

The 1819 'Peterloo' massacre: class struggle in the Industrial Revolution

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August 16, 2009 — The Industrial Revolution began in England, and the emergence of the industrial working class brought to the fore a new social and political force in world history. The bloody events of 190 years ago, on August 16, 1819, when a mass workers' protest in Manchester demanding political reform and labour rights was broken up by the army, with considerable loss of life, stand out as a stark warning to socialist activists everywhere that the ruling classes will react with violence and terror when their power and privileges are challenged.

On August 16, 1819, mounted regular troops and yeomanry of the British army, acting on the instructions of government officials, attacked without warning a mass meeting of more 100,000 people drawn from the industrial centres of Lancashire in the north-west of England. The meeting, held on St. Peter's Field in the centre of Manchester, the major industrial city of Lancashire, had been organised as part of a national campaign to win a radical reform of the British parliament and to redress the economic grievances of working people. More than 400 men, women and children were killed or seriously injured as a result of this "action".

One of the cavalry units involved — the 11th Hussars — had been present at the Battle of Waterloo, which had occurred four years earlier. As soon as the massacre became known to the public, the savage sobriquet "Peterloo" was universally adopted.

The August 16 massacre was one outcome of an extraordinarily powerful and determined agitation for social and political justice in England, which at times approached pre-revolutionary proportions. The primary social force behind this mass agitation was the new working class.

Industrial Revolution

This new class, the industrial proletariat, emerged from the Industrial Revolution, a transformation of economic and social relations that began towards the end of the 18th century, primarily in parts of north-west England. The cradle of this revolution was in fact south-east Lancashire, and Manchester in particular. Here, technological innovations developed in the latter third of the 18th century, such as the steam engine, the power loom and the spinning jenny, were applied to the previously dispersed, domestic-based cotton industry then in existence. The "putting-out" system, whereby

spinners and weavers worked at home at more or less their own pace, was replaced by vast factories employing hundreds or thousands of workers. The new machine industry was concentrated in these factories. Raw materials and fuel for the machines came from the coal and iron extraction industries then emerging in other parts of England, Scotland and Wales. Around the factories grew up large industrial towns such as Rochdale, Stockport, Oldham and Blackburn; as well as the world's first industrial city — Manchester.

The previously existing social order broke up in Lancashire and other emergent industrial districts, and was replaced by a new one. Ties of dependence descended from feudalism — a deferential hierarchy linking “masters” and “men”; the static, rigid order overseen by landlord and parson: all this was burst asunder and replaced by the cut-throat world of capitalist competition. In these regions the whole pattern of life was revolutionised.

By 1800, of English cities, Manchester was second only to London in size. Near to the centre of Manchester, in large opulent houses, lived the new rich — the capitalist factory owners. Surrounding the factories, the workers and their families lived. Many of these workers were ruined handloom weavers or hand spinners forced to seek work in factory towns like Manchester, as competition from cheap, machine-produced goods forced them out of their traditional occupations. Many capitalists made quick fortunes raising jerry-built, back-to-back slums to house the workers. Almost without exception these slums were overcrowded, damp, ill-lit, without sanitation, and without running water or gardens.

Many who sought employment were denied it by the frequent economic slumps that punctuated the evolution of capitalist industry. Those who did find work were faced with ruthless exploitation and appalling working conditions. Long hours — 14 hours per day was usual — abysmally low wages, child labour, and dangerous, unguarded machinery were the norm. Sexual abuse of women by foremen and capitalists was rampant. Immigrant workers, especially those from Ireland, fared particularly badly.

Class struggle

The new working class was by no means a “dormant, passive mass” in the face of these conditions of life and work. It hit back at its oppressors in an increasingly intelligent, organised and effective way. Working-class radicalism in England was on the rise when the French Revolution broke out in 1789. Jacobin democratic clubs sprang up across the country during the 1790s, inspired by the revolution in France and by widely circulated books such as Tom Paine's *The Rights of Man*.

The government's repression of domestic radicalism, which it combined with a reactionary war against the French republic, was strongly and widely opposed by workers. The historian E.P. Thompson, in his book *The Making of the English Working Class* reveals how the English workers fought back during the period of the French wars, by organising unions and secret societies in defiance of the Combination Acts, and by burning the mills and smashing the machines that threatened their livelihoods.

By 1815, the revolutionary ferment brewing underground burst forth in the mass radicalism that was to come to a head in 1819. At this time Manchester and its surrounding area was, among governing circles, considered to be the most “turbulent and seditious” in the country. The mass radical movement as a national force directed itself towards achieving first political rights, and second social and economic justice. “Political rights” included first and foremost a democratic, representative parliament, and necessitated the sweeping away of “Old Corruption”. Under that system bribery and patronage of electors were rife. Old Sarem, which had been the parliamentary

seat of William Pitt the Elder, consisted of a few tufts of grass, while Manchester, with its population of 200,000, went unrepresented. Repeal of the Test and Corporation Acts, under which religious minorities — Jews, Roman Catholics and non-conformists in particular — faced discrimination in public life, was another major issue. Repeal of the anti-trade union Combination Acts, and of the monopolistic Corn Laws also were major foci of organised agitation.

The ongoing economic struggle for improved wages, shorter hours and better working conditions was made more imperative by the acute distress of the post-war years in England. Industry and trade slumped. Unemployment rose and was swelled by the return of demobilised troops from Continental Europe. Wages fell. Actual starvation faced many working-class communities. Joseph Johnson, a shareholder in the radical newspaper the *Manchester Observer*, wrote of conditions in Manchester in 1819, the year of Peterloo:

“Everything is almost at a standstill, nothing but ruin and starvation stare one in the face. The state of the district is truly dreadful.”

The government in power at this time, that of the Tory Prime Minister Lord Liverpool, has been described as one of the most reactionary and repressive in British history. It represented the interests of no more than a narrow ruling class of big landowners, London financiers and merchants. Liverpool and his closest advisors were firmly convinced that England was on the brink of revolution. Home Secretary Sidmouth, who had control of the police, the militia and army units stationed in England, had organised an elaborate network of spies to disrupt the radical movement. Castlereagh, another of Liverpool’s ministers, had been instrumental in the suppression of the Irish rebellion of 1798 and the subsequent terror campaign and forced the union of Ireland with Britain.

Control of Manchester itself was in the hands of the descendants of the same local landed clique who had ruled this once small market town in pre-industrial times. Landowners and clergymen dominated the local magistracy — this body was to have direct responsibility for instigating the Peterloo massacre. A local levy of merchants, manufacturers, publicans and shopkeepers, all rabid enemies of the working-class radical movement, formed the backbone of the “Manchester and Salford Yeomanry Cavalry” — the body that charged into the assembly at St. Peter’s Field.

Mass movement

Although one of the powerhouses of the mass movement for radical reform was centred in the industrial districts of Lancashire, by 1819 a coordinated national effort was well under way, based on mass mobilisations in all the major cities. 1817 had witnessed a huge meeting of workers, mainly spinners and weavers, assembling on St. Peter’s Field to see off the famous “March of the Blanketeers” from Manchester to London. The march sought redress of economic grievances. 1818 had been a year of mass strikes aimed at restoring falling wage levels. These strikes showed a great capacity by workers for discipline and organisation, with meetings, marches and pickets in Manchester and Stockport. A new feature of these actions was the increasing participation of women workers. Union Societies were founded to develop basic education in the working class, and to circulate the ideas of radicalism in an organised way. Women had their own separate Union Societies.

The workers’ press advanced the ideas of radicalism with imagination and tenacity. Newspapers widely read by radicals and radical sympathisers included William Cobbett’s *Political Register* as well as *The Black Dwarf*. A typical issue of the *Manchester Observer*, founded in 1818, included alongside a demand for the impeachment of Sidmouth, coverage of the republican revolution in Venezuela.

Mass meetings for parliamentary reform, and for the repeal of the hated Corn Laws, which artificially inflated the price of bread, took place in Stockport and Manchester in the first half of 1819. By July thousands of workers had begun drilling on the moors and in the fields outside working-class districts in Lancashire. The same thing occurred in other parts of the country. In July as many as 2000 workers paraded in semi-military formation along the High Road from Manchester to Rochdale. These preparations were primarily aimed at improving organisation for the planned August mass meeting at St. Peter's Field, to which contingents from surrounding towns were to march. The planned assembly in Manchester was part of a broader national effort for July-August 1819, which organised large meetings in Birmingham, Leeds and London.

The reactionary oligarchy controlling the city of Manchester made preparations in league with Sidmouth and the national government for what amounted to the waging of civil war on the workers expected to pour into the centre of the city to demand reform of parliament. In July the magistracy formed an "Armed Association for the Preservation of the Peace" and enrolled special constables. Military units in the south-east Lancashire area were mobilised as part of a national military alert. As soon as instructions came through, the yeomanry sent its sabres to be sharpened. On the final weekend before the rally at St. Peter's Field the city magistracy sat in almost continuous session to discuss ways and means of dealing with the mobilisation.

In the weeks before the St. Peter's Field meeting, which as everyone expected would be the largest meeting ever seen in England, Manchester's streets and buildings were covered with posters and placards, and thousands of leaflets and fliers were distributed. The publicising of the assembly was a major achievement of communication and organisation. Assembly points were announced from which people in the towns and districts surrounding Manchester could gather and from there march in disciplined contingents to the rally.

Peterloo massacre

August 16 in Lancashire was a lovely summer day with a cloudless sky and a hot sun shining. There was a confident, cheerful and festive atmosphere as the contingents gathered and prepared to march. Bands played, and the beautiful banners, woven and embroidered with great care, were unfurled. Oldham's banner was of pure white silk, emblazoned with the inscriptions: "Universal Suffrage, Annual Parliaments — Election by Ballot", and "No Combination Acts: Oldham Union". Saddleworth's was jet black, with the inscription "Equal Representation or Death" in white over two joined hands and a heart. One of the banners carried by the Stockport contingent read: "Success to the Female Reformers of Stockport". Many red caps of liberty were carried.

When all the contingents had arrived and assembled in the centre of Manchester, something like 12 per cent of the population of the county of Lancashire, and over half that of its industrial south east were present. It was the largest assembly England had ever seen.

As soon as all the contingents had filled St. Peter's Field, to the point where, according to a contemporary report, people were packed in so tightly that "their hats seemed to touch", the area was ringed by 1500 troops with cannon. No one in the crowd, least of all the organisers, suspected that an attempt to physically disperse the meeting was planned. Meetings such as this, even if smaller and without the same evident discipline and organisation, had been held many times before up and down the country. The ensuing massacre was completely unexpected and unprovoked, and met with little organised resistance. The city magistrates had even gone to the lengths in their preparations for the massacre of employing scavengers to remove every stone, brick or possible missile from the field and surrounding streets, so that the meeting's participants were thus left

entirely without defence.

Barely had Henry Hunt, the main featured speaker, begun to address the meeting when mounted troopers of the yeomanry charged the hustings to arrest him and others on the platform. At first the crowd, which had not been aware of the presence of the troops, did not panic and Hunt shouted: "Stand firm, my friends: there are only a few soldiers, and we are a host against them."

But as the yeomanry, many of whom were drunk, charged with sabres drawn, slashing and cutting their way through the crowd and trampling and crushing many people, chaos and panic gripped the field. According to witnesses cited in Joyce Marlow's account *The Peterloo Massacre*, the yeomanry, having tasted blood, went berserk. They dragged the speakers and organisers from the hustings and would have killed Hunt had he not been quickly whisked away to jail. The yeomanry continued to slash and cut indiscriminately at men, women and children alike, while smashing wagons and platforms, and tearing the banners and the caps of liberty.

The regular cavalry then moved onto the field to complete the work. Hundreds more people suffered serious injuries from the slashing sabres and flying hooves, or were smothered under piles of falling bodies. Ten minutes from the first charge it was all over. Samuel Bamford, the Lancashire poet, described the scene

"...the field was an open and almost deserted space. The hustings remained, with a few broken and hewed flagstaves erect, and a torn and gashed banner or two drooping; whilst over the whole field were strewed the caps, bonnets, hats, shawls and shoes and other parts of male and female dress; trampled, torn and bloody. The yeomanry had dismounted — some were easing their horses' girths and some were wiping their sabres."

Many more people were killed and maimed as the troops continued to "disperse" the crowd through surrounding streets. That night one person was shot dead and several injured in clashes between soldiers and crowds of angry workers.

The government's attitude was made clear by its total endorsement of the massacre. The Prince Regent, then disporting himself on his yacht, made it known through Sidmouth what great satisfaction he had derived from the magistrate's "prompt, decisive and efficient measure for the preservation of public tranquillity". Despite repeated and widely voiced demands for one, there never was an official inquiry into the Peterloo massacre.

Wave of anger

An immense wave of anger swept across England in the wake of the massacre. The mass movement for reform was not appreciably set back by the Peterloo massacre. A huge crowd estimated by the conservative *Times* at 300,000 lined the streets of London to greet Hunt after his release from jail. Meetings were spurred all over England by the events at St. Peter's Field, especially in the north-east counties, where more than 50,000 miners marched into Newcastle from surrounding districts. Loyalist [pro-government] forces in this area began arming, and the pitmen took up arms to defend themselves. In the months of October and November, according to Edward Thompson, workers across the country stocked pikes and other weapons to defend themselves and their meetings. Drilling, and armed demonstrations, were reported in Newcastle, Wolverhampton, Wigan, Bolton and Blackburn.

Divisions within the radical movements's leadership between constitutionalists and revolutionaries were not resolved, and this crisis of leadership, combined with renewed government repression and

an economic upturn brought this early phase of mass working-class struggle to a close. The events in Manchester on August 16, 1819 however, will remain forever inscribed in the collective memory of the international working class. Shelley's poem "The Masque of Anarchy" was written just after Peterloo and its final stanza carries the fighting sentiments of thousands of workers:

*Rise, like lions after slumber.
In unvanquishable number!
Shake your chains to earth like dew,
Which in sleep had fallen on you!
Ye are many — they are few!*

P.S.

* From Links (Australia):
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