution to this book is in fact a basic exposition of the case against capitalism and the case for socialism, a reminder that before the First World War the argument was not so much about what socialism was but about how to get there. Henderson’s definition of socialism is clear enough: “community ownership of the land and of the means of producing and distributing wealth; and the organisation of industry under that common ownership as public service for the benefit of all; directed to social ends and the equipment of the life of the whole people instead of, as now, to the private enrichment of a privileged class of owners”.

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