



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Manchester workers campaign for economic equality and political representation (Peterloo Massacre), 1817-1820

March

1817

to: Spring

1820

Country: United Kingdom

Location City/State/Province: *Manchester*

Goals:

- Higher wages
- Closing of income gap
- Fairer representation in Parliament
- Repeal of the Corn Laws

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 038. Marches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 048. Protest meetings
- 106. Industry strike
- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 141. Civil disobedience of "illegitimate" laws

Methods in 4th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support

Methods in 6th segment:

Additional methods (Timing Unknown):

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols
- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 009. Leaflets, pamphlets, and books
- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 036. Performances of plays and music
- 037. Singing
- 048. Protest meetings
- 071. Consumers' boycott of beer
- 120. Withholding or withdrawal of allegiance
- 121. Refusal of public support

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Democracy

Economic Justice

Group characterization:

- Handloom weavers
- laborers
- small landholders
- spinners
- tenant farmers

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

John Bagguley, Henry Hunt, Joseph Johnson, John Knight

Partners:

Manchester Patriotic Union (Mary Fildes, president)

The Manchester Observer (James Wroe, editor; John Thacker Saxton, co-editor; Richard Carlile, publisher)

Samuel Bradford, leader of the Middleton contingent at Peterloo

James Moorehouse

External allies:

Sir Francis Burdett (MP)

Major John Cartwright

The Times

Involvement of social elites:

Not known

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Spinners
- factory/cotton workers
- weavers

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Broader cross-section of working class

Groups in 3rd Segment:**Groups in 4th Segment:****Groups in 5th Segment:**

- Rural/agricultural workers (possibly earlier)

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: *Approximately 8 months*

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Parliament

Manchester Loyalists (included political parties of High Tories and Pittites)

Manchester Magistrates

Manchester Yeomen

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

Not known

Campaigner violence:

Many arrived armed to St. Peter's Field.

After the melee broke out in St. Peter's Field, some threw stones at the Yeomanry.

Repressive Violence:

Campaigners were hacked with sabers at a number of actions broken up by the police. The Peterloo Massacre that took place on St. Peter's Field involved the death of 11-15 protesters, and the injury of around 400.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

0 points out of 6 points

Survival:

0 points out of 1 point

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

While the campaign had little immediate success in terms of concrete reforms, it is still important to remember the influence that the events at Peterloo had in terms of ingraining the issues into the public mind. (See last paragraph of narrative.)

The economic plight of the people of Manchester in the early eighteenth century was rooted in three major historical developments: the Industrial Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Corn Laws of 1804. The first solidified an enormous and conspicuous gap between rich and poor, leaving Manchester's lower classes—mostly spinners and weavers of cotton—to grapple with unemployment, poverty, hunger, and heavy reliance on social welfare. It also contributed to an unprecedented boom in population (Manchester's quintupled in four decades). Meanwhile, the Corn Laws' regressive duty on imported corn exacerbated these predicaments as the war against Napoleon drained the treasury. England had never been richer, but its population had never collectively been poorer, and industrial cities and towns such as Manchester bore the brunt of the disparities.

Parliament made no effort to reflect England's demographics, leaving the poor underrepresented and the wealthy overrepresented in the legislature; the lower classes were marginalized economically and largely disenfranchised politically. Manchester, among several other localities, had no representation.

Interestingly, however, the poorer classes were also becoming more literate and were thus more aware of the need for parliamentary reform, suffrage, and a fairer distribution of wealth. Parliament remained aloof, however, and caved to landed interests via new, more crushing Corn Law regulations in 1815 and 1816. Radical sentiment rapidly began to increase, and it expanded to include much of the working class (rather than mostly spinners and weavers). Violent riots and rampages, fueled by the angry workers, were not uncommon. Wary of violent insurrection, the state maintained vigilant discipline on the working and lower classes through the suppression of many civil liberties to an unprecedented extent: for instance, in 1816, trade unions were outlawed and freedom of the press restricted, and in 1817, unapproved public meetings were banned and habeas corpus suspended.

One early catalyst in the campaign occurred in March of 1817, when renown and energetic orator John Bagguley organized a march, known as the March of the Blanketeers, of forty thousand participants in blatant violation of the law. Many, including Bagguley, were arrested, but there was no violence. And while the English government demonstrated success in quelling immediate uprisings, in the long run, their repression only fomented resistance.

By 1818, external economic forces had pushed workers' wages to their lowest levels yet. In the fifteen years prior, spinners' income had decreased by a third and weavers' by two thirds—from already insufficient levels. Factory owners provided no relief, so workers—from building workers to colliers to spinners to weavers—went on strike. The strikes and demonstrations were, with a few minor exceptions, peaceful, but the state quickly grew impatient. English officials arrested Bagguley and many other leaders of the campaign, leaving the participants vulnerable. Ultimately, they called off their strikes. Yet again, though, resistance only continued to mount. Not long after the strikes, unions began to form in Manchester, which helped to organize the working class and increase popular sympathy for the workers' cause.

With John Bagguley now imprisoned, Henry Hunt, another powerful public speaker, filled his void. In January of 1819, he made

his first appearance to the workers in the Manchester campaign, addressing a fervent crowd of ten thousand. His popularity led to an invitation to speak at a forthcoming event in August, at the same site (St. Peter's Field). It was organized by Joseph Johnson, a key leadership figure in the campaign. This August gathering would afterwards become known as the Peterloo Massacre—an ironic name for an event at which Hunt encouraged all attendees to maintain nonviolent discipline.

About eight thousand people from Middleton and Saddleworth came to Manchester for Hunt's second speech at St. Peter's. Combined with the workers from Manchester, there were between sixty and eighty thousand men, women, and children at the event. And they were not all from industrial, urban backgrounds; many rural backgrounds were represented, as well.

Some protestors linked arms to prevent, in theory, the constables present from being able to arrest the speakers. Not long after Hunt began his oratory, however, the magistrates, watching the spectacle from a building overlooking the field, gave the order for several constables to arrest him. Hunt pleaded to the Manchester Yeomanry for help. However, the amateur Yeomanry, unskilled in breaking up crowds and largely intoxicated, panicked. The magistrates then gave them the order to disperse the crowd. The Yeomen began to slash, with sabers, indiscriminately through the crowd, which at first heeded Hunt's call to stand firm. But soon complete disorder and panic took over, and the crowd had to attempt to flee. The attendants were impeded, however, by the several other regiments blocking the exits. Carnage continued, and by the end of the massacre, anywhere from four to six hundred had been wounded, about a dozen had died, and approximately forty—including Henry Hunt—were arrested.

It should be noted that the crowd did not maintain perfect nonviolent discipline. The feelings of antagonism, and in a large sense the desire for revenge, were probably directed towards the Yeomen as much as they came from them. Many who were victims of the massacre had, incongruously, also brought weapons themselves, as if to indicate that they were prepared (or even hoping) for violence. Furthermore, more than a few workers at St. Peter's field took full advantage of the stones on the ground once the melee broke out. Of course, however, violence was not the intent of Johnson, Hunt, and other leaders and organizers; the opposite was explicitly the case. After the massacre, scattered skirmishes and other disturbances took place, some with casualties.

Unfortunately for the workers' movement, the two chief results of the incident at St. Peter's Field were further repression and the lethargy of the campaign. Citizens of Manchester were defeated and left hesitant to engage in any kind of public demonstrations. In late 1819, Parliament passed the Six Acts, which increased the power of law enforcement, made prosecution simpler, restricted public meetings, imposed a stamp tax on certain low-cost periodicals, etc. Combined with the restrictions enacted before the Peterloo Massacre, the English government had repressive capabilities on an unimaginable and unmatched scale, thus further discouraging resistance.

Henry Hunt, along with a handful of other leaders and participants, was imprisoned in the spring of 1820. By this point, however, a collusion of fading memories and increased risk had greatly minimized the public's anger. The guilty verdicts caused but a fraction of the uproar that they would have just six months earlier, even though the conditions of the working class had not improved.

Nonetheless, despite the floundering and demise of the campaign, the efforts of the citizens of Manchester, and other parts of England, from 1815-1820 brought the issues of Parliamentary reform and economic inequality to the public's collective conscience. Indeed, future uprisings to sociopolitical and socioeconomic circumstances in England—such as those of 1832, 1867, 1884, 1918, 1928, and 1945—were inspired and informed by the campaign and the Peterloo Massacre. Eventually, conditions for the working class improved in England, which may not have occurred exclusively or even in large part because of the incident at St. Peter's Field but which most likely would not have occurred as quickly without it.

Research Notes

Influences:

Influenced by Radical Reform movement.(1)

Influenced by factory sabotage in 1811-1812.(1)

Influenced by similar reform campaign at Stockport.(1)

Influenced a similar reform campaign at Westminster.(2)

Influenced subsequent socioeconomic/sociopolitical campaigns in 1832, 1867, 1884–5, 1918, 1928, and 1945.(2)

Sources:

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Poole, Robert. "The March to Peterloo: Politics and Festivity in Late Gregorian England." Past & Present 192, no. 1 (August 2006): 109-153. Academic Search Premier, EBSCOhost.

Previous, broader work on workers' movements in Manchester by Olivia Ensign was also utilized.

Name of researcher, and date dd/mm/yyyy:

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