

# Socialism and Nationalisation

An early article by Paul Lafargue

*Readers know the circumstances in which Paul Lafargue and Laura Marx have ended life together, with their last words expressing their belief in the early triumph of the cause for which they laboured. We bow before death. Nevertheless we rejoice that, although Lafargue has laid down his pen, his words still fight on behalf of the workers. The following article, written in "L'Egalité" of June 2nd, 1882, is still trenchant and useful.*

At the present moment a kind of Socialism for the capitalists is being created. It is very modest. It contents itself with the transformation of certain industries into public services. Above all, it does not compromise one. On the contrary it will rally a good number of capitalists.

They are told: Look at the Post Office, that is a Socialist public service, functioning admirably to the profit of the community, and more cheaply than if it were entrusted to a private company as was formerly the case. The gas supply, the railways and the building of workmen's dwellings must also become public services. They will function to the profit of the community and will chiefly benefit the capitalist class.

In capitalist society, the transformation of certain industries into municipal or national services is the last form of capitalist exploitation. It is because that form presents multiple and incontestable advantages for the bourgeoisie that in every capitalist country the same industries are becoming nationalised (Army, Police, Post Office, Telegraphs, the Mint, etc.).

Certain monopolised industries, indeed, delivered up to the greed of private companies, become instruments for the exploitation of other sections of the capitalist class, and so powerful that they disturb the whole bourgeois system.

Here are a few examples. The electric telegraph, on its introduction into France, became a state service because the political interests of the Government required it. In England and the United States, where the same political interest did not exist, the telegraphs were established by private companies. The English Government was compelled to buy them out in the interests of all, particularly the speculators, who in the transformation found means of obtaining scandalous profits. In the United States the telegraph service is still in private hands. It is monopolised by a gang of speculators who control the entire Press of the country. Those speculators communicate telegrams only to newspapers in vassalage to them, and which must pay such a heavy tax that many, being unable to bear such a burden, do without telegraphic news altogether. In America telegrams are the most important part of the newspapers; to deprive them of these dispatches is to condemn them to languish and die. In that republican Republic, which individualist Liberals take as the ideal of their most daring dreams, the liberty of the Press is at the mercy of a handful of speculators, without government force and without responsibility, but in control of the telegraph service.

The railway monopoly is so exorbitant that a company can ruin at will an industry or a town by differential or preferential tariffs. The danger to which society is exposed by the private ownership of the means of transport is so keenly felt that in France, England and the United States, many capitalists in their own interests demand the nationalisation of the railways. In capitalist society a private industry only becomes a State service in order to better serve the interest of the bourgeoisie. The advantages which the latter obtain are of different kinds; we have just spoken of the social danger created by the abandonment of certain industries to private exploitation, dangers which disappear or are attenuated as soon as the State directs them but there are others.

The State, by centralising administration, lessens the general charges; it runs the service at a smaller cost. The State is accused of paying everything more dearly than private enterprise; nevertheless, such is not always the case when there is a question of the establishment of means of communication, one of the most difficult and complex enterprises in modern society. Thus the tramways constructed in France have, with rare exceptions, cost an average of 250,000 to 300,000 francs per kilometre as a first establishment charge. The railway from Alais to the Rhone has eaten up per kilometre of line a sum of about 700,000 francs. M. Freycinet, who is not a bourgeois director for fun, has established upon positive grounds that the State could construct railways at a cost of 200,000 francs per kilometre. The

State can therefore sensibly diminish the prices of the services it exploits. It is the capitalists who profit by the reduction, because it is they, principally, who make use of them. Thus, what a number of workmen only use the postal service once or twice a year! And how very numerous are the commercial houses and industrial concerns which send out over ten and twenty letters a day!

State services become a means to politicians for placing their tools or dependants, and for giving good, fat sinecures to the sons-in-law of the bourgeoisie. M. Cochery has accorded lucrative posts to Orleanists; among others, to the son of Senator Laboulaye, the man of the inkpot.

Militants of the Parti Ouvrier may and must in their polemics against the public men and the politicians of the capitalist class, make use of this transformation of one time private industries into State services, to show how the bourgeoisie themselves are led by the logic of events to attack their own principles, which demand that society, represented by the State, snatch no industry from private initiative. But they must not desire, and still less demand, the transformation of fresh industries into national services, and that for diverse reasons.

Because it is to the interest of the workers' party to embitter the conflicts which lacerate the capitalist class, instead of seeking to pacify them—these antagonisms quicken the disorganisation of the ruling class; because nationalisation increases the corruptive power of capitalist politicians; because State employees, like workers in private employ, strike and engage in a struggle with the exploiters.

The only Socialist reason that one might put forward for that transformation is that perhaps it might simplify the revolutionary work of expropriation by the workers' party; we will examine this on another occasion.

## Part II

In the last issue we were saying that the only Socialist reason that might be given in favour of the transformation of certain private industries into services administered by State or Commune, was that the transformation would simplify the revolutionary task of expropriation to be accomplished by the workers' party when masters of political power. But this reason has not a leg to stand on. The advantages of the changes would be far from balancing the many dangers presented, which we have already briefly mentioned.

The first great revolutionary effort of the workers will be to seize the central power; so long as this capitalist stronghold will not have been captured, all proletarian measures will be refused—even urgent ones—or if accorded, it will be in such a form that they become illusory, and only benefit the capitalist class.

When the bourgeoisie are dispossessed of political power, then only will the workers' party be able to commence their economic expropriation; but those who demand the nationalisation of certain industries—even under present conditions—say that the task of the workers' party will be lightened because the bourgeoisie will already have been dispossessed of a portion of the social means of production.

Not at all.

The great organisations of communication and credit (such as the railways, the Bank of France, the Crédit Foncier, and the like), which it is desired to put in the hands of the State, are already so admirably centralised that, in order to seize them, it would be necessary to give a kick to their directors and burn a few bundles of paper; it would be just as easy to take possession of the Bank of France and its provincial branches as it would be to take over the General Post Office and its branches; it would be needful to send four men and a corporal, and to put the high officials under lock and key, in order to paralyse their intrigues and obtain information, if need were felt even for this.

Nationalisation would not facilitate the revolutionary task; but it would give rise to financial swindles, and a fearful deterioration of the Exchequer. In the second number of *L'Egalité* and in the *Revue Socialiste* I have pointed out some of the scandalous robberies of public funds which took place on the

State purchase of the smaller railways. All the political jobbers—the Freycinets, Gambettas and Wilsons—their appetite whetted by the repurchase of the small lines, demand the purchase of the trunk railways.

Although in a less degree, the expropriation of the great organisations of production (iron-works, mines, textiles, etc.), will still be an easy matter. It will be a question of displacing and confining if needful, a few administrators or owners. But expropriation is only a part of the historic task of the workers' party.

Those who busy themselves with State-Socialism, that is to say, those who demand the nationalisation or municipalisation of certain services, do not trouble at all about the lot of the workers engaged in them; but even admitting that they sought to improve the lot of those employed would they be able to do so? If they can, let them begin by improving the conditions of the underpaid workers in the Post Office, in the State tobacco factories, railways and State ironworks. The workshops of the State and municipality are prisons quite as bad as private workshops, if not worse.

The toilers are more greedily exploited in them than in private enterprise; they are bent beneath an authority that is more powerfully hierarchic; they can neither combine nor strike. And it could scarcely be otherwise, the State and municipality being only the official representatives of the capitalist class.

But the revolutionary power which will socialise the instruments of labour taken from the capitalist class, will have to mount guard over the general interests of society served by the socialised industries, and in particular over the interests of those directly engaged in them.

Suppose the party of the proletariat had sent Mr Rothschild to Jericho to look for records of his ancestors, and had seized the Northern of France railways: and let us further suppose that it either would not or could not establish gratuitous transport at the outset; it could arrange matters somewhat in this way. Out of each 100 francs of receipts, 10 francs are set aside for depreciation and general expenses, and 30 francs are distributable to share and debenture holders. Now shares and debentures being suppressed, the revolutionary government could divide the portion taken by the shareholders for doing nothing in three parts. One third could be left to the workers, one third go to cheapen freight, and one third go as revenue to the State.

Thus the revolutionary government could immediately increase the remuneration of the employees by nearly 16 per cent. It would have to ensure that the remuneration were distributed in quite a different way from the present where the less an administrator or high official works, the more he is paid. To remedy this it need only leave those interested to apportion the amount according to services and talents. The revolutionary Government would also have to obtain guarantees that the workers to whom it confided a social instrument, possessed all the requisite qualities for its good working; and that it did not become a means of exploiting certain grades of workers, as co-operative workshops have become in present-day society.

This method of utilising the social means of production could only be a passing one, imposed by the difficulties amidst which the workers' party will have to struggle on the morrow of the revolution. But we can perceive a period wherein, with the needs of consumption and the powers of production scientifically calculated, consumption as well as production will be free. There will be neither wages nor market prices. Human society will then once more enter the period of communism.

Indeed, only a "possibilist" professor, ignorant of social conditions and steeped in bourgeois prejudices, could offer the nationalisation of public services as the Socialist ideal.

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