British workers strike for better wages and political reform (“The Plug Plot Riots”), 1842

July 18, 1842 to: September 1842

Country: United Kingdom
Location City/State/Province: focused in the industrial areas of Lancashire, Staffordshire, Cheshire, and Yorkshire

Goals:
Demands varied by location and industry, but the strikes were prompted by proposed wage cuts. Most strikers requested a return to the wage levels of 1840. The campaign expanded from these narrow economic goals as it grew, and soon endorsed enactment of the revolutionary People’s Charter. The six points of the Charter are as follows:

1) Suffrage for all able-minded men 21 years of age.
2) That each Member of Parliament (MP) represent the same number of electors, to prevent unequal representation.
3) That all men be eligible for Parliament, without a property qualification.
4) The secret ballot, to protect electors.
5) Annual elections for Parliament, to ensure accountability and limit bribery.
6) Payment of MPs, to enable the poor or middle-class serve.

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 016. Picketing
- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 016. Picketing
- 038. Marches
- 048. Protest meetings
• 116. Generalised strike
• 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse

Methods in 3rd segment:

• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 016. Picketing
• 038. Marches
• 048. Protest meetings
• 116. Generalised strike
• 134. Nonobedience in absence of direct supervision
• 137. Refusal of an assemblage or meeting to disperse

Methods in 4th segment:

• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 016. Picketing
• 048. Protest meetings
• 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 5th segment:

• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 016. Picketing
• 048. Protest meetings
• 116. Generalised strike

Methods in 6th segment:

• 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
• 010. Newspapers and journals
• 016. Picketing
• 048. Protest meetings
• 116. Generalised strike

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

• 192. Alternative economic institutions

Classifications

Classification:
Change
Defense

Cluster:
Democracy

Group characterization:
• Chartists
• lower class trade unionists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:
Leadership was decentralized. The all-important local leaders are too numerous to name. The Great Delegate Conference in Manchester, chaired by Alexander Hutchinson, provided a degree of central leadership.

Partners:
The National Chartist Association (NCA), although internally divided, agreed to support and aid the strikers. It used its more-developed national infrastructure to help spread the campaign. The Northern Star, a Chartist newspaper led by Feargus O’Conner, disseminated information about the strikes.

External allies:
Some middle-class shop owners donated food to help feed the strikers, and others donated money.

Involvement of social elites:
Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:
• Workers in Burslem and Hanley

Groups in 2nd Segment:
• Bolton
• Denton
• Hyde
• Manchester
• Stalybridge
• many other regions

Groups in 3rd Segment:
• Great Delegate Conference
• Local delegate conferences
• National Chartist Association
• Workers in South Wales; parts of Scotland; Dorset and Somerset

Groups in 4th Segment:
Groups in 5th Segment:
• Some workers (exit)

Groups in 6th Segment:
• More workers (exit)

Segment Length: Approximately 12 days
Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

**Opponents:**
Factory owners and British government

**Nonviolent responses of opponent:**
Not known

**Campaigner violence:**
Factory workers scuffled with managers in the process of leaving the factories. Workers also fought back against soldiers who attempted to disperse their gatherings. The strike leadership advised against the use of force, but its control over individual strikers was often weak.

**Repressive Violence:**
Soldiers systematically dispersed assembled strikers by use of force, including charging with bayonets and firing on crowds. Strikers were killed in several different cities. In other cases, factory managers locked in and fought with workers attempting to walk out.

Success Outcome

**Success in achieving specific demands/goals:**
2 points out of 6 points

**Survival:**
1 point out of 1 points

**Growth:**
3 points out of 3 points

**Notes on outcomes:**
Almost all factories cancelled proposed wage cuts and in many cases restored salaries to 1840 levels. The Factory Act of 1844 improved working conditions for women and children. However, broader political reform did not occur.

Worker’s organizations persisted despite the arrest of many leaders.

The strike spread from local beginnings in Hanley and Burslem to encompass 500,000 workers across Britain.

The Industrial Revolution brought prosperity to Britain’s upper classes and in the process created a new industrial working class. To this class belonged, in 1842, 350,000 textile workers, 120,000 coal miners, and 400,000 metal workers. Most of these laborers lived in the coal-rich counties of Lancashire, Cheshire, Yorkshire and Staffordshire in western Britain. Far from sharing in the newfound industrial wealth of their employers, however, workers endured abysmal working conditions, unpredictable wages, and no job security. The constant advancement of technology in the cotton mills frequently made large numbers of employees obsolete. A nation-wide depression beginning in 1837 made the workers’ situation even more difficult. All of these factors added up to great hardship for working class families, who, as a rule, struggled to obtain basic necessities.

Although trade unionism was illegal in Britain, unions were well-established in many locations and frequently clashed with the government. The unionists constituted one of two powerful populist movements. The other was known as Chartism, named after the People’s Charter which demanded universal male suffrage, the eligibility of all classes to be Members of Parliament, and other political reforms. Broadly popular among laborers, Chartism also drew support from the disaffected lower-middle-class, who felt shut out of the political process.

The ongoing depression led factory owners to cut wages two or three times between 1840 and June 1842. Each occasion prompted scattered strikes and protestations, but the tide of cuts continued. The beginning of continuous striking occurred on
July 18, 1842, in the city of Hanley, Staffordshire. A group of coal miners assembled and swore not to resume work until wages and working conditions were bettered. As the strike spread to the other coalfields of Staffordshire, the strikers in Hanley and elsewhere passed resolutions in support of the People’s Charter while maintaining their original wage-related demands. Strikers spread the campaign by marching from town to town and collecting their fellow laborers.

Workers spread news of the Staffordshire strikes to their fellow laborers across the region, aided by the radical Chartist newspaper the Northern Star. Many opportunistic Chartists looking to capitalize on the strength of the trade unionists called meetings to organize the campaign and direct it toward the Charter. Workers and Chartists alike called for higher wages, praised the Charter and planned a ‘Great National turn-out’ to begin on August 8. On this date, workers gathered in Stalybridge and Ashton before marching to other cities, ‘turning-out’ workers from every factory they passed. In all of these actions, women and child workers marched alongside men. Marchers were for the most part orderly and serious, although mild fighting did occur when police and managers attempted to guard factory gates. This trend continued throughout the campaign—workers typically did not seek violence in their demonstrations, but did not hesitate to fight when provoked by soldiers or police. On August 9, the strike reached Manchester, the epicenter of the industrial region. 20,000 workers marched through the streets in a peaceful demonstration of strength. The Commissioner of Police, Sir Charles Shaw, strongly desired to disperse the ‘mob’ violently, but the city magistrate apprehended the political danger of the situation and convinced Shaw not to take action.

Once the strike reached Manchester, workers rapidly spread unrest to the rest of the region. Within days, the strikers shut down every factory within fifty miles of Manchester. Workers from each industry set up “trade conferences” in each city to decide what, exactly, they wanted out of the strike. Each conference debated the crucial question of whether to steer the strike firmly in the Chartist direction or to remain narrowly focused on wage issues. Local-level strike leaders formed strike committees to negotiate arrangements between shop-owners and hungry laborers. Despite some success in procuring bread for the strikers, food stress remained a huge problem throughout the strike. Workers respected the sanctity of private property and refused to raid farms to feed themselves. Strike committees actually permitted some factories to temporarily reopen in order to make use of perishable materials. Once the materials were expended, workers walked out again. All of these measures demonstrate that, although the Charter contained elements of class warfare, the strikers were conscious of public relations and strove to present a respectable face, the best to remedy their miserable situation.

Despite the workers’ best efforts at legitimacy, reports in the upper-class newspaper, the Guardian, characterized the workers as a lawless mob. Strike leaders were portrayed as dirty, cowardly and treacherous. In London, Home Secretary Sir James Graham readied artillery and troops dispatched them toward Lancashire on August 13. On this same date, Queen Victoria issued an edict declaring the illegality of the strikes and offering a £50 reward for turning in a fellow striker. Although some laborers earned only £5 per month, few chose to desert the campaign.

Meanwhile, the strikers continued to organize themselves. On August 15, each local trade conference sent a representative to the Great Delegate Conference in Manchester. Each delegate stood and voiced the concerns of his local tradespeople; then, the conference overwhelmingly voted to endorse both the Charter and a return to 1840 wage rates. That evening, city magistrates entered to disperse the meeting. The delegates left, but agreed to meet the next day at a different location. The next morning, the chairman, Alexander Hutchinson, defiantly declared that the conference had not been broken up the previous evening, but had finished its agenda and dispersed.

Workers continued to march across the region and spread the strike to Dundee, Norwisch and Lancaster. Wherever they could, law enforcement officials dispersed crowds by charging them with bayonets. On August 15 and 16, soldiers fired on demonstrators in several cities, killing approximately eight and wounding many more. Despite this violence, the fact remained that the government simply did not have sufficient law enforcement manpower to forcibly remove all the strikers. City governments conscripted special constables from among the middle class, but many of these constables empathized with the workers and refused to fight them.

Even though the region around Manchester was paralyzed, the strikes did not become truly national in scope until the National Charter Association (NCA) officially endorsed the campaign on August 16. The NCA’s nationwide organizational network
immediately helped spread the strikes further. Parts of South Wales, Scotland, Dorset, and Somerset now joined the strike. Workers also spread unrest in London, but proper strikes never developed there due to intense police attention.

August 16 proved to be the high-water mark of the strike, the moment where the threat to the national government was greatest. With the Great Delegate Conference in session, strike committees dictating which factories could and could not operate, and the NCA in alliance, the campaign had immense authority and was dangerously close to becoming a revolutionary counter-government. The momentum did not last, however. Following the close of the Great Delegate Conference, delegates returned to their hometowns and left a void in central leadership. The NCA leaders also dispersed, and, although they continued to work locally, the Charter was a national-level political document which required top-down inception. With the campaign once again decentralized, more achievable wage demands began to dominate the discourse. Meanwhile, Home Secretary Graham forged local police and soldiers into a unified force of repression, ready to harass and disband marchers wherever they should turn up. By August 20, Chairman Alexander Hutchinson and many other union and Chartist leaders had been arrested. Others filled in, but the national strike organization became less robust.

Although the campaign lost its centralized character, all of the workers—500,000 of them—remained on strike through the end of August and into September. On August 29, some factories attempted to reopen, but the number of laborers who showed up to work numbered in the tens. As food became harder to come by in September, some workers would return for a week, get paid, and then leave again. The most perseverant held out until the end of September before settling with employers. In all cases, strikers prevented proposed wage cuts at their factories. Some had to settle with this small victory, in other cases owners granted wage increases from pre-strike levels. So, although the campaign did not succeed in passing the Charter, the initial goal of better pay was achieved.

Fifty-nine leaders of the campaign were tried the following year in London. Charges sought were relatively light. 1,500 more strikers were tried in local courts across the country. In 1844, Parliament passed the Factory Act of 1844, which improved working conditions for women and children, who, as mentioned earlier, had marched alongside men in all the demonstrations (women and children made up a substantial percentage of the industrial workforce at this time). Chartism survived and thrived as a movement, later reaching its apex of influence in 1848. Trade unions continued to exert their force periodically, but would not be legalized until 1871.

Research Notes

Influences:

Pamphlet titled Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes, effectively a blueprint for a general strike, written and circulated by William Benbow in 1832. (1)

Sources:


Additional Notes:
The first source above is a comprehensive account of the strike from start to finish—very informative.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:
William Lawrence, 24/09/2010

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