

# A revolutionary socialist

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At the beginning of his socialist activity William Morris was a strong opponent of socialists involving themselves in election and parliamentary activities. By the end of his life, however, he had become convinced that his earlier attitude was mistaken and that socialists should fight for 'palliatives', or reforms, as well as for political power for socialism. Morris's period of opposition to parliamentary activity corresponds more or less with his membership of the Socialist League from 1884–1890.

Morris's views on the problem of reform and revolution can be gathered from the articles he wrote for the official organ of the Socialist League, *Commonweal*, from his books and published lectures, from his private letters, from his lecture notes and occasional articles in other journals. The most reliable statements of his views are to be found in his published articles, especially his reply to a correspondent on 'Socialism and Politics', in an official statement on parliamentary activity he drew up for the League in 1888, in the last article he wrote for the *Commonweal* 'Where are We Now' in 1890 and in an article he wrote in 1894 for the *Labour Prophet* 'What is our Present Business as Socialists?' A lecture he gave in July 1887 on 'The Policy of Abstention' also gives his views.<sup>1</sup>

The early socialists in Britain thought that capitalist rule would have to be overthrown by violent insurrection along the lines of the Paris Commune of 1871. They also tended to think that this clash, or Revolution with a capital R, would come quickly. The Paris Commune, a fully democratic regime in which the working class took part, was mercilessly crushed after two months by the forces at the service of the French government at Versailles. From this socialists drew the conclusion, understandable in the circumstances of the time, that the capitalist class would defend their privileges by all means and that their rule could only be overthrown by violent action.

Morris shared this belief that the overthrow would be violent and was not very far off. He argued that the coming uprising would not be successful unless there were present at the time a strong and determined



body of socialists. If, by some chance, capitalist rule were to collapse and socialists were to find themselves in possession of political power before they had had time to make adequate preparations and without the full backing of the workers, then the experience of the Paris Commune would be repeated: the counter-revolution would triumph and capitalist rule would be restored. At all costs this had to be avoided. A strong and determined body of socialists was a prime necessity for the success of the uprising. What the socialists of Britain must do was to devote all their resources to creating such a body of socialists. This is what Morris meant by 'Education for Revolution'. Socialists must prepare for the imminent uprising by 'making socialists'. This basic outlook was shared by all those who left the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) in 1884 to set up the Socialist League. All of them, however, did not go as far as Morris in opposing parliamentary activity. But the League never did have a reform programme. Until the anarchists took over, it pursued the policy of simply putting over propaganda for socialism, written and spoken.

This assumption that the rule of the capitalist class would have to be overthrown by violence was the basis of Morris's anti-parliamentary arguments. From it he concluded that parliamentary activity would be futile and a waste of time which could better be spent in making socialists. Parliament was an institution whose purpose was to preserve the domination of the capitalist class. This class would never allow it to be used to overthrow their rule. Even if socialists should, by some means, obtain a majority in parliament this might give them the power to make laws but it would not give them the power to enforce them or to end capitalist rule. For in this event the capitalist class, if they had let the socialists get this far in the first place, would resist the will of the parliamentary majority with violence. So that in the end would come the violent clash in which the number and determination of the socialists would be decisive. The time and energy spent in electing members to parliament would have been wasted. Worse, in fact, for the parliamentary majority would have been elected by the votes of non-socialists gathered by various vote-catching devices. Support gained by such means would be useless in any violent clash with the capitalist class and its supporters; the counter-revolution would triumph with little difficulty.

Morris also argued that reforms tended to reduce the discontent of the workers and so make them less ready to act against capitalist rule. Indeed the capitalist class would support reforms precisely with this end in view. For socialists to press for reforms in Parliament would be to help the capitalist class prolong their rule by delaying the workers'



uprising. Any socialists allowed into Parliament would be used for this purpose. They would allow the capitalist class to assess in what ways the workers were discontented and what should be done to reduce such discontent. Further, they would also be helping to erect a barrier against their own aim since all reforms, including State capitalism, tended to create a group of better-off workers with a stake in capitalism who would side with the capitalists in any clash with the rest of the workers.

Morris further drew attention to the dangerous effects which a reform programme could have on a socialist party. Contesting elections and working through Parliament necessarily involved compromising socialist principles. At elections the socialist candidate would water down his socialism and use various 'immediate demands' as bait to catch votes and get elected. In Parliament the bargaining needed to get a bill passed would again involve the party in compromise. A socialist party used to compromise would be unable to act in the necessary uncompromising way when the violent clash came.

However, Morris was not opposed to reforms as such. What he was opposed to was the policy of trying to use Parliament to get reforms. This he thought would weaken the socialist movement through compromising its principles. Any improvements that might be possible within capitalism would come more easily as a result of the capitalists' fear of an uncompromising socialist movement outside Parliament. At times, it is true, Morris did give the impression that he was opposed to improvements, whatever the means used to get them, just because they made the workers less discontented.

A further consideration was always present in Morris's arguments. He often made the simple point that at the time there were so few socialists that they could not be effective even as a parliamentary, reform party until they had built up their strength. As he put it, 'The making of Socialists must be a preliminary to the settling of the question: What are Socialists to do'. So even from the parliamentary point of view the situation demanded a policy of 'making socialists'. Morris still insisted on this after he had himself come to support a policy of using Parliament to get reforms.

There was also an element of irrational prejudice against 'party politics' in Morris's attitude. He once described Parliament as 'that degraded and degrading twaddle-shop'. He hated the intrigue and dishonesty involved in politics; to him it was a dirty game of which he wanted no part. This comes out clearly in his private letters where he says in effect that parliamentary activity may well be necessary but that he for one will have no part of it.



Since Morris did not believe that it was possible to use Parliament to get control of political power, what form did he expect the change-over to take? It is interesting to note that his idea was very similar to that of the French Syndicalists of a later period and of other anti-parliamentarists: The workers combine together into a nation-wide Workers' Federation which the government tries to suppress. Law and order begin to break down so that the workers are forced to take over many of the administrative functions of the State themselves. To do this they form 'workmen's committees'. A General Strike is called leading to a civil war in which most of the regular army go over to the workers.<sup>2</sup>

Morris thought that the workers might be able to use Parliament in some way during the course of the Revolution. Not to get political power, of course, since this was not possible nor to get reforms but at least to pass various laws. This would put the onus of rebellion on the privileged classes and so give the workers the additional prestige that comes from legality. The capitalists rather than the workers would be the 'rebels'. Morris also believed that before 'full Socialism' or Communism would be established society would pass through a transitional stage of State capitalism, introduced partly by the capitalists themselves before and partly by the socialists after the capture of political power. Although he regarded this stage as necessary Morris dreaded it and always opposed identifying it with socialism.

After Morris left the Socialist League in 1890 he did some re-thinking. In particular he reconsidered his earlier assumption that the overthrow of capitalist rule could only be violent. He began to argue that it was possible for the working class to win political power through the ballot-box and overcame his objections to socialists using Parliament to get reforms. The most important factors influencing his change of mind on these questions must have been his experience of the growing workers' movement as well as his own experience as a socialist propagandist. In 1882 there were only a handful of socialists. Ten years later many of the younger and more active trade unionists professed to have socialist ideas. The unskilled workers were organising in the New Unions. Moves were afoot to set up a workers' party independent of both the Liberals and the Conservatives. In other words, the working class was slowly advancing in organisation and in understanding. Morris also, like Marx and Engels had had to do previously, revised his earlier optimistic views as to when the Revolution would take place.

Taken together these changes brought Morris's position nearer to that of Engels (who had criticised his anti-parliamentarism). Morris, like



Engels, came to base his estimate of what socialists should do on what the working class was doing.

To Morris it seemed that the working class was choosing the peaceful way to socialism through the ballot-box. He remained opposed to any policy of compromise but no longer believed that for socialists to go into Parliament necessarily involved compromise. Parliament could be used to get political power peaceably. The uncompromising struggle for socialism could go on inside Parliament as well as outside. Reforms could still not be got by compromise, by assuming a community of interest between masters and men, but by a struggle based on the recognition that the workers could only improve their position at the expense of the capitalists. Morris argued that socialists should support such struggles for objectives less than socialism, not merely because they brought improvements but also because they trained the workers in joint action for a common end and so prepared them to act for socialism.

To make the socialists of Britain more effective, Morris suggested a united socialist party to be formed by a federation of existing 'socialist' bodies like the Fabian Society and the SDF. The test for membership of this party should be professed agreement with the aim of socialism. This party would have a parliamentary reform programme and would support the struggles of the workers. But its main task would be to 'make socialists', to carry on a persistent propaganda for socialism. This scheme never got off the ground except for the issuing in 1893 of the *Manifesto of English Socialists*.

At the end of his life, then, Morris had reached a position on the problem of reform and revolution—and indeed on socialist tactics generally—very similar to that later elaborated by European Social Democracy<sup>3</sup>; that the struggle for reforms prepared the working class for the struggle for political power; that the way to get reforms was by means of the class struggle; that a socialist party should have a reform programme.

## MORRIS'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE REFORM-REVOLUTION DEBATE

Morris himself of course was not the originator of all the arguments he employed. Most of them were basically of anarchist origin. The anarchists of the time had as their immediate aim an insurrection against the



State. Their attitude to reforms and Parliament followed from this. They opposed electoral and trade union activity because it diverted the workers' attention from the need for an immediate uprising. They opposed reforms because they lessened discontent and so made the workers less prepared to revolt. And, finally, they opposed Parliament as a part of the State they were aiming to destroy.

Morris was not an anarchist; he did not advocate an immediate uprising although, at that time, he could see no way to end capitalist rule except by violence. Where Morris differed from the anarchists was in arguing that no insurrection against capitalist rule could succeed unless workers themselves were prepared to act for socialism. So for Morris the most important task facing socialists was to rouse such a readiness amongst the workers, to make them genuine revolutionary socialists. This was why he opposed the anarchists in the Socialist League who called for an immediate insurrection or at least for immediate acts of defiance of the State. It was precisely this insistence on the necessity of a socialist working class—and for socialists to work to create it—that distinguishes Morris's arguments on reforms and Parliament from those of the anarchists and gives them a peculiar significance of their own. For Morris was opposed to socialists taking part in Parliament and yet was not an anarchist.

If Morris's arguments were similar to those of the anarchists this was because he shared their belief that capitalist rule would have to be overthrown by an insurrection. When Morris came to abandon this belief in the inevitability of insurrection then with it went the larger part of his case against a socialist party having a reform programme. Morris then came to believe that the growing socialist movement (as he thought) would be able to use the ballot box and Parliament to win political power. Naturally a socialist party, in the course of its uncompromising struggle for socialism, should also press for reforms inside Parliament. Morris still recognised that there were dangers in election and Parliamentary activity but expected that the mass of socialist workers outside Parliament would be able to control their delegates inside. For although Morris changed his views on insurrection he never changed those on the necessity of making socialists: socialism could not be set up until the workers wanted it and knew how to run it.

Morris was the first to point out the dangers to a socialist party of trying to get elected to Parliament on a reform programme. People would vote for the reforms rather than for socialism so that the socialist members



would have no mandate for socialism and would be forced to compromise. Fighting on a reform programme would lead to 'the error of moving earth and sea to fill the ballot boxes with Socialist votes which will not represent Socialist men'. As socialism is impossible without 'Socialist men', socialists elected to Parliament by such means would be of no use as a force for socialism. They would not be in Parliament as delegates of a socialist working class outside and would be restricted in what they could do by the non-socialist views of those who had voted for them. What was important was to create a desire for socialism amongst the workers. This done, the workers would know what to do to realise their desire. Socialists should be making more socialists by persistent propaganda rather than trying to get reforms. A socialist party should thus not have a reform programme in addition to its aim of socialism.

This is Morris's main contribution to the reform-revolution discussion in the sense that it was a point, whatever weight is given to it, that had not been made before.

#### AN INFANTILE DISORDER?

Engels, who had supported those who broke with the SDF in 1884 to set up the Socialist League, was opposed to the anti-parliamentarism which soon became the policy of the League and backed those who wanted it to have a reform programme. In a letter of May 12, 1886 he complained that

'the League is passing more and more into the hands of the Anarchists . . . Bax and Morris are strongly under the influence of the Anarchists'.<sup>4</sup>

The question of parliamentary activity was discussed at the 1887 and 1888 Conferences of the League. After the 1887 Conference Engels wrote in another letter

'As to the League, if it upholds the resolution of the last Conference, I do not see how anyone can remain a member who intends using the present political machinery as a means of propaganda and action' (June 23).

and

'Of all the various Socialist groups in England, what is now the "opposition" in the League, was the only one with which so far I could thoroughly sympathize' (July 26).<sup>5</sup>

This 'opposition', which favoured parliamentary action, left the League



soon after the 1888 Conference which re-affirmed the League's position on the question.

Engels was still pursuing the aims which he and Marx had set themselves in the International Working Men's Association in the 1860s and 1870's: the formation of independent workers' parties in Britain and elsewhere. With this aim in view Engels felt that the Socialists in Britain should not cut themselves off from any moves in this direction by remaining a mere propagandist group and refusing to have anything to do with reforms or Parliament. He regarded the League's anti-parliamentarism as a case of the 'infantile disorders' he had learnt was a stage all socialist movements went through at the start.

This criticism was to a certain extent valid: much of Morris's early argument against parliamentary activity and for just making socialists was based on an inadequate grasp of the process of social change. This policy did, as Engels expected, cut off the Socialist League from the growing movement for a workers' party and led also in the end to its capture by the anarchists.

Nevertheless Morris's early policy of making socialists could be said to have been right but for the wrong reasons. In a sense Engels was correct in arguing that the appearance of a workers' party in Britain would be a step forward as the working class would learn to act on the political field independently of their masters. But this party did not, as he had expected, evolve into a socialist party but remained a Labour Party committed to the administration and reform of capitalism rather than to revolutionary socialism.

This would, as it were, rehabilitate Morris. If he erred, he erred on the right side. For his policy of making socialists can be justified on strict Marxian grounds. All a small socialist party can do is to put over the case for socialism as strongly and as often as possible, to fight confusion and compromise, and to admit only genuine socialists to its ranks in preparation for the time when social development will have made the working class socialist. Such a party should not try to be a reform party at the same time.

## MORRIS'S REPUTATION AND INFLUENCE

Although the task of toning down Morris's socialism for the benefit of his wealthy admirers began almost as soon as he was dead, in Marxian circles his reputation as a 'revolutionary socialist' survived. His *News*



from *Nowhere* which leaves no doubt as to where he stood on this issue had a very wide circulation. It was quickly translated into German (by the wife of the pioneer German socialist, Wilhelm Liebknecht) and distributed by the Social Democratic Party.

At the end of his life Morris's political position was more or less that of the SDF and it was this organisation which first kept alive his reputation. The Twentieth Century Press which was at the service, if not under the democratic control of the SDF, reprinted a number of Morris's writings: some of the pamphlets he had written for the Socialist League, an article *How I became a Socialist*. The anarchists too reprinted some of the Socialist League pamphlets. Besides these pamphlets, articles and lectures Morris's books *Signs of Change* and *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (written with Belfort Bax) were also available. So that at the turn of the century, when the reform-revolution problem was re-opened, socialists could have had access to a fair number of Morris's socialist works. After the turn of the century yet more of his works became available. In 1903 the Fabian Society published a lecture of his on *Communism*. In 1907 the Socialist Party of Great Britain, which had broken away from the SDF in 1904, brought out another lecture 'Art under Plutocracy' as a pamphlet entitled *Art, Labour and Socialism*. In 1913 the Charles H. Kerr Publishing Co. in Chicago which specialised in popular editions of Marxist works reprinted *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*.

In Britain the SDF first became the Social Democratic Party and then the British Socialist Party. After the first world war most of the members of the SDF went into the Communist Party of Great Britain. Here the reputation of Morris was kept up by those who knew, especially R. Page Arnott.

The Socialist Party of Great Britain still survives today and in 1962 reprinted *Art, Labour and Socialism*. The Socialist Party is interesting in that those who drew up its declaration of principles in 1904 must have had amongst the documents in front of them *The Manifesto of the Socialist League* which had been partly drafted by Morris. A comparison of the wording of certain passages makes this clear.

In America the Socialist Labour Party there still keeps alive the reputation of William Morris. With regard to America, it is interesting to note that as far back as 1907 R. R. La Monte, then a member of the Socialist Party of America, was surprised to read that Morris was not a 'scientific socialist'. He wrote in a footnote in his book *Socialism, Positive and Negative*:



‘The other day I chanced upon a pamphlet by one Oscar Lovell Triggs of Chicago. It bore the title, “William Morris, Craftsman, Writer and Social Reformer”. In turning over its pages I was somewhat startled to read “ ‘scientific’ socialism he never understood or advocated”. And again further on my eyes fell on this gem: “it is apparent that Morris’s ‘socialism’ is poetic and not scientific socialism” ’.<sup>6</sup>

Well might La Monte be startled—even in 1907.

It has been established that Morris was known as a ‘revolutionary socialist’ in Marxian circles, but was his contribution to the discussion of the problem of reform and revolution also known? This seems much less likely especially as the sources—articles in *Commonweal*, unpublished lectures and private letters—would not have been available to socialists at this time. To this must be added the fact that when he died Morris no longer held anti-parliamentary views.

It thus seems reasonable to conclude that when the discussion was re-opened at the turn of the century it was under the influence of Daniel De Leon’s views in the Socialist Labor Party of America rather than of Morris’s earlier views. Even so some of the terminology, for instance ‘palliative’, was common to both discussions.

J. Fitzgerald, a founder member of the Socialist Party of Great Britain, did refer to Morris in a discussion of socialist tactics at a meeting in March 1905. He was quoted as saying:

‘... they had been told by some worthy people, even by a man of the stamp of Morris, that the soldiers would fraternise with the people’.<sup>7</sup>

However this is probably a reference to a passage at the end of the chapter ‘How the Change Came’ in *News from Nowhere* and cannot be taken as evidence that Morris’s early views on tactics were still known.

Morris in fact left the problem unsolved. He believed that using Parliament necessarily involved fighting for reforms. This was why when he was opposed to parliamentary action he was also opposed to a reform programme and why when later he supported parliamentary action he also supported a reform programme. The solution was in fact proposed by the Socialist Party of Great Britain in 1904 when they pointed out that using the vote and Parliament to get socialism did not entail having a reform programme. A socialist party could contest elections on a straight socialist programme and only seek votes for this programme; in this way could a socialist party avoid the danger, which Morris foresaw, of attracting non-socialist support and being forced into compromise, finally ceasing to be a socialist party altogether.



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> References are, respectively, *Commonweal* July 1885, June 9 1888 and November 15 1890, and *Labour Prophet* January 1894. The lecture is given in *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, supplementary volume II, 1936.

<sup>2</sup> This is the picture in chapter XVII of *News from Nowhere* entitled 'How the Change Came'.

<sup>3</sup> E. P. Thompson argued otherwise in the first (1955) edition of his *William Morris Romantic to Revolutionary*: that Morris's position was more or less that of Lenin; that he favoured a highly disciplined vanguard party ready to take over and lead the workers' struggle. 'Were William Morris alive today', wrote Thompson in 1955 in an obvious reference to the Communist Party, 'he would not look far to find the party of his choice'. This is highly questionable, to say the least. Quite apart from the fact that the system in Russia is obviously the State Socialism (or State capitalism) for which Morris cared so little, Morris rejected the idea of 'leadership'. In all his socialist writings the emphasis is on the understanding and determination of the workers rather than on their leaders (or so-called leaders, as Morris preferred to call them). This was the crux of his case against Parliamentarism and later what he relied on to prevent 'the personal fads and vanities of leaders' from standing in 'the way of real business'.

<sup>4</sup> Engels to W. Liebknecht, Page Arnot, *William Morris, The Man and The Myth*, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Engels to J. L. Mahon, E. P. Thompson, *From Romantic to Revolutionary*, appendix.

<sup>6</sup> R. R. La Monte, *Socialism, Positive and Negative*, pp. 122-3.

<sup>7</sup> Paris Commune meeting, *Socialist Standard*, April 1905.