

Morris and the problem of reform or revolution

It is now generally accepted that William Morris, the Victorian poet and designer, was for the last thirteen years of his life (he died in 1896 at the age of 62) an active propagandist for "Revolutionary International Socialism". It is not so well known that for a part of this period his attitude to socialist tactics - summed up in the phrases "Education for Revolution" and "Make Socialists" - was in many respects similar to that adopted by the Socialist Party of Great Britain when it was formed only eight years after his death.

When Morris became convinced that socialism was the only solution to the problems facing society - and particularly, as far as he was concerned, to the disappearance of enjoyable work or "popular art" as he called it - he joined the Democratic Federation which H.M. Hyndman had formed from various radical groups and clubs in London. In 1883, the year Morris joined, the Democratic Federation proclaimed Socialism as its aim and changed its name to Social Democratic Federation. It maintained its programme of immediate demands (public housing, free education, eight-hour day, public works, nationalisation of the land) but labelled them "stepping stones" to socialism.

Education for Revolution

Hyndman was a former Tory and carried over his arrogant and jingoist attitudes into the SDF with the result that conflict developed within the organisation and, at the very end of 1884, a split. Morris found himself a leading light in the new organisation, the Socialist League. Unlike the SDF, the Socialist League had no programme of "stepping stones" but concentrated, by means of lectures, street-corner meetings and sales of its journal *Commonweal*, on propagating socialism (even if the understanding of some of its members was not always that clear).

The Socialist League's Manifesto, drafted by Morris, began:

Fellow Citizens, We come before you as a body advocating the principles of Revolutionary International Socialism; that is, we seek a change in the basis of Society - a change which would destroy the distinctions of classes and nationalities. As the civilised world is at present constituted, there are two classes of Society - the one possessing wealth and the instruments of production, the other producing wealth by means of those instruments but only by leave and for the use of the possessing classes. These two classes are necessarily in antagonism to one another.

It went on to reject state capitalism as a solution to working class problems:

No better solution would be that State Socialism, by whatever name it may be called, whose aim it would be to make concessions to the working class while leaving the present system of capital and wages still in operation: no number of merely administrative changes, until the workers are in possession of all political power, would make any real approach to Socialism.

And said of socialism:

To the realisation of this change the Socialist League addresses itself with all earnestness. As a means thereto it will do all in its power towards the education of the people in the principles of this great cause, and will strive to organise those who will accept this education, so that when the crisis comes, which the march of events is preparing there may be a body of men ready to step into their due places and deal with and direct the irresistible movement.

There are one or two confusions in the statement, not least in the inclusion of "banking" among "all means of production and distribution" which "must be declared and treated as the common property of all" (this is a confusion since Morris was well aware that there would be no banks in socialism), but otherwise is an admirable document considering the early stage of the development of socialist ideas in Britain that it was issued (the Manifesto in full is published as an appendix to E.P. Thompson's *William Morris Romantic to Revolutionary*).

This same insistence on "education for revolution" had already been made in a statement issued in January 1885 by the 10 members of the Council of the SDF, including Morris, who had just resigned:

Our view is that such a body in the present state of things has no function but to educate the people in the principles of socialism, and to organise such as it can get hold of to take their due places, when the crisis shall come which will force action on us. We believe that to hold out as baits hopes of amelioration of the condition of the workers, to be wrung out of the necessities of the rival factions of our privileged rulers, is delusive and mischievous.

In his private letters too Morris made clear this policy of the Socialist League. The League, he wrote in January 1885, "begins at all events with the distinct aim of making Socialists by educating them, and of organizing them to deal with politics in the end" (P. Henderson, *The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends*, 1950, p.229) and in December 1888 he wrote that his Branch, Hammersmith, "tacitly and instinctively tries to keep up the first idea of the League, the making of genuine convinced Socialists without reference to passing exigencies of tactics" (p.304).

In the last article he wrote in *Commonweal* on 15 November 1890, Morris again defended the policy of making socialists, against both those who wanted a reform programme and the anarchists:

This time when people are excited about Socialism, and when many who know nothing about it think themselves Socialists, is the time of all others to put forward the simple principles of Socialism regardless of the policy of the passing hour. I say for us to make Socialists is the business at present, and at present I do not think we can have any other useful business. Those who are not really Socialists - who are Trade Unionists, disturbance-breeders, or what not - will do what they are impelled to do, and we cannot help it. At the worst there will be some good in what they do; but we need not and cannot heartily work with

them, when we know that their methods are beside the right way. Our business, I repeat, is the making of Socialists, i.e. convincing people that Socialism is good for them and is possible. When we have enough people of that way of thinking, they will find out what action is necessary for putting their principles into practice. Until we have that mass of opinion, action for a general change that will benefit the whole people is impossible. Have we that body of opinion? Surely not. . .

Therefore, I say, make Socialists. We Socialists can do nothing else that is useful, and preaching and teaching is not out of date for that purpose; but rather for those who, like myself, do not believe in State Socialism, it is the only rational means of attaining to the new Order of Things (Morris' emphasis).

So, Morris was quite clear: a socialist organisation should not campaign for reforms or "palliatives" but should concentrate exclusively on socialist propaganda and education. In the beginning, in 1885 and 1886, this was based on a belief that capitalism was soon going to collapse ("when the crisis comes") and the consequent urgent need to have a strong body of socialists to ensure that socialism would be the outcome. But by 1890 this had developed to a full and clear understanding that the establishment of socialism was impossible without there first being a mass of opinion in favour of it. Morris was later to change his policy on campaigning for reforms, but he never wavered on this point.

The Policy of Abstention

Morris tended to identify campaigning for reforms with campaigning to get elected to Parliament. This was understandable enough since those who were advocating parliamentary action at that time did envisage getting elected on a reform programme which they would then try to get Parliament to implement. Thus Morris's opposition to campaigning for reforms also took the form of opposition to parliamentary action. It would however be inaccurate to describe him as a pure and simple "anti-Parliamentarists", and certainly not as an anarchist, since he did not absolutely rule out the use of Parliament by socialists in the course of the socialist revolution.

Among those who left the SDF to found the Socialist League were a group who favoured parliamentary action. These included Marx's daughter, Eleanor Marx-Aveling, and had the patronage of Engels. When, early in 1885, the Socialist League was discussing its new constitution, a draft had been rejected which had sought to commit it to "striving to conquer political power by promoting the election of Socialists to Local Governments, School Boards, and other administrative bodies". The "parliamentarists" (as Morris called them), however, continued to press the issue at the League's Annual Conferences in 1886 and 1887. On both occasions they were defeated and when they persisted in their views, even going so far as to support SDF candidates in elections to a local Board of Guardians, they had finally to be suspended in 1888 and resigned. It was to Morris that the task of presenting the case against parliamentary action fell. It was he who drafted an official statement issued by the Council of the League in 1888 on the subject (in *Commonweal*, 9 June 1888). But his views are

more fully expressed in a lecture he gave in 1887 entitled "The Policy of Abstention".

Morris' arguments against parliamentary action can be summed up as (1) that Parliament was a capitalist institution; (2) that reforms obtained through Parliament would strengthen capitalism and would only be passed with this end in view; and (3) that campaigning for reforms would corrupt a socialist party.

In The Policy of Abstention Morris declared:

The Communists believe that it would be a waste of time for Socialists to expend their energy in furthering reforms which so far from bringing us nearer to Socialism would rather serve to bolster up the present state of things.

The workers, he went on,

are asked to vote and send representatives to Parliament (if "working men" so much the better) that they may point out what concessions may be necessary for the ruling class to make in order that the slavery of the workers may last on: in a word that to vote for the continuance of their own slavery is all the parliamentary action they will be allowed to take under the present regime: Liberal Associations, Radical Clubs, working men members are at present, and Socialist members will be in the future, looked on with complacency by the governing classes as serving towards the end of propping up the stability of robber society in the safest and least troublesome manner by beguiling them to take part in their own government.

And, in an excellent statement of the case against socialists seeking to get elected to Parliament on a programme of reforms, Morris wrote referring to those he called "the parliamentary socialists":

Starting from the same point as the abstentionists they have to preach an electioneering campaign as an absolute necessity, and to set about it as soon as possible: they will then have to put forward a programme of reforms deduced from the principles of Socialism, which we will admit they will always keep to the front as much as possible; they will necessarily have to appeal for support (i.e. votes) to a great number of people who are not convinced Socialists, and their programme of reforms will be the bait to catch these votes: and to the ordinary voter it will be this bait which will be the matter of interest, and not the principle for whose furtherance they will be intended to act as an instrument: when the voting recruit reads the manifesto of a parliamentary body, he will scarcely notice the statement of principles which heads it, but he will eagerly criticise the proposals of measures to be carried which he finds below it: and yet if he is to be honestly dealt with, he will have to be told that these measures are not put forward as a solution to the social question, but are" - in short, ground bait for him so that he may be led at last to search into and accept the real principles of Socialism. So that it will be impossible to deal with him honestly, and the Socialist members when they get into Parliament will represent a heterogeneous body of opinion, ultra-radical, democratic, discontented non-politicals, rather than a body of Socialists; and

it will be their opinions and prejudices that will sway the action of the members in Parliament. With these fetters on them the Socialist members will have to be a mere instrument of compromise (May Morris, William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist, Supplementary Volume II, 1936).

The 1888 League statement which Morris had drafted also opposed reform-mongering:

The Socialist League has declared over and over again its sense of the futility of Socialists wasting their time in getting such palliative measures passed, which, if desirable to be passed as temporarily useful, will be passed much more readily if they do not mix themselves up in the matter, and which are at least intended by our masters to hinder Socialism and not to further it. Over and over again it has deprecated Socialists mixing themselves up in political intrigues, and it believes no useful purpose can be served by their running after the votes of those who do not understand the principles of Socialism, and who therefore must be attracted by promises which could not be fulfilled by the candidates if by any chance such candidates were returned to Parliament.

These are clearly arguments against the policy of using Parliament to try to get reforms rather than against socialist parliamentary action as such and in fact, even during his "anti-parliamentary" period, Morris was not opposed to socialists entering Parliament in the course of the socialist revolution, on condition that they went there not to try to get reforms but "as rebels".

Thus he wrote to J. Bruce Glasier in December 1886:

I did not mean that at some time or other it might not be necessary for Socialists to go into Parliament in order to break it up; but again, that could only be when we are very much more advanced than we are now; in short, on the verge of a revolution; so that we might either capture the army, or shake their confidence in the legality of their position (Henderson, The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends, p.263).

And in two letters in 1887 to Dr. J. Glasse:

I believe that the Socialists will certainly send members to Parliament when they are strong enough to do so: in itself I see no harm in that, so long as it is understood that they go there as rebels, and not as members of the governing body prepared by passing palliative measures to keep "Society" alive. But I fear that many of them will be drawn into error by the corrupting influence of a body professedly hostile to Socialism (May 23).

Of course, it's clearly no use talking of parliamentary action now. I admit, and always have admitted, that at some future period it may be necessary to use parliament mechanically: what I object to is depending on parliamentary agitation. There must be a great party, a great organisation outside parliament actively engaged in reconstructing society and learning administration whatever goes on in parliament itself. This is in direct opposition to the view of the regular parliamentary section as represented by Shaw, who look upon Parliament

as the means; and it seems to me will fall into the error of moving earth and sea to fill the ballot boxes with Socialist votes which will not represent Socialist men (September 23). (R. Page Arnot, Unpublished Letters of William Morris, 1951, p.5 and p.8).

In his lecture on "The Policy of Abstention" Morris elaborated on this "great organisation outside parliament actively engaged in reconstructing society and learning administration":

The organisation I am thinking of would have a serious point of difference from any that could be formed as a part of a parliamentary plan of action; its aim would be to act directly, whatever was done in it would be done by the people themselves: there would consequently be no possibility of compromise, of the association becoming anything else than it was intended to be; nothing could take its place: before all its members would be put one alternative to complete success, complete failure, namely.

The workers can form an organisation which without heeding Parliament can force from the ruler what concessions may be necessary in the present and whose aim would be the total abolition of the monopolist classes and rule. The action such an organisation would be compelled to take would educate its members in administration, so that on the morrow of the revolution they would be able, from a thorough knowledge of the wants and capacities of the workers, to carry on affairs with the least possible amount of blunders, and would do almost nothing that would have to be undone, and thereby offer no opportunity to the counter-revolution.

And, in a letter in May 1887 to J.L. Mahon, he wrote that "our work" was:

getting the workmen to organise genuine revolutionary labour bodies not looking to Parliament at all but to their own pressure (legal or illegal as the times may go) on their employers while the latter lasted (R. Page Arnot, William Morris: The Man and the Myth, 1964, p.66).

In the picture of the socialist revolution painted in Chapter XVII "How the Change Came" of his utopian communist novel *News From Nowhere* (originally published in serial form in *Commonweal* in 1890) Morris has these "revolutionary labour bodies" come to clash more and more with the government; eventually, after a short civil war involving a general strike and some violence, capitalist rule is overthrown.

This clearly underestimates the power and solidity of the capitalist state and, if tried, would have led to unnecessary bloodshed. Morris was overlooking the vital necessity for the socialist majority to first gain control of the state machine before trying to establish socialism, but he had been greatly influenced by the bloody suppression of the Paris Commune in 1871 and did not expect the capitalist class to surrender peaceably even if socialists were to win a parliamentary majority. Morris was later to see the validity of this criticism but unfortunately tied this, as we shall see, to a withdrawal of his opposition to campaigning for reforms.

The Use of the Vote

Morris's allies in the struggle against the "parliamentarists" were for the most part out-and-out anarchists who were opposed to all parliamentary action on principle (even to going there "as rebels"). These anarchists eventually came to dominate the Socialist League and abandoned its policy of patiently making socialists for appeals to individual acts of violence against the state and its representatives. At the end of 1890 Morris and the branch to which he belonged, Hammersmith, left and, as the Hammersmith Socialist Society, continued the original League policy.

But, after a while, Morris came to question whether his opposition to campaigning for reforms (and campaigning to get elected to Parliament and local bodies on a programme of reforms) was justified. Even during his period of activity in the Socialist League he had continued to regard the Social Democratic Federation and even the Fabians as socialists, even though they were certainly pursuing mistaken policies. With the organisation of the unskilled workers in the 1890s and the formation of the ILP in 1892, it seemed to Morris that the working class had definitely opted for the tactics of the "parliamentary socialists". He knew that the bulk of the workers involved in this agitation were not conscious socialists but merely wanted some improvement of their condition within capitalism. He interpreted this as meaning that it was all the more important that the socialist case be presented to them and that therefore all those who were "socialists" should unite to do this.

Thus Morris was instrumental in getting the Fabians, the SDF and others to issue a joint Manifesto of English Socialists on May Day 1893. Parts of this were not too bad:

Our aim, one and all, is to obtain for the whole community complete ownership and control of the means of transport, means of manufacture, the mines, and the land. Thus we look to put an end for ever to the wage-system, to sweep away all distinctions of class, and eventually to establish national and international communism.

The Manifesto, however, also contained a list of immediate demands (an Eight Hour Law, Prohibition of all Child Labour, Equal Pay for Equal Work, a Minimum Wage in State Services, Universal Male and Female Suffrage).

In signing this Manifesto Morris supported campaigning for reforms. Thus, interviewed in the SDF journal *Justice* in January 1894, he repudiated his previous policy:

Present circumstances go to prove the wisdom of the SDF in drawing up palliative measures. . . Mean and paltry as it seemed to me - and does still as compared with the whole thing - something of the kind is absolutely necessary.

In this same interview he recognised the necessity for socialists to gain control of political power before trying to establish socialism:

We must try. . . and get at the butt end" of the machine gun and rifle, and then force is much less likely to be necessary and much more sure to be successful.

The way to "get at the butt end" was through the ballot box, Morris argued in an unpublished lecture on "Communism":

I confess I am no great lover of political tactics, the sordid squabble of an election is unpleasant enough for a straight-forward man to deal in: yet I cannot fail to see that it is necessary somehow to get hold of the machine which has at its back the executive power of the country, however that may be done and that by means of the ballot-box will, to say the least of it, be little indeed compared with what would be necessary to effect it by open revolt; besides that the change effected by peaceful means would be done more completely and with little chance, indeed with no chance of counter-revolution. On the other hand I feel sure that some action is even now demanded by the growth of Socialism, and will be more and more imperatively demanded as time goes on. In short I do not believe in the possible success of revolt until the Socialist party has grown so powerful in numbers that it can gain its end by peaceful means, and that therefore what is called violence will never be needed, unless indeed the reactionaries were to refuse the decision of the ballot-box and try the matter by arms; which after all I am pretty sure they could not attempt by the time things had gone as far as that. As to the attempt of a small minority to terrify a vast majority into accepting something which they do not understand, by spasmodic acts of violence, mostly involving the death or mutilation of non-combatants, I can call that nothing else than sheer madness (May Morris, Supplementary Volume II, pp.350-1).

And, in an article in Labour Prophet in January 1894, Morris commented:

The workers have started to claim new conditions of life which they can only obtain at the expense of the possessing classes; and they must therefore force their claims on the latter. The means by which they will attempt this are not doubtful. To speak plainly, there are only two methods of bringing the necessary force to bear; open armed insurrection on the one hand; the use of the vote, to get hold of the executive on the other. Of the first method they are not even thinking; but the second they are growing more determined to use day by day; and it is practically the only direct means. And it must be said that, if they are defeated in their attempt, it means the present defeat of Socialism, though its ultimate defeat is impossible.

In a lecture "What we have to look for" given in the spring of 1895 Morris explained his earlier attitude:

It must be admitted that behind this propaganda of preaching lay the thought that the change we advocated would be brought about by insurrection; and this was supposed even by those who were most averse to violence; no other means seemed conceivable for lifting the intolerable load which lay upon us. We thought that every step towards Socialism would be resisted by the reactionaries who would use against it the legal executive force which was, and is, let me

say, wholly in the power of the possessing classes, that the wider the movement grew the more rigorously the authorities would repress it.

Almost everyone has ceased to believe in the change coming by catastrophe. To state the position shortly, as a means to the realization of the new society Socialists hope so far as to conquer public opinion, that at last a majority of the Parliament shall be sent to sit in the house as avowed Socialists and the delegates of Socialists, and on that should follow what legislation might be necessary; and moreover, though the time for this may be very far ahead, yet most people would now think that the hope of doing it is by no means unreasonable.

And, in the same lecture, returning to his theme of the need for a single, united socialist party, he declared that until such a party is formed:

We had better confine ourselves to the old teaching and preaching of Socialism pure and simple, which is I fear more or less neglected amidst the said futile attempt to act as a party when we have no party (May Morris, Volume II).

Thus to the end Morris insisted on the need for socialist propaganda to help achieve the socialist majority necessary before socialism could be established but he now believed this should be combined with campaigning for reforms. In other words, he had reached the position held by European Social Democracy, represented in Britain by the SDF. Although he never rejoined the SDF he co-operated closely with it. It is significant that he chose to identify himself with the SDF rather than the Fabians or the ILP, for the SDF proclaimed itself Marxist and was thus nearer to Morris's general theoretical position as an advocate of "Revolutionary International Socialism". The SDF, despite its many shortcomings, was at this time the nearest thing in Britain to a Marxian organisation and it was from its ranks that in 1904 was to emerge the Socialist Party of Great Britain whose founding members, like those of the Socialist League twenty years previously, fed up with its opportunism and Hyndman's authoritarianism, left to found a genuine Socialist Party on sound principles, committed to "making Socialists" rather than campaigning for reforms.

Morris's Dilemma Solved

The problem which Morris had been grappling with was the problem of reform and revolution. In his Socialist League days he had clearly seen the futility - and dangers - of campaigning for reforms, but had linked this with a virtual rejection of parliamentary action. This was because in his mind parliamentary action and campaigning for reforms were virtually inseparable. Thus, later, when he came to recognise the need to gain control of political power through the ballot box and Parliament before trying to establish socialism, this was coupled with an acceptance of the policy of campaigning for reforms.

It was left to the Socialist Party of Great Britain to end this dilemma. Our founding members in 1904 agreed both with Morris's later insistence that "it is necessary somehow to get hold of the machine which has at its back the executive power of the country" (or, more dramatically, to "get at the butt end

of the machine gun and rifle") and that the only sure way to do this was through the ballot box and with his earlier rejection of campaigning for reforms. They adopted the policy of trying to gain control of the machinery of government through the ballot box by campaigning on an exclusively socialist programme without seeking support on a policy of reforms; while supporting parliamentary action they refused to advocate reforms. This has remained our policy to this day and, as the solution to the problem of reform and revolution, represents our specific contribution to socialist theory.

Morris grappled with this problem, but failed to solve it. In the beginning he veered towards anti-parliamentarism and in the end towards reformism, but he can nevertheless be said to have made one original contribution to the discussion (even though he later came to abandon it): the danger for a socialist party of seeking to get elected to Parliament on a programme of reforms. As he explained in the passage we quoted from his 1887 lecture "The Policy of Abstention", socialists elected to Parliament on such a programme of reforms would be prisoners of the reform-minded non-socialists who had elected them and would inevitably have to compromise any socialist principles they might once have had. The subsequent evolution of the European Social Democratic parties into mere instruments of capitalist administration and reform showed how correct Morris was on this point. It is a pity that he himself did not remember his words of 1887 when, in the 1896 General Election (held the year he died), he helped try to get Hyndman, the SDF leader, elected to Parliament for Burnley on a programme of reforms. ALB