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For Oliver
Gareth
and
Rachel

Introduction

by John Foster

Mick Jenkins's book on the General Strike of 1842 opens a new chapter in the history of the working class. Taking an event often referred to but seldom systematically examined, he reveals its full magnitude for the first time, and more important still, uses the proceedings of the trades conferences to establish that its main thrust and inspiration, indeed what enabled it to have the coherence of a national strike, was the *political* demand for universal male suffrage. After over a century, this book finally brings the strikers of 1842 back into the bright August sunlight of their own time: proud, articulate and amazingly confident that the hour had finally come for labour to assert its right to power. To quote one of the magnificent addresses given in an appendix:

Centuries may roll on as they have fled past, before such universal action may again be displayed; we have made the cast for liberty, and we must stand, like men, the hazard of the die. . . . Strengthen our hands at this crisis. Support your leaders. Rally round our sacred cause and leave the decision to the God of Justice and of battle.

That summer something like 500,000 workers answered this call. They did so not passively, but with an active discipline that brought into being decisive expressions of working-class power: strike committees that organized and ran communities, outfaced local magistrates and army commanders, issued permits to work, ensured policing, collected and distributed food, and brought together mass meetings by which entire populations were involved in determining the course of the strike.

In telling this story the book returns to the working people of Britain one of the finest episodes in their history, and at the same time compels historians to reassess a number of crucial aspects in the country's political development.

The demand of the strikers, universal male suffrage, was not

in fact achieved in Britain until 1918, and full adult suffrage had to wait till 1928. As a formal democracy, therefore, the country was a relative latecomer, beaten in the race by France, New Zealand, Australia, Norway, Finland, Sweden, Denmark and Russia, and finally crossing the line in the aftermath of the First World War in the dubious company of Germany, Austria and Japan. Up to that point, despite the Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884, various restrictions in the franchise meant that working people were never able to command more than a minority of votes in parliamentary elections.

In the past, historians have tended to emphasize the inevitability of Britain's progress towards majority rule. A study of 1842 supplies a useful corrective. It spurs us to look in a quite different direction to ask why universal suffrage was withheld for so long and what combination of forces made it possible to do this. Britain's very early general strike was not the only one to be linked with demands for the vote. At the end of the century one can find a whole series of intriguingly close parallels: in Belgium in 1886, 1887, 1892, 1902 and 1913, in Sweden in 1902, in Finland and Russia in 1905. Apart from the October strikes in Russia, none ever came near 1842 in its length, or in the absolute number of workers involved. Only a third of Belgium's industrial labour force, 350,000 workers, took part in the biggest of that country's strikes in 1913. In Sweden no more than 120,000 struck work in the four-day general strike of 1902. Yet all these strikes won at least a measure of fairly immediate change in representation.

The reason for this contrast in achievement is certainly not that 1842 was somehow isolated and unprepared. In terms of scale and organization it was rather the culmination of a long period of struggle in which trade union activity and the movement for democratic rights had become closely interdependent. If we are looking for parallels to the initial, patchy and part insurrectionary Belgian strikes of the 1880s, the best comparison is probably not 1842 but the Jacobin-inspired strikes of 1818 and 1820 or the two-day holiday of 1839. Nonetheless, 1842 not only failed to secure any visible legislative response but, temporarily at least, marked the end of this form of action in Britain. Whereas in most other European countries the general strike was officially accepted in the later nineteenth

century as labour's basic and final weapon in the battle of democracy, in Britain such use of strike action remained effectively outlawed in the trade union movement until after the First World War.

It is perhaps not too difficult to explain why universal suffrage was so firmly resisted in Britain. Put bluntly the country's rulers knew that on the terms laid down by the Chartists, and in British conditions, universal suffrage would mean a transfer of state power. During one of the trials of strikers in 1842 the Lord Chief Justice had no hesitation in making this quite clear: 'If those who had no property should have powers to make laws, it would necessarily lead to the destruction of those who had property.' In slightly more opaque language Walter Bagehot and John Stuart Mill said the same. To protect the minority from the dangers of democracy and 'class legislation' some form of anomaly or plural voting had to be introduced. At the back of everyone's mind was the vital difference in social structure between Britain and other European countries. In Britain wage workers formed the majority. Elsewhere there were substantial sections of peasants, small farmers and artisans who could be used to lock the working class into the compromise politics of sectional alliance. Indeed, we too often forget just how far Britain monopolized industrial development during the first half of the nineteenth century – and hence overlook the political consequences.

If we take one of the most important indicators of the maturity of a working class, the numbers of workers in factories and large-scale industry, we find in Britain more than double the number in the rest of Europe put together, and it was these workers, highly organized and already long educated in the nature of capitalist crisis, who formed the leading contingents for the strike. Unlike France in the June days of 1848, it was not the most hopeless sections of the population who revolted – the unemployed in the new state workshops – but the most advanced, the cotton-spinners, miners and engineers. It was, therefore, quite predictable that any demand for universal suffrage would meet implacable opposition. In the context of a mobilized and class-conscious working class, democracy would, as Engels observed, inevitably mean revolution. As yet it could not be made compatible with the needs of capitalist state power.

Consequently, it is the second part of the question, how the demand for universal suffrage was successfully resisted, and in what way the working class was persuaded not to make political use again of its industrial strength, that poses the most interesting and fundamental problem.

While the main contribution of the present book is to demonstrate that this problem exists rather than to attempt a solution, it does supply some vital clues. It examines, as should any valid study of class struggle, the strategy of both sides. In doing so, it succeeds in identifying a crucial discontinuity in government policy. Sometime in the winter of 1842-3, the government decided to abandon its plans for a monster show trial that would conclusively and publicly demonstrate that the leaders of organized labour and of the Chartist movement had conspired together to overthrow the state. At the trial, which eventually took place in March 1843, its tactics were virtually reversed. In a judgement far too easily accepted by subsequent historians, the strike was characterized as being mainly concerned with immediate economic demands, largely spontaneous in origin, part provoked by the Anti-Corn Law League employers and part the product of extreme and acknowledged distress. As the trial went on, there developed something of a public dialogue between the government and the leaders of the organized working class – albeit one in which the defendants felt naturally constrained to accept the unexpectedly favourable judgements of their accusers. The Attorney-General gave an indulgent and Baldwinesque homily on the respective rights of capital and labour, repeatedly drew attention to the atrocious living conditions of the working class and praised the good character of the major trade union leaders on trial. The judge made it his special task to provide a particularly broad definition of legitimate political agitation, and Feargus O'Connor then publicly accepted this as the basis of a 'covenant' binding on all future Chartist activity.

This change of government policy, it hardly needs adding, was the product of weakness, not strength, and is a further indication of the new forces of working-class combativeness unleashed by the strike. It marked a realization that to continue on a path of outright repression, and above all to make a formal legal identification between trade union leaders and the

Chartists, would be to consolidate what was feared most: a labour movement that politically identified itself with a class possessing interests incompatible with the existing order. In order to avoid this, more had to be done than utter a few platitudes about class harmony. Real material concessions had to be made. The redefinition of relations had to be made concrete at the level of both the class and the state. Locally, collective bargaining became the order of the day. Legislatively, restrictions began to be imposed, slowly but convincingly, on the freedom of capital in its dealings with labour. Taken together, these measures can be said to have significantly restricted the direct ability of capital to extract surplus value in Britain itself.

All the same, the way in which this was actually done was by no means wholly positive, and contained within it grave dangers for the ability of the working class to continue the battle of democracy on its own terms. It persuaded many labour leaders to open the Pandora's box of reformism, apparently full of glittering prizes, but also imposing on working-class action a crippling disability. It demanded that organized labour operate on the terms set by the capitalist state, and rigidly separate the 'economic' and the 'political' spheres of its activity. Labour might legitimately use industrial action sectionally against particular employers, but in bargaining 'politically', at the level of government, it had to operate *within* the existing state, that is, demobilize itself as a class, abandon the political use of its own power industrially, in face of the organized state power of the capitalist class. The seeds of this reformist confusion in Britain can be traced right back to that strange, unexpected conspiracy trial of March 1843, and if those seeds grew fast in the rich soil of mid-Victorian imperial prosperity, O'Connor himself must bear some responsibility. For he not only accepted the terms laid down for legal political campaigning, but subsequently used them inside the Chartist movement to defeat those like Peter McDouall who advocated the continued use of industrial action.

The wider transformation was not, however, and could not be, just a matter of personal misjudgement. The growth of reformism and of sectional trade unionism, the rupturing of the links between Chartism and organized labour, was part of a

fundamental process of social and economic reorientation by which working people tried to come to terms with the smashed and shattered hopes of the 1840s. If the full significance of 1842 remained unrecognized for over a century, then it is also true that we still lack any concrete understanding of its sequel: the growth of the labour aristocracy, of how trade unionism became for a generation the prerogative of skilled workers alone, and how in mid-Victorian Britain the organized power of labour – including some of the new forms thrown up in 1842 – was taken forward, sustained and crystallized for the benefit of one section of workers, but no longer the class as a whole.

For it was within such new institutions that the reformist labour politician was reared and gradually inducted into the conventions of parliamentary politics. The fact that it still took over seventy years to win formal democracy shows how fully, and ultimately correctly, the forces of capital understood the special weakness of their position. At the same time the unparalleled resilience of the reformist tradition in Britain also bears witness to the continuing strength of its imperialist base and to the care and ingenuity that was lavished upon maintaining its credibility. After 1842 one thing had become clear beyond all doubt. In Britain democracy could only be made compatible with the capitalist order if the organizations of the working class were themselves captured for quite alien ideas which served the needs of the ruling class.

These, then are some of the wider problems posed here. However, the book's principal achievement lies elsewhere. It is its facility for historical recognition. Its author, a working-class leader of long experience, himself born and bred in Lancashire, provides us with the ability to understand a mass movement from inside. Looking at the proceedings of a conference or a mass meeting, he is able to make comprehensible what to most other historians would remain meaningless or prosaic: the vital importance of timing, the ability to judge responses and preempt divisions, the subtle heightening of slogans. Nowhere, for instance, could one find a better description of what it means to be a labour leader than in the chapter on Richard Pilling, the principal driving force behind the strike.

Today, therefore, any trade unionist reading this book will find much that is familiar, much that is recognizably the product

of the same movement at an earlier stage; but mixed with recognition will also be amazement. For it will only be those who have themselves been active in the labour movement who will appreciate the full magnitude of what was attempted and what was achieved: that the strike of 1842 was indeed, in the words of the Attorney-General, 'The most formidable conspiracy ever' – or, in working-class terms, one of those very rare occasions when working people come together, consciously and with full deliberation, to end a social order based on their own exploitation.

Glasgow, 1979

Preface

Ere long your enemies will discover that labour is in truth the only source of wealth, and should be the only source of power.

Address of the National Charter Association to the Chartist Public,
17 August 1842

At its height, the General Strike of 1842 involved up to half-a-million workers and covered an area which stretched from Dundee and the Scottish coalfields to South Wales and Cornwall. It lasted twice the length of the 1926 General Strike, and was the most massive industrial action to take place in Britain – and probably anywhere – in the nineteenth century. Its immediate cause was a demand for a 25 per cent wage cut by cotton manufacturers in Ashton-under-Lyne and Stalybridge. While this was the straw that broke the camel's back, it was not the basic cause. The strike had deep roots, and in the event, opposition to wage cuts was overshadowed by more fundamental and long-term demands, above all the demand for universal suffrage. To this extent, the 1842 General Strike marked a historic peak in the struggle of working people against the effects of the industrial revolution and against the new type of class oppression it imposed on them.

From about the 1760s to the time of the 1842 General Strike, a transformation had taken place in the lives of the ordinary people such as the world had not seen before. There had been a tremendous increase in wealth and luxury, in inventions and science, and an unprecedented expansion of trade and commerce; but parallel to all this there was widespread poverty, hunger and suffering. The changes wrought by the industrial revolution were, in many ways, devastating. The old rural society ceased to exist; the independent artisan, the home or domestic worker, with his patch of land, with his family helping him, was destroyed. He now drifted to the town, and with his family lived in one room or in a back-to-back house, worked long hours in a factory, or was unemployed. This meant a plentiful supply of cheap labour to fill the new factories and, in

accordance with the law of supply and demand, the competition among workers for employment led to wages so low as to scarcely meet subsistence. In addition, because of the new machinery and the division of labour, many factories were staffed completely with women and children. Complaints of brutality were frequent. It was a situation where the employer was all powerful and the isolated worker, of himself, powerless.

The General Strike of 1842 took place in a period of trade recession when masses were unemployed, when wage cut followed wage cut, and starving workers and their families roamed the streets. Contemporary descriptions of the conditions and privations of the working people make heart-rending reading. The *Manchester and Salford Advertiser* – a paper sympathetic to the workers – ran a column headed ‘State of Trade’. In its issue of 9 July 1842 appeared the following paragraph:

Bands of half-famished men, women and children walk the streets of this (Manchester) and our immediate towns asking charity, and some even DEMAND it; and well they may, for in a land of plenty the people *will not and ought not to starve*.^{1*}

On 30 April 1842 it reported a court case. The heading ran: ‘The Starving Weavers: Robbery of Bread Shops’, and it concerned seven men charged with stealing bread.

What were the workers like? In 1842, a parliamentary commission was set up to inquire into the distress at Stockport and the chairman of the Stockport Poor Law Union addressed a communication to them. The applicants for relief, it ran,

are not the crouching idle vagabonds who would not work if they could help it, but clever, intelligent operatives and mechanics, who would never appear there if stern necessity had not driven them to it; not until their little savings, their good household furniture, nearly the whole of their clothing and bedding, had been sold or pawned, in the hope of a change in the times. . . . Their starving wives and the crying of the hungry children have driven them to . . . the Board [of Guardians].²

‘Clever, intelligent operatives and mechanics.’ This is what they were. They were not demoralized, declassed elements. They were fighting to lift themselves out of the wretchedness and

* See notes at the end of each chapter.

degradation capitalism had driven them into. They were fighting for a decent, reasonable standard of living. They were fighting for social change which would give them a say in the government of the country and so guarantee their economic and social gains – and that meant the People's Charter. That was what the 1842 General Strike was about. Many historians and students have written about this strike. Most have included it as part of a longer work on history or of the contemporary scene. Some have dealt with aspects of the strike, but invariably the orthodox historian or student, then and now, notwithstanding sympathetic descriptions of the suffering of the working people at the time, has seized upon an incidental feature of the strike – the pulling of plugs out of the boilers to stop the mills – to dub the strike 'The Great Plug Plot Riots'.

In fact the General Strike of 1842 was far more than this. It raised the sights of the trade union and labour movement. From demands of an every day, trade-union character, limited to individual trades, it went forward to pose class aims. Its unification of wage demands with the demand for universal suffrage raised working-class struggle to the level of class struggle for the revolutionary transformation of society.

The geographical centre of the strike was Lancashire. As we will see later, this was no accident. It was in Lancashire that the greatest share of the country's industrial workers were concentrated, where the industrial revolution took form and shape, and where in 1842 the most advanced factories stood derelict, their workers idle, victims of profound economic crisis. More than workers anywhere else, they had had opportunity to learn the lesson that defensive struggle was not enough, to see that the source of their degradation lay in the organization of society itself, and that if economic crisis were to be overcome, labour had to become 'the only source of power'.³

Eighty-four years later another general strike took place, that of 1926. While the first took place when capitalism was in the ascendancy, this strike occurred when capitalism was in decline. Both were defeated. The first because of the reserves of strength the ruling class was able to bring to bear as the strike proceeded. The second, as G. D. H. Cole put it, because of the 'surrender of the national leaders'.⁴ The collapse of the 1926 strike brought with it confusion and an element of demoralization in the ranks

of the trade union movement. For years after the capitalist class was able to maintain an offensive against the working class.

The General Strike of 1842 was not defeated by the treachery of its leaders. On the contrary, there was unity and harmony between the workers and the strike leaders. They were defeated because of the superior strength of the ruling class. Far from being demoralized, they went back to work determined to resume the struggle at the first opportune moment. The 'Concluding Address' of the last Manchester trades conference declared:

We dissolve with the firm determination that, as soon as our organisation is sufficient for, and our resources adequate to the commencement of the national cessation from labour until the Charter becomes the law of the land, we shall do so, loyally and constitutionally; and we fear not but the result will crown our cause with victory.⁵

The turn-outs of 1842 were undefeated in spirit; they had asserted their independence as a class, and had demonstrated their class solidarity. They had exposed the vicious and brutal character of the capitalist state. One commentator, Cooke Taylor, who toured the manufacturing districts a month after the strike, wrote: 'the operatives are disappointed at the result of their late proceedings but they are certainly not daunted; on the contrary they boast of the great strength they displayed and the sympathy they met in almost every direction.'⁶

The turn-outs of 1842 had undergone a dramatic experience. They had experienced a new form of class action: the blending of the mass trade union movement with Chartism. They had seen what could be done with mass picketing. They had experienced certain elements in the exercise of working-class power, such as the issue of work permits by strike committees. They had seen trades conferences in action and becoming authoritative centres of local leadership.

This experience became a central part of the heritage of the modern labour movement. The development of the trades councils in the 1850s and 1860s took place against the background of the unprecedented and exhilarating local power exercised by the union delegate conferences in 1842. Their

political importance was demonstrated in no uncertain manner in 1920 when they forced Lloyd George to abandon his drive to war against the young Soviet Republic. Again in 1926 the disastrous effects of treachery by the leadership of the TUC were minimized as a result of the existence and activity of the trades councils and councils of action, and the authority they were able to exercise in maintaining morale. The 1842 strike was a vital stage in the political and organizational development of the British labour movement. There was hardly a piece of organization, or method of work in 1926 whose prototype or embryo could not be found in 1842.

What follows is an attempt to tell the story of the strike from the point of view of the strikers: to tell of the events that led up to the strike and of the workers who took part in it, and to question some of the long-standing characterizations of the strike.

I am indebted to the staffs of a number of libraries for their help in my search for materials of the General Strike of 1842. My thanks are due to the staff of the Manchester Central Library Social Science Department and the Local History Department; the University of Manchester Library; Cheetham's Library; Lancashire Public Records Office; Stockport, Middleton, Bury, Blackburn, Salford, Bolton and Heywood libraries. I would also like to thank the Manchester Central Library for permission to reproduce illustrations.

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In addition, Dr Foster helped in the formulation of some of the conclusions contained in the book.

NOTES

1. *Manchester and Salford Advertiser* (hereafter *Advertiser*), 9 July 1842.
2. Quoted by W. Cooke Taylor, *Notes of a Tour of the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire*, London, 1842, p. 214.
3. Address of the National Charter Association to the Chartist Public, 17 August 1842.
4. G. D. H. Cole, *British Trade Unionism Today*, London, 1945, p. 188.
5. *Manchester Guardian*, 24 August 1842.
6. Cooke Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 329.

The General Strike – A Weapon in the Struggle for Democracy

We have today a trade union movement that is the result of generations of experience of strikes, lock-outs and struggles on a local and national scale – experience of trade union organization, illegal and legal, friendly society type and militant class-conscious type. In other words we have today the refined product of some two hundred years of struggle to build a trade union movement. The 1840s were still early days for the trade union movement. Organization and democratic processes were still in their elementary state. Nevertheless, they were forms of organization and processes of democracy recognized by the people and used to the full by them. What happened in the 1840s was a contribution to the modern product of the 1970s and 1980s.

William Benbow and the idea of the General Strike

The idea of the general strike did not appear as a revelation to a handful of men in the middle of 1842. The idea had long been maturing and in a rudimentary way efforts had been made to extend local strikes into strikes of a more general character.

More than a decade before the 1842 General Strike, a full and detailed plan for a general strike had been worked out, published, and widely circulated throughout the country. The pamphlet was called *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes*. Its author was William Benbow, born in a village near Manchester. Like many leaders of the workers of that day, he was self-educated, and like the overwhelming majority of the national and local leaders of Chartism, used all his power and enthusiasm for the enlightenment of the masses.

The two principal ideas in the pamphlet were, first, that a National Holiday of one month's duration take place, and, second, that during the month a national congress of the productive classes be held. The first was a general strike which

would not need the full month to oust the capitalist class, and the second would be a new form of parliament. There was a class consciousness about the pamphlet: 'Our labour is of no use to us since what it produces goes into the hands of others.' And Benbow's aim was not a narrow one: 'We shall . . . endeavour to establish the happiness of the *immense majority* of the human race.' The aim of the National Holiday: 'Before the holiday be expired . . . if it is possible, the privations, wretchedness, and slavery, of the great mass of us, may be diminished, if not completely annihilated.' And what of the congress? 'The constitution drawn up during our holiday, shall place every human being on the same footing. Equal rights, equal liberties, equal enjoyments, equal toil, equal respect, equal share of production: this is the object of our holy day – of our sacred day – of our festival!' The objective was socialism.

The plans for the general strike were based on the participation of the whole of the people. Committees in the villages and townships, which would 'watch over the good order of its district, establish regularity, punish all attempts at disorder'.¹ They called for frequent meetings, the election of delegates to the national congress, the provision of funds and food. There are flashes of depth of understanding of the class struggle that jump a couple of generations into the age of Marxism. There was the sense that the very act of the masses stopping work would give them the consciousness of their strength, the magnitude of their united action.²

General Strikes and the struggle for democracy before Chartism

Max Beer in his *History of British Socialism* says of the 1830s: 'All debates on a general strike and all attempts at its realization in that decade are to be traced to Benbow's pamphlet.'³ At the same time the arguments it contained themselves derived from decades of practical class experience in which Benbow had actively participated.

Benbow, a shoemaker by trade, grew up near Middleton, a township at the very centre of the Lancashire cotton industry. From his youth he had good opportunity to observe the potential power to be exercised through industrial action.⁴ In 1810, when he was twenty-six, a strike of cotton spinners took

place. This strike, by what was then the most advanced section of factory workers, covered Manchester, Macclesfield, Stalybridge, Ashton, Hyde, Bolton and went as far north as Preston. It aimed to lift the wage rates paid in the smaller towns and centres to the level paid in Manchester, and was conducted by a federation of local unions of spinners which had been formed prior to the strike with a 'congress' at Manchester acting as a governing body. Contributions of between £1,000 and £1,500 a week came in, and a total of £17,000 was distributed to the men on strike. In all 30,000 factory workers were eventually involved and it took four months' struggle before defeat was conceded.

Two years later, in 1812, a general strike of weavers took place in Scotland. This had the aim of forcing employers to operate the wage rates which magistrates had adjudicated. Some 40,000 looms were thrown idle, finally affecting 200,000 people in the manufacturing side of the industry from Aberdeen to Carlisle. The strike only ended after nine weeks and the arrest of the strike committee.⁵

A little earlier the same year a still stormier confrontation took place in England, and one of its turning-points was a two-day battle between armed workers and troops in Benbow's own township of Middleton.⁶ This movement, often referred to as Luddism, did not precisely take the form of a general strike, but it is of direct relevance to our theme because of the degree to which it linked industrial and political action. Its immediate objective was to stop the introduction of any new machinery which might create unemployment. However, in the course of mobilizing masses of workers in the required extra-legal activity, it quickly became fused – whether deliberately or not is a question that still has to be answered – with the existing tradition of semi-insurrectionary struggle for democratic rights, which had continued unbroken since the 1790s.⁷ Across Lancashire, Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire workers now defied – and on occasion actually fought – regular troops in order to carry through their objectives. At the same time, and running parallel to this underground struggle, a public campaign was conducted for universal suffrage. This right to vote was described by one of the leaders as an essential safeguard for 'Labour (the poor man's only property)'.⁸

Immediately after the Napoleonic war this struggle for democratic rights was resumed. On this occasion there is no shortage of evidence, either for Benbow's direct involvement, or for his conviction that the industrial power of workers had to be harnessed to that cause. In 1816–17 he was sufficiently prominent within the Lancashire Hampden clubs to be sent as an organizer and lecturer to Birmingham and Yorkshire. In December 1816 he was mobilizing support in the North for the attempted insurrection by the radicals of London (mostly followers of the socialist Thomas Spence).⁹ Three months later he was among the organizers of the Blanketeers' march on London. Indeed it was Benbow, at a meeting in Manchester on 3 March 1817, who moved a resolution that this, the first use of an organized hunger march, be made a mass march of Lancashire weavers and spinners. After the march had been forcibly dispersed and habeas corpus suspended, Benbow was one of those for whom a warrant was issued and he was finally captured in Dublin on 16 May.¹⁰ On his release in the spring of 1818, he threw himself into an agitation that culminated in the first ever attempt at a general strike.

Speaking beside other recently released leaders on 13 April 1818, he made reference to the French revolutionary slogan, 'For a nation to be free it was sufficient that the People willed it', and continued:

The ministers might be blamed in some degree for the abuses that prevailed for, God knows, they were guilty enough, but in one sense, and that the most striking, it was not their fault. The blame rested with the People themselves. Why did they suffer their just rights to be withheld? Why did they not seize them with a strong hand? . . . The People, if united, could do anything. . . .¹¹

These themes were repeated at mass meetings across Lancashire for the following two months. Then, at the beginning of July, the Lancashire spinners, who had been particularly important in supplying finance for the Blanketeers the previous year, struck work and demanded a return to the wage rates of 1816.¹² The manifesto in which they called for support ended by addressing their employers in the following terms:

When we refuse to work you say we are conspiring against the government, charge us with sedition, send soldiers to arrest us. . . . Remember what was done in France at the bridge of Pont Neuf by a fool of an officer beating an old man with the flat of his sword. We advise all professions who live by work to stand up for a proper remuneration for their labour.¹³

Two weeks later a delegate meeting of Lancashire and Cheshire weavers also decided to strike work and at the end of July they were joined by the Lancashire miners and hatters. With this, all the main contingents of the county's industrial labour force had been brought into action. The Manchester stipendiary magistrate told the Home Secretary that attempts were being made to 'convert what at present appears but a turnout into an engine for overthrowing the government of the country and producing a new order of things'.¹⁴

At this point the government saw the situation as sufficiently serious to put pressure on the employers of the biggest group of strikers, the 100,000 strong weavers, to concede at least part of their wage demands. 'It is important,' wrote the Home Secretary, 'to deprive the journeymen of every pretext for dissatisfaction and it would be very material if this consideration could be impressed in the minds of the master manufacturers.'¹⁵ Although some concessions were made, most weavers and all the spinners, miners and hatters stayed out, and on 19 August – at a time when up to 250,000 workers were on strike – a delegate conference of all Lancashire trades was held in Manchester. This passed a resolution establishing 'a union of all trades called a Philanthropic Society', pledged to mutual aid. It was only after heavy coercive action by the government and further wage concessions by the mineowners and master manufacturers ('a little through fear', according to the Manchester stipendiary magistrate) that the wave of strike action was finally broken in late August and early September.¹⁶ On 29 August the entire spinners committee was arrested and on 2 and 3 September, after the Manchester garrison had been considerably reinforced, serious clashes erupted in the centre of the city when the military attacked and dispersed mass meetings of 4,000 spinners and 15,000 weavers.¹⁷ Throughout the strike the Home Office intelligence reports provide detailed descriptions of

debates within strike committees, particularly those of the weavers and miners, between leaders who wanted to limit objectives to wage increases and those who were in favour of extending the struggle to the achievement of universal suffrage, and who advocated some form of insurrectionary action early in September. By October, one informant of the Home Office was reporting that 'some of the main actors of 1812 have been heard to say that their projects have again been botched and they fear that the different trades cannot be *roused* to the assertion of the people's rights. . . .'¹⁸

During the great agitations of the following year, culminating in Peterloo, there is no indication that any form of general strike was contemplated. In April 1820, however, a general strike was seen as an integral part of the insurrection which was then attempted. In Glasgow, where the democratic forces remained more or less in control for three days, placards were issued on behalf of the 'Committee of Organisation for forming a Provisional Government' which called on 'All the inhabitants of Great Britain and Ireland . . . in the present state of affairs, and during the continuation of so momentous a struggle [to] desist from their labour and attend wholly to their Rights, and consider it as the duty of everyone not to recommence until he is in possession of those Rights which distinguish the Freeman from the Slave; viz. that of giving consent to the laws by which he is governed.'¹⁹ Similar placards also appeared for a short time in some towns in Lancashire and Yorkshire.²⁰

Benbow himself seems to have joined Cobbett in exile in America some time in the late summer of 1818 and, after a further spell of imprisonment in London during 1819-20, established himself among the capital's radical booksellers and publishers. His shop became a meeting place for those on the left of the radical movement, particularly the followers of Thomas Spence, and in 1831 he played some part in establishing the National Union of the Working Classes.

Benbow's pamphlet, therefore, when published in 1832, did not spring out of thin air. It drew upon and crystallized the lessons of many class actions which had been undertaken in the previous two decades, and in particular can be said to have drawn together the experience of the factory workers of the

North and the insurrectionary socialism of the London Spencians.

Meanwhile in the factory districts themselves the pace of industrialization was further deepening and extending workers' understanding of their potential power. The first of many attempts were being made to establish unions which covered entire industries. In December 1829 John Doherty, who had taken part in the strike of 1818 and was a friend of Benbow, established the Grand General Union of Operative Spinners of Great Britain and Ireland. On 27 December 1830 fifty-two mills in Ashton-under-Lyne, near Manchester, struck work in order to regain lost wages the previous year. The employers retaliated by trying to enforce a general reduction in wages. While the Ashton dispute was still new, the Grand General Union of Spinners held its second delegate conference in Manchester. The Manchester spinners urged that the masters' counter-attack be met by the declaration of a general strike by all spinners of the United Kingdom.²¹

Similar attempts to form industry-wide unions were made by the potters and builders, and in 1831 John Doherty established the short-lived but important National Association for the Protection of Labour to provide central coordination for the different unions. In 1833-4, by which time the factory component within the cotton industry labour force exceeded 200,000, Doherty became a leading figure in the fight to enforce an eight-hour day by direct industrial action. Two great federations were formed: the National Regeneration Society in the North and the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union in the South and Midlands. Both were profoundly influenced by radical socialist ideas which included, as well as those of Owen, those reflecting the direct experience of working-class insurrectionary struggle. On 5 April 1834 Doherty's paper, the *Herald of the Rights of Industry* made the call for an eight-hour day:

*To members of trades unions, we say solemnly and emphatically, strike! not against some handful of greedy and wretched employers as we have heretofore done, but strike at once against the whole tribe of idlers of every grade, class or condition. . . .*²²

On 3 May, Owen's paper *The Crisis* argued in similar terms:

Strikes after strikes in thick succession. . . . The evil of all these engagements is that they are partial; . . . we have not sufficient unity of action to take possession of the country or govern it when taken . . . by a general strike they might bring their superiors to any terms of accommodation. But these petty strivings are like petty thefts.²³

Chartism and industrial action

It would be wrong to say that the first stage of the Chartist movement altogether excluded this specifically working-class perspective of harnessing industrial action to wider political ends. In certain ways, however, because of its mixed class base, early Chartism did mark something of a retreat.

The deepening economic crisis of the late 1830s, and particularly the banking crisis of 1836–7, had precipitated many small employers, tradesmen and shopkeepers into radical politics. Though granted the vote in 1832 these men increasingly felt themselves powerless to influence a political establishment dominated, as they saw it, by the landed interest and by rentiers who insisted on maintaining an inflexible and very disadvantageous gold-based currency system. To the leaders of the industrial working class, outmanoeuvred on the vote question in 1832, this gave some hope that a basic shift in class alliances could be achieved. Over large parts of the country, but particularly in London, Birmingham and the Midlands where large-scale factory production had not yet developed and working-class radicalism had previously been weak, there now appeared the opportunity of tapping new sources of popular mobilization. It was partly to draw on such support that the six points of the People's Charter were put together in 1837 and then made the basis of a unified campaign for universal male suffrage in August 1838.

The problem, of course, was how to ensure that these new forces did in fact strengthen this fight and not simply rob the working class of a clear campaigning perspective. This was particularly so when it came to organization. Within the reform movements of the post-war period there had always existed a tight, illegal, but usually democratic and elective structure of leadership. Early Chartism had no such structure. On the one

hand, there were the existing bases of working-class power in the industrial North and West. Here 'political unions' provided forms of mass democratic control which necessarily interlocked – in a coercive and illegal way – with the local maintenance of effective trade union activity. On the other hand, in those parts of the South and Midlands where distinct blocs of small employers had thrown their support behind the Charter, the local structure was far more diffuse, naturally excluded integration with local trade union struggle, and tended to rest – often quite undemocratically – on the prestige and patronage which individual middle-class radicals were able to exercise.

Nationally, as a bridge between the two areas of support, stood London's radical journalists. These men rightly enjoyed vast prestige. After four years of bitter struggle culminating in 1834–5, they had finally beaten off the government's attempt to suppress the radical opposition press. As journalists they were not directly responsible to any particular social group and could thereby operate, to an extent, as go-betweens. Accordingly great power came to be exercised by the men who most successfully bridged the two positions, particularly Feargus O'Connor and his paper, the *Northern Star*, which became something of a substitute for a national leadership.

The negative consequences soon became apparent. Early Chartism harnessed forces which made it appear uniquely powerful. Yet although there was unity on the Charter itself, there was none on how it was to be achieved and, still worse, no democratic process by which any binding agreement could be evolved. The very breadth of support which the Charter enjoyed persuaded many that it could be secured by a simple replay of 1832. Once it became apparent that this was not to be the case, as it had by the early summer of 1839, the movement was immediately torn by conflict. The composition of the National Convention was so diverse that each group felt itself more responsible to its own external backers than to the collective decisions of the Convention. When the government stepped up its harassment in May 1839, a sizeable group of working-class radicals began to discuss some form of insurrectionary mobilization. O'Connor vacillated. The middle-class radicals withdrew to their own areas and started to damp down the movement they had previously supported. When the Con-

vention reconvened on 1 July, and especially after the rejection of the Chartist petition on 12 July, the remaining delegates were faced with an almost impossible task. The legal road of petitioning had come to a dead-end. The movement, particularly in the industrial areas, was mobilized and waiting. Yet tactically, on the ground, it was quite unprepared – in terms of detailed organization – for any irrevocable step into illegality.

This dilemma was most forcefully illustrated when it came to the question of a general strike. Almost from the beginning there had been reference to the possibility of using strike action to force the government's hand. Benbow had been tirelessly campaigning for this during a long tour of the industrial North since the beginning of 1838. Even Attwood, leader of the middle-class radicals, had referred to this possibility ('not the workers against the employers but a rising of all against the common enemy') at a stage when such an outcome seemed highly remote. Now it had to be faced head-on.

In the first week of July, before the rejection of the petition, the call for a 'sacred month' had been extensively discussed and eventually given unanimous support by the Convention. The strongest backing came from Dr John Taylor, the Ayrshire doctor whose main base was among the miners of Northumberland, and Dr. Peter McDougall, another doctor of Scottish origin, whose medical work among the factory workers of South Lancashire had won him for the proletarian wing of the Chartist movement. Once the petition had been rejected the issue was immediately re-opened.

Initially, and during three very depleted sittings of the Convention, Lowery, the Tyneside leader, managed to push through a resolution fixing 12 August for the beginning of the strike. A couple of days later Bronterre O'Brien returned from campaigning work in the country to lead a determined counter-attack. O'Brien, a dedicated supporter of the fight for proletarian democracy and its chief ideologist (he had translated Buonarrotti's *History of the Conspiracy of the Equals*), stood second only to O'Connor within the Chartist movement. We can do no more than guess at the reasons for his opposition. He certainly knew that the preparations had not been made, and that in those parts of the country where the movement was still

under middle-class dominance there might be no response at all. He may also have been unhappy about a form of struggle which was somewhat remote from his own practical experience as a London-based radical journalist, and which, moreover, did not figure in that French model of popular revolution – the 1796 Babeuf rising – which he had attempted to popularize. It is, however, worth noting that O'Brien also received support from a number of other leaders, like John Frost, who could in no way be accused of remoteness from the industrial working class.

In the event O'Brien won his point and a committee of five was elected to reconsider the proposal for a general strike in the light of feelings in the country. The motion affirmed that 'The Convention continues to be unanimously of the opinion that nothing short of a general strike, or suspension of labour throughout the country, will ever suffice to re-establish the rights and liberties of the industrial classes', but then went on to detail the reasons why 'we nevertheless cannot take upon ourselves the responsibility of dictating the time or circumstances of such a strike'.²⁴ Finally, after three weeks delay, during which the government took the opportunity to arrest another large batch of leaders (including Benbow), the committee recommended the Convention to convert the general strike into a one-day token strike:

We are unanimously of the opinion that the people are not prepared to carry out the sacred month on the 12th of August. The same evidence, however, convinces us that the great body of working people, including most of the trades may be induced to leave work on the 12th instant for two or three days in order to devote the whole of that time to solemn processions and solemn meetings.²⁵

The resolution went on to make some further points which would appear to underline the very uneven state of readiness and support across the country as well as the fear that certain groups of workers might attempt to go it alone:

Under these circumstances we implore all our brother Chartists to abandon the project of a sacred month as being for the present utterly impracticable, and to prepare themselves forthwith to carry into effect the aforesaid constitutional objects on the 12 instant. We also implore the united trades, if they would save the country from convulsion and themselves and families from ruin, to render their

distressed brethren all the aid in their power on or before the 12 instant towards realising the great and beneficent object of the holiday.²⁶

The demonstrations and marches scheduled for that day were well supported, but from then on the scale of mobilization fell away in face of intensifying arrests, and a number of the remaining leaders – notably Frost and Taylor – turned their attention to the organization of armed insurrection. The failure of these risings during the autumn and winter of 1839–40 ended the first phase of the Chartist movement.

The following year seems to have been one of fundamental reorientation. In July 1840 twenty-nine delegates, mainly from the industrial North, met in Manchester to establish the permanent organization which Chartism had previously lacked, the National Charter Association. Unlike the underground leaderships of the post-war radical movement, the NCA was intended as a legal body, and although its organization was to some extent determined by the need to evade prosecution under the 1799 Corresponding Societies Act, it has been rightly described as the first-ever working-class party. The man elected president, and claimed as its principal architect, was the Manchester radical (and subsequent friend of Engels), James Leach.²⁷

The reasons for the formation of the new body were not made entirely clear. Given the fact that almost all the old national leadership were in prison at the time, the foundation of the new organization seems to have been very much on the initiative of local Chartist supporters. It would also seem to have been intended to ensure that the problems of the previous year did not recur, and that middle-class radicals only remained in a position of leadership if they agreed to accept collective discipline.

Certainly over the following months the NCA's actions were marked by a strong emphasis on class identification, and even if the resulting purges were manipulated by O'Connor to his own ends, it does seem to have enabled a qualitative change in the local base of the Chartist movement. From now on the priority was on a much closer relation with organized labour, and in some areas, like the Black Country, the results seem to have been dramatic. After the withdrawal of the Birmingham middle-class

radicals, their places were filled by miners and iron workers from the surrounding hinterland. In such areas Chartist influence increased rapidly. In the mining town of Bilston, for instance, membership rose from 150 in 1840 to over 1,000 by early 1842, and while such growth may to some extent be accounted for by the concurrent upsurge in industrial militancy, it was probably in part due to a simple link-up between the Chartist movement and the pre-existing (and illegal) bases of local working-class power now coming under heavy attack from the state.²⁸

Throughout the late 1830s central government had been tightening its grip on the most sensitive areas of local government, police and poor relief, and was preparing to use them to smash the local community discipline on which trade union power depended. This inevitably drew the trade unions far more directly into political activity and the fight for universal male suffrage.

Across the country, therefore, as economic crisis intensified, as local Chartists and trade unionists drew closer together, and as leaders like McDouall came out of prison determined to carry through the plans abandoned in 1839, so the basis was being laid for a mustering of class strength that would see no equal in Britain that century.

NOTES

1. William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* (ed. A. Ruter, 1936, International Review of Social History facsimile reproductions), 8–11.
2. An article in the *Poor Man's Guardian*, 30 August 1834, signed 'Equality' states: 'The great advantage of a strike is that it increases the enmity between labourers and capitalists, and compels labourers to reflect and investigate the causes of their sufferings' (p. 238).
3. M. Beer, *History of British Socialism*, London, 1940, Part 2, p. 316.
4. Biographical details on Benbow can be found in G. D. H. Cole's *British Working Class Movements: selected documents*, London, 1965, p. 230. A. Plummer, *Bronterre O'Brien*, London, 1971, p. 124, and I. Prothero, 'William Benbow and the Concept of the General Strike', *Past and Present* (May 1974).

5. Cole, op. cit., p. 93
6. E. P. Thompson, *Making of the English Working Class*, London, 1967, pp. 620-1.
7. J. Dinwiddy, 'Luddism', *Social History*, 1978.
8. John Knight's introduction to *The Trial of the 38 men from Manchester on 27 August 1812*, Manchester, J. Plant, 1812, p. 129.
9. Chippendale to Fletcher, 4 September 1816, HO 42/153; Chippendale to Home Office, 31 October 1816, HO 40/3; same, 19 December 1816.
10. Hay to Sidmouth, 24 March 1817, HO/3; list of persons imprisoned by warrant 1817, HO 42/127.
11. Chippendale to Fletcher, 20 April 1818, enclosed in Fletcher to Hobhouse, 25 April 1818, HO42/176.
12. Fletcher to Sidmouth, 11 July 1818, HO 42/178.
13. Manchester Borough reeve to Home Office, 9 July 1818, HO 42/178. The preceding day Benbow had addressed a mass meeting in Middleton.
14. Norris to Home Office, 29 July 1818, HO 42/178.
15. Hobhouse to Fletcher, 30 July 1818, HO 79/3, and letters quoted in Cole, op. cit., pp. 101-5.
16. Norris to Sidmouth, 5 September 1818, HO 42/180.
17. Norris to Sidmouth, 2 September 1818, HO 42/180.
18. Fletcher to Hobhouse, 20 October 1818, HO 42/181.
19. A. Plummer, op. cit., p. 124.
20. Hobhouse to Norris, 6 April 1820, HO 41/6.
21. G. D. H. Cole, *Attempts at General Union*, London, 1953, pp. 24-5.
22. *Herald of the Rights of Industry*, 5 April 1834.
23. *The Crisis*, 3 May 1834.
24. R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement*, London, 1854, p. 146.
25. *ibid.*, p. 154.
26. *ibid.*, p. 155.
27. D. Jones, *Chartism and the Chartists*, London, 1975, p. 70.
28. G. Barnsby, *The Working Class Movement in the Black Country*, Wolverhampton, 1977, p. 157.

Economic Crisis

Historians writing in recent times have, in general, confirmed contemporary accounts of the hardships, the suffering and the distress of the working class in the course of the industrial revolution. The industrial revolution brought with it the booms and slumps of capitalist industry so well known to us. If the condition of the working class was poor in 'normal' times, then it was one of outright destitution in times of depression. The years immediately preceding the General Strike were such years of depression.

The experience of poverty

J. F. C. Harrison puts it quite bluntly: 'by 1837 the country was plunged into a prolonged depression lasting until 1842. These six years were the grimmest period in the history of the nineteenth century. Industry came to a standstill, unemployment reached hitherto unknown proportions, and with high food prices and inadequate relief, the manufacturing population faced hunger and destitution.'¹ The depths of suffering and deprivation experienced can be gauged by the examination Harrison made of an 1841 London worker's budget which might just support himself, his wife and three children. Assuming continuous employment and regular earnings of 15s a week – with a wife and three children, the budget covered bread, meat, porter, coal, potatoes, tea, sugar, butter, soap, candles, rent, schooling, sundries. The budget did not include, milk, cheese, fresh vegetables, clothes, provision for sickness. Harrison comments: 'Even supposing the wife was also able to earn, it is difficult to see how such a family could escape periods of destitution.'² What then must have been the position of employed workers who were earning much less than 15s a week? And what must have been the condition of the unemployed worker and his family?

The answer can be found in the newspapers of the time. The

radical and Chartist press, the *Northern Star*, the *Advertiser* and and similar papers, allowed hardly an issue to be printed during these years without exposing the condition of the working class. The *Northern Star* in its issue of 23 July 1842, two weeks before the general strike, in a report from Nottingham said, 'to enter fully into the depths of sorrow, to tell the tale of woe, there is no need to call in the aid of eloquence'. It then continues its story by quoting from the *Nottingham Review*. Thirty-six of the (Bulwall) unemployed obtained a waggon from Mr Jennison and proceeded to the quarry yard, where they filled it with lime. They were then yoked to it like oxen and started to draw it to Nottingham, Newark and Grantham, 'to show the world that their distress was not caused by any unwillingness to labour for an honourable subsistence, and to request pecuniary assistance from those who were in better circumstances. The sight drew tears from many eyes and the most bitter reproaches were almost invariably vented against the authors of their calamity.'

In 1842 Poor Law Commissioners were appointed to inquire into the state of the distressed population of Stockport. They interviewed a Mr John Daniels, an unemployed silk weaver, with a wife and five children. His total income had been about 8s a week. They were getting three meals a day. On being asked to give an account of the three meals he said:

We make our breakfast for seven of us of a cupful of oatmeal made into thin porridge, together with some bread; at dinner we have about six pounds of potatoes, with salt and bread, and the tea or supper, as you may call it, this is the same as at breakfast, in the whole about four pounds of bread daily, say 8d, 2d worth of potatoes and 2d worth of oatmeal, amounting to a shilling a day for seven of us. This and 10d a week we have to pay for coal makes up the 8s nearly. . . . Life must be kept together, so long as we can wish to live.³

'We wish to live.' This was the cry of the whole working class – employed and unemployed – whether maintaining life on oatmeal, bread and potatoes, or taking part in political activity, and marching behind banners and flags which proclaimed, 'Bread not Blood', or 'We want not charity but employment', or 'Better be shot, than see our children starve.'⁴ Distress and deprivation did not demoralize the unemployed. On the

contrary, in many parts of the country, the activity of the unemployed, especially in Lancashire, was politically integrated with the activity and campaigning of the employed workers. The unemployed workers of Stockport at a mass meeting in October 1841 passed the following resolution with one vote against:

That the working classes of this town are in a most deplorable condition, hunger and starvation prevailing to an alarming extent, and that reductions have a tendency to increase misery and crime, and that the only way to benefit the industrious millions is to give them a power over the law by granting Universal Suffrage and thus enable them to protect their labour, which is the source of all wealth against the encroachments of the capitalists.⁵

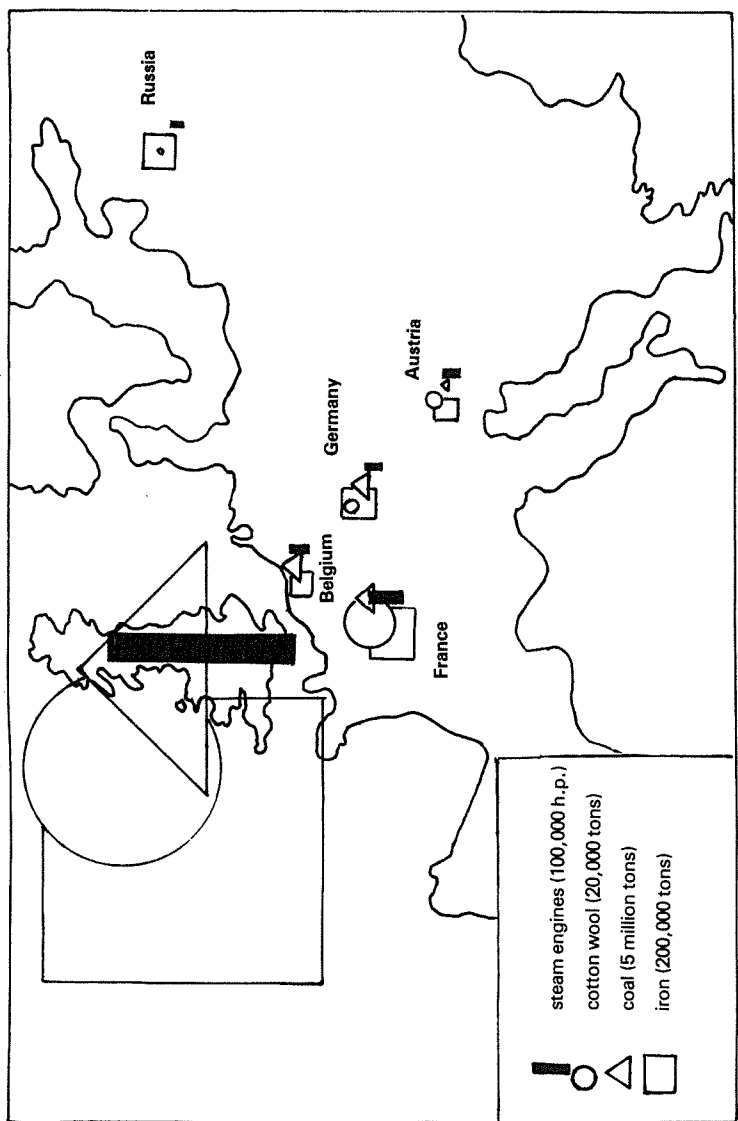
The first and biggest working class

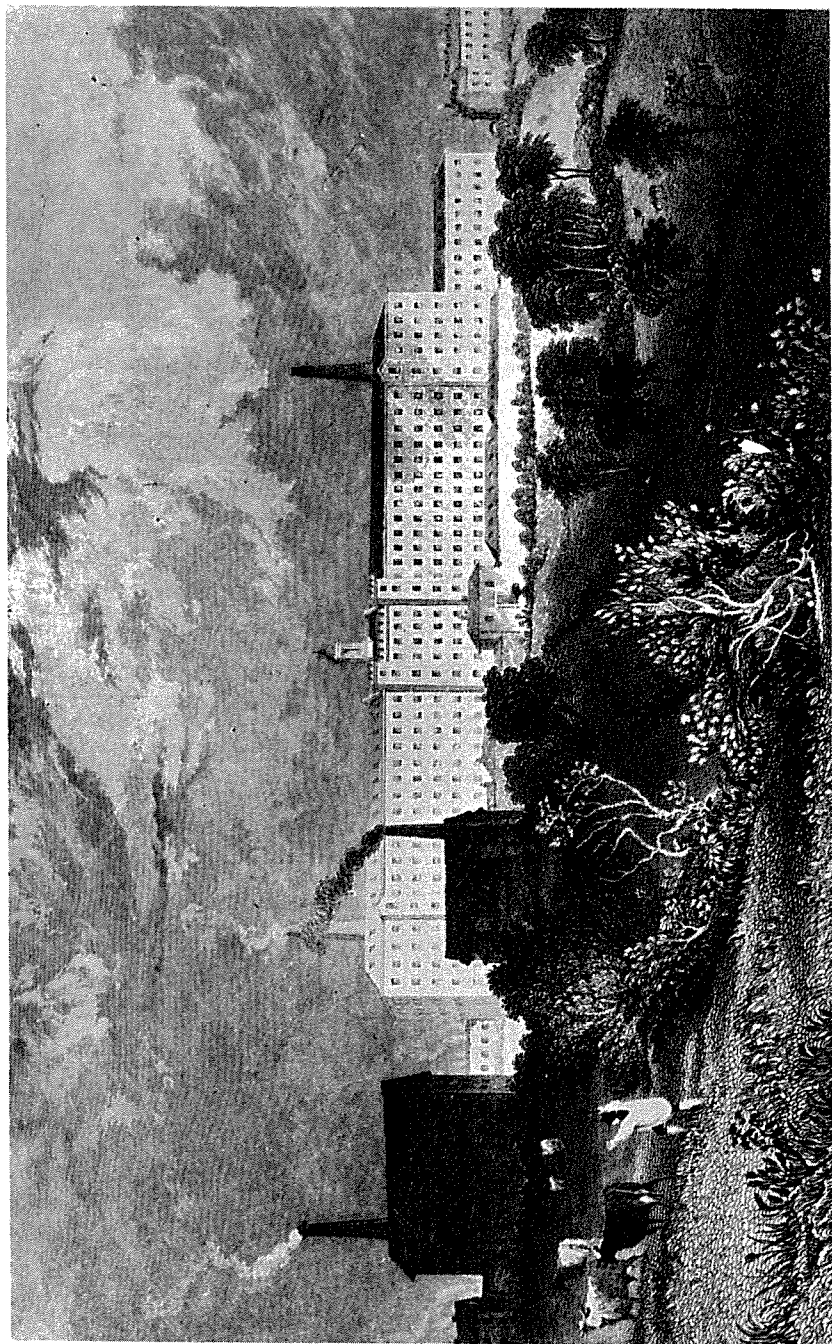
The vigour of this response was itself a reflection of the maturity of the British working class. Still in the 1840s it was incomparably bigger (and more experienced) than any other. If its political activity was quite unlike that found in France or Germany and if it was able to give new meaning to the ideas of social progress emerging on the continent, it was at least in part because its material base was a generation ahead of that elsewhere. In terms of the steam engine, that touchstone of nineteenth-century industrialization, Britain had three times the horse power of the rest of Europe put together. Its cotton labour force was 350,000 strong; that of its nearest rival, France, 90,000. It had 120,000 coalminers – Germany had 16,000 and France 12,000. Its 400,000 metal workers, diversified in many different trades, probably outnumbered their French counterparts five to one (Figure 1).⁶

No less important was the *concentration* of this industrial working class.

The spread of machine industry did not take place evenly across the country, but was largely limited to the coal-bearing counties of the North and West (Figures 2 and 3). Whereas in France and Germany workers in the new industries were confined to small isolated pockets, in Lancashire, Cheshire, Yorkshire, Staffordshire and Warwickshire, they formed the bulk of what was already a predominantly urban population. What is more, this concentration also extended to the *scale* of

Figure 1 Industrial production in Europe in 1840⁶





Factory near Preston, 1835

Figure 2 Distribution of coal and cotton workers by county 1841⁷

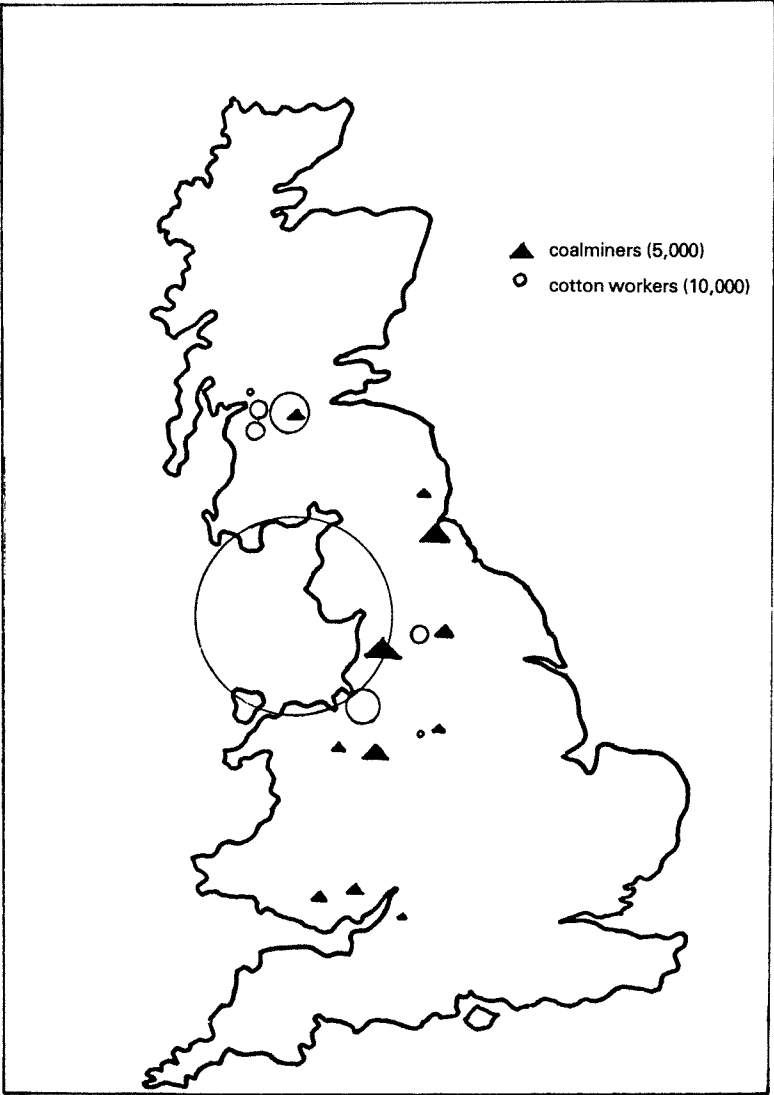
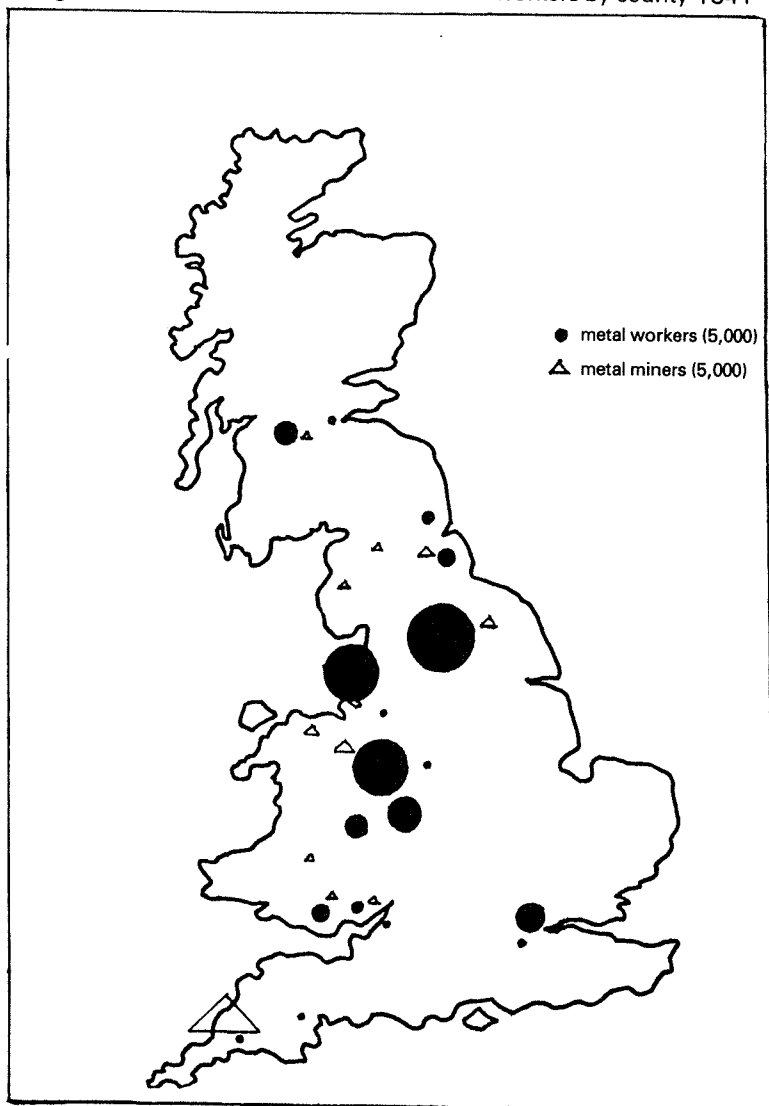


Figure 3 Distribution of metal miners and workers by county 1841⁸



production (Figure 4). For the major industries we are no longer dealing with small workshops. A generation before, in 1810, the number of cotton workers employed in factories exceeded 100,000. By 1841 93 per cent of Manchester's 40,000 cotton labour force worked in factories employing more than 100 workers. In Lancashire as a whole this proportion ranged from 77 per cent in Rochdale to 97 per cent in Preston. The highly capitalized trade of textile-machine making seems to have been about equally concentrated, and most of coal and iron production took place within relatively large units (Figure 5).¹⁰

It was the lack of such concentration and the smaller scale of production which distinguished these counties from the agrarian South and East. The agricultural labourers were of course also wage workers and bore no resemblance to the peasant populations of the continent, but their organization was sadly retarded. Scattered in small groups among tenant farmers, their attempts to form unions were easily – and thus brutally – rooted out. It was only in the urban centres or wherever large-scale industry brought workers together – as in the North-East or the West of Scotland – that the principles of trade unionism were deeply rooted. Naturally even there, elements of sectionalism and craft privilege existed, but the continued attempts to outlaw trade union activity and the three generations of struggle against state repression – at both local and national level – had firmly consolidated the lessons of wider solidarity. On top of this, and still more important, was the experience of capitalist production itself – the endless repetition of boom and slump when advances in productivity were repeatedly followed by reduced wages and greater unemployment.

Twenty-five years progress in the cotton industry

Nowhere was this clearer than in the leading sector of industry, cotton. Here the consequences of twenty-five years technical advance were vividly, if reluctantly, brought out at the trial of Feargus O'Connor and fifty-eight others in March 1843.

The Attorney-General questioned a Mr John Brooks, prosecution witness, as to the wages level at the mill where he was book-keeper and manager. To the question, were the

Figure 4 Distribution of Lancashire cotton labour force 1841⁹

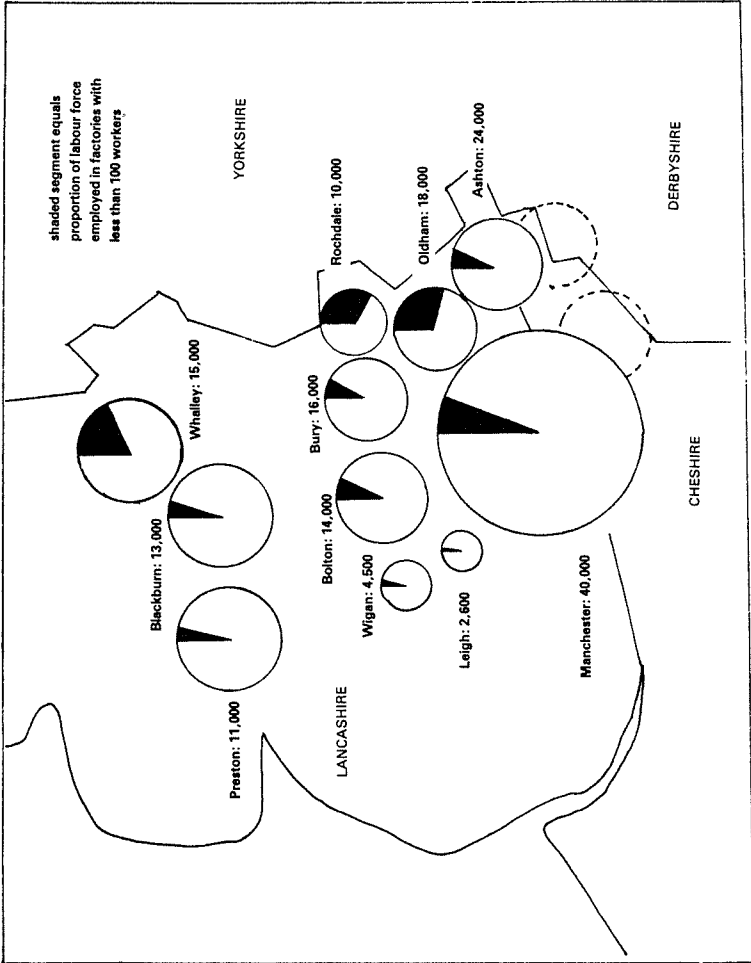
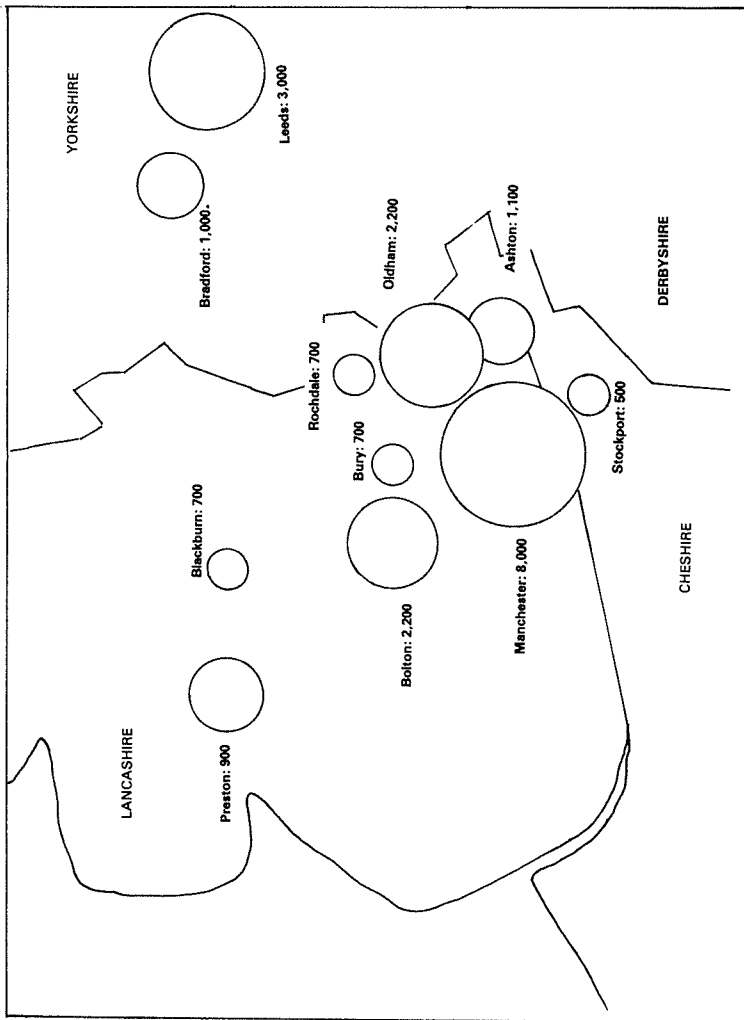


Figure 5 Distribution of textile machine makers in 1841¹⁰

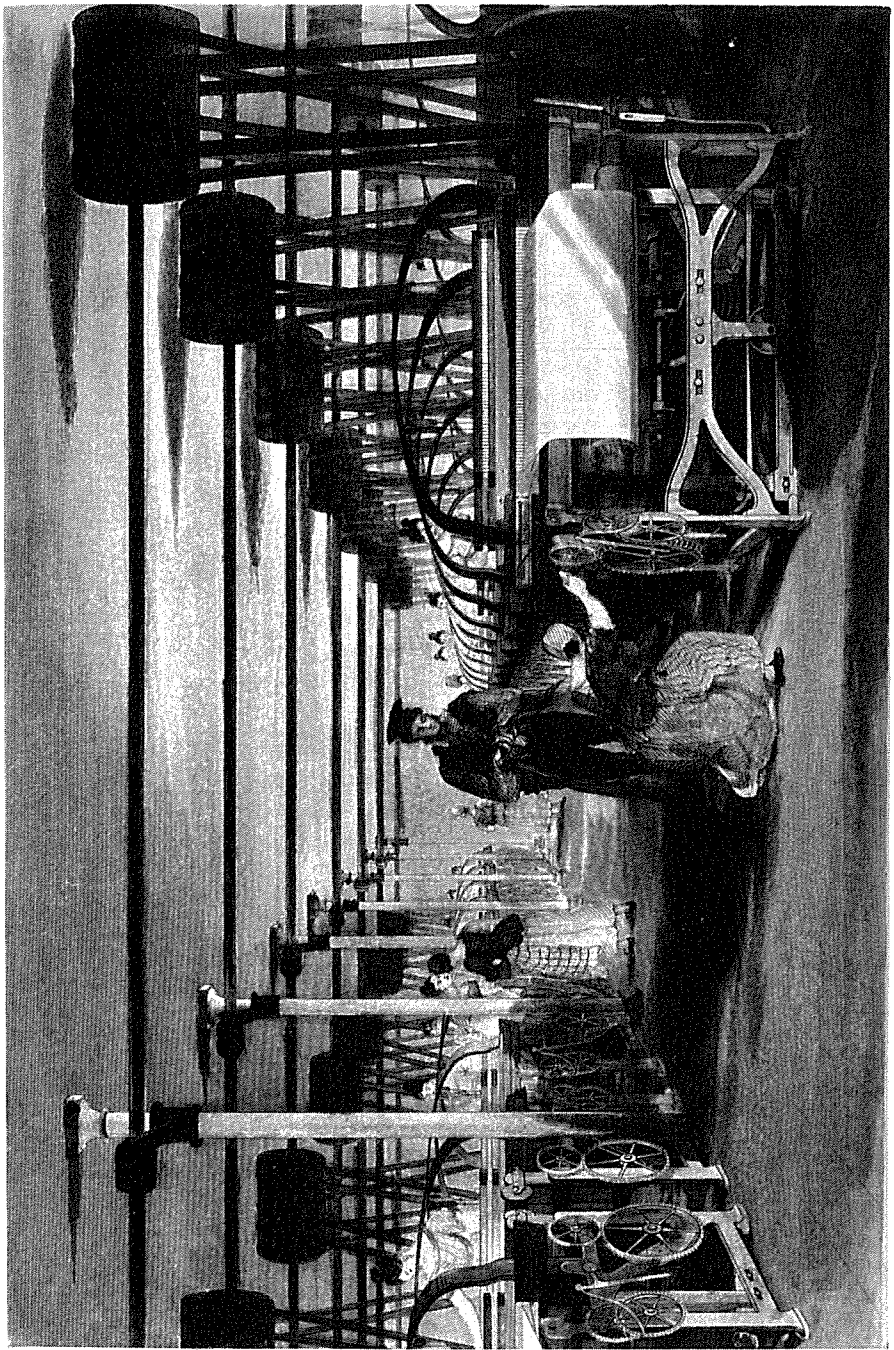
workpeople receiving the same wages that they had been receiving for some time, he replied that they were receiving more wages at the moment than twenty-five years earlier. Spinners receive weekly wages, and other hands do not. Spinners who work by the piece had suffered a 10 per cent reduction in August 1840. They were then earning from thirty-two to thirty-six shillings, but the average would be about thirty shillings. No one received less than twenty-two shillings per week. About 300 were employed at the mill.

The witness was cross-examined by Mr O'Connor, 'How much did you pay each Saturday night?' 'Sometimes over £300. Perhaps from £310 to £320. The spinners pay the piecers.' 'How many piecers to the spinners of the double-decked mule?' 'Some of them have eight. We have five double-decked mules. Three of them require eight piecers each and the two others require seven each.' 'How many single-decked mules have you?' 'Twenty-seven pair.' 'How many piecers engaged on these twenty-seven pair of single-decked mules?' 'Four piecers to each.' 'How many spinners have you?' 'Thirty-five.' 'You have 300 hands in all?' 'About that.' 'And only thirty-five spinners?' 'Yes.' 'Then out of 300 hands employed, it was only thirty-five spinners whose wages averaged from 36s the highest to 22s the lowest?' 'Yes, that is the net wages.'

Mr O'Connor: 'If a man works a fair week's work how much will he have?' 'A spinner gets for the stated amount of work six guineas in the fortnight. There is 10 per cent off that . . . 2s a week off for gas, that is 4s in the fortnight – that reduces it to £5 10s.

The judge: 'To £5 9s 6d.'

Mr O'Connor: 'How much does a man earn who works at a double-decked mule?' '. . . A man . . . should earn £10 13s . . . deductions are . . . about 20 per cent and 3s a week for gas.' The witness explained that there were different sized mules and as much as £13 could be earned in the fortnight with 20 per cent deduction and 3s a week for gas. In answer to Mr O'Connor he explained that there were no fines – except for spoiled work. Mr O'Connor; 'Then when you said £310 you meant by the fortnight?' 'Yes.' 'You have 300 hands at work and the amount of wages to these is about £155 per week?' 'Yes.' 'And thirty-five of these hands earn from 22s to 36s per week – that I presume



would leave about 7s per week, upon an average, for the remaining 265 hands?’

The judge: ‘Taking the average at 30s a week for the spinners, it would leave £103 10s for the remainder, which is about 7s a week.’

James Leach, one of the defendants, took up the cross-examination. He questioned the witness about the difference in wages in the twenty-five year period, going into technicalities. Where differences were given they were fractional.

Mr J. Leach: ‘. . . you tell us that your spinners now earn 36s; but don’t you know that there are spinners in Stalybridge working for 12s or 14s a week?’ ‘I have nothing to do with other masters.’ Further examination established that twenty years earlier spinners were spinning on 648 spindles, and ten years later they were spinning on 1,300 spindles. ‘What number are they spinning on now?’ ‘They try it as low as 1,000.’ ‘Well, what height do you go to?’ ‘The double-deckers some of them, run to 2,000 now. . . .’

The judge: ‘I do not know the object of this examination.’

Mr J. Leach: ‘He stated that they were receiving the same wages which they received twenty years ago. I know they are not receiving half the wages for the amount of work.’

The judge: ‘What is meant is that they, in fact, produce a greater quantity now than formerly.’

The Attorney-General: ‘That is very likely.’

Leach addressed the witness: ‘You don’t know that in the mills in your district, the spinners were working 2,600 spindles and only getting 9s a week? . . . You state that your workmen average 36s per week. I believe it would only be £1 0s 8d in the fortnight according to what you subsequently stated, that is 10s 4d a week.’

The judge: ‘Yes, you are right in that; it would be 10s 4d a week. . . . What I understand from the witness is this, that a workman employing the same quantity of labour and skill that he employed twenty-five years ago, has as much earnings as he had then, but he may give a greater quantity of produce.’

The following day, James Leach in his defence speech stated: ‘In twenty of the largest mills in Manchester, which in the year 1825 employed 1,018 spinners, there are now only 500 spinners, so that the improvements in machinery have had the effect of

turning more than one half of the hands out of employment since 1825, and also diminishing the wages of the remainder 50 per cent.¹¹

The above presents a picture of the state of wages and employment at the time of the General Strike compared with the state of wages and employment twenty-five years earlier. It was a situation which by any labour and trade union standards justified a general strike to halt and, if possible, reverse the process of lowering of living standards and growing unemployment. If, however, we take into consideration what was happening to wages in the period immediately prior to August 1842, then the full depth of feeling can be appreciated.

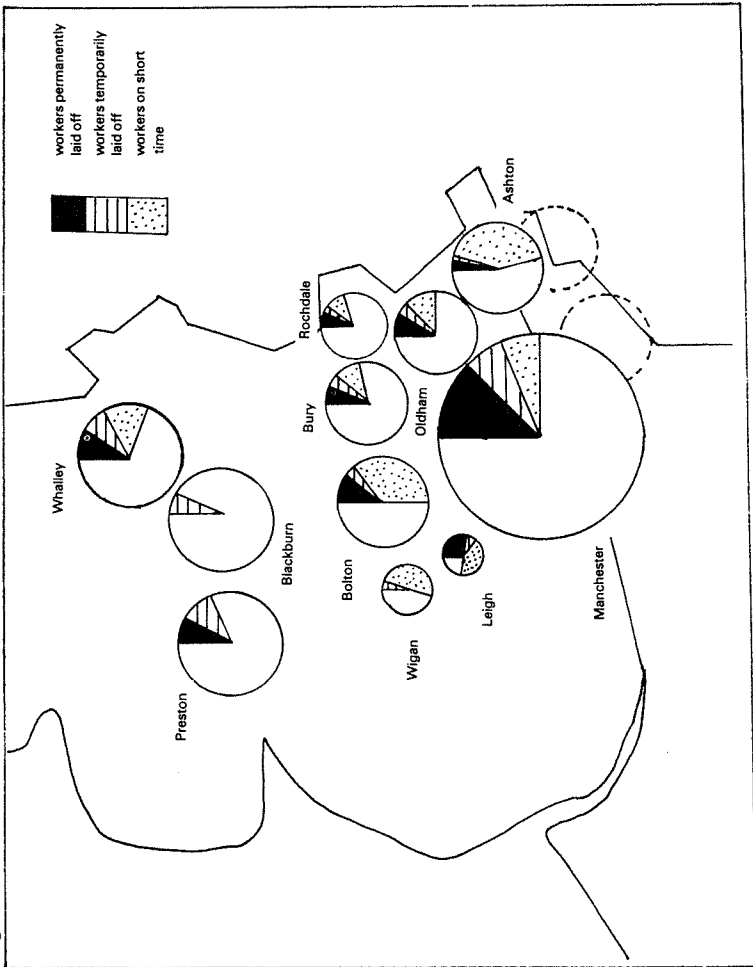
'Wages must go down'

In 1841 the cotton industry entered a period of unprecedented depression. In the autumn of that year the factory inspectors conducted a survey of the scale of unemployment and short-time working in Lancashire. In the town worst affected, Leigh, they found that 78 per cent of the cotton workforce was either unemployed or on short time. In some of the bigger centres, the figures were not much better: 58 per cent in Wigan, 50 per cent in Bolton and 48 per cent in Ashton. In Manchester a significant group of firms – previously employing 15 per cent of the labour force – had either closed or gone bankrupt altogether (Figure 6).¹²

In these circumstances, with acute 'overproduction' and cut-throat competition, employers adopted their usual remedy. Across Lancashire we find 1841 marked by a bitter struggle to enforce yet another round of wage cuts – which, added to the effects of short-time working, faced many families with complete destitution.

In January–February 1841 the owner of a large factory built in order to gather labour from Droylsden and the villages around, and in which whole families worked, demanded a reduction from his power loom operatives of 5s from every four loom weaver. To achieve this aim he employed every trick there was in strike breaking. He stopped the factory on the day before the strike was to start, thereby weavers who were unable to finish their cuts if they went on strike lost one, two, three or four cuts.

Figure 6 Lancashire cotton workers: proportions laid off and on short time, Autumn 1841¹²



He gave notice to quit to all weavers on strike who rented houses from him. He circulated a black list. Police were employed to guard knobsticks (blacklegs) and intimidate strikers. Under pain of dismissal he forced spinners and dressers who were not on strike to send their wives and children into the factory to blackleg. The opening sentence of a news item on the Droylsden turn-out in the *Northern Star* read: 'Droylsden is at this time one scene of poverty, misery, distress, starvation and want in consequence of the late turn-out of the power loom weavers.'¹³

All over the county of Lancashire, and elsewhere, fierce resistance was being put to the incessant demands for wage reductions. Just one or two further examples will suffice. Towards the end of 1841 all spinning mills at Chorley suffered a 12½ per cent reduction, and nine weeks later, in January 1842, one Robert Wallworth gave his spinners notice of a further reduction. It was reported that Wallworth would be followed by all the masters in the town.

At Blackburn some mill operatives had their wages reduced 30 and in some instances as much as 50 per cent, within the first six months of 1842. At Bolton in May 1842, the master spinners discussed wage reductions. Proposals ranged between reductions of 27 per cent and none less than 15 per cent. Eventually most mill owners gave notice of a 12½ per cent reduction, and in the area where the general strike started, as early in the year as the first half of January, the Stalybridge employers proposed wage reductions, and a mass meeting of operatives in the Town Hall considered, 'means to be adopted to avoid so disastrous an event'.¹⁴ At Ashton-under-Lyne a few weeks later, the master spinners and manufacturers announced their intention of reducing wages by 10 per cent on twist and 5 per cent on weft.¹⁵

Nor was the slump restricted to cotton. In the first half of 1841 a sixteen-week strike by Lancashire hatters was defeated and their wages were cut. Over the same period there were bitter strikes among coalminers in Lancashire and the Midlands to resist wage reductions. Probably the most keenly felt reductions were those in the previously secure and well-paid engineering crafts. With the export of textile machinery still prohibited, any recession in the home cotton industry brought widespread unemployment.

John Sharp, head of the firm Sharp, Roberts of Manchester, 'the largest machinists in that town and consequently in the world', addressed a national conference of the Anti-Corn Law League in July 1842, a few days before the general strike began. Among other things, he said, 'Continental rivals were making greater strides in mechanism than could be expected, and they were yearly advancing to perfection.' If restriction on free interchange continued, '... the inevitable result must be the stagnation and ruin of our own manufacturers . . . it being impossible for the British to compete with the foreign artizan while trade remained at its present level.' With the help of Mr Cobden, MP and others in the form of questions, Mr Sharp stated, 'That the wages of the workers in their trade must go down. Last week they had given notice of their intention to reduce the wages of their men this week, (hear, hear); and they had shortened the hours of labour (hear, hear). They had gone down 20 per cent from what they were four weeks ago; and in four weeks more they would, if no change for the better took place, be decreased by at least 35 or 40 per cent, (hear, hear).'

It is not without significance that the engineering workers of Sharp, Roberts and Company responded to this speech and did not wait for any plugs to be pulled, but came out on strike. To their credit they played an important part in organizing and leading the strike (Alexander Hutchinson, who was chairman of the trades conference, was one of their leaders). Neither can we ignore the fact that this speech which was made some two weeks before the strike started, received it seems, from the report in the *Guardian*, unanimous endorsement. The emphatic wage cutting declarations of Mr Sharp, brought 'hear, hears'. If we add to this the uncompromising statement of Mr John Bright – at the same conference – in response to two letters, one from Mr O'Connell, MP and the other from Mr Joseph Sturge, both suggesting cooperation in campaigning for the extension of the suffrage as a means of obtaining, '... the just rights of the people', Mr Bright declared, '... that he would regard it as treachery of the grossest and basest character . . . if they were to withdraw . . . (from the) . . . one measure – one object before them (Repeal of the Corn Laws) . . . they would not be justified in mixing up with any other object'.¹⁶ This statement was in line with his attitude on wages contained in an address to the working men of

Rochdale, which he issued three weeks later towards the end of the first week of the strike.

These two speeches could have no other effect than to tell the workers that their wages had to, and would come down, and that they could expect no help whatsoever from the middle classes, in their desperate struggle to prevent further deterioration in their living standards. In turn this meant that only massive action – such as a general strike – could be of help to them.

In the trial of Feargus O'Connor and the fifty-eight others, the wages position as presented by the defendants was generally accepted by the judge and the prosecution. The judge, in his summing up, said: 'I should say, as a jurymen, that the weight of evidence is strongly that the workmen are now getting much less wages than formerly.' He hastened to add, 'That, however, has no earthly bearing upon the point of Law.'¹⁷

In fact the Attorney-General, in his opening address to the Court and before any of the defendants had spoken, stated: 'It appears there had been some reductions made by the masters in the wages of those employed; I think there had been as many as two or three reductions and the last preceding reductions had been carried into effect in the month of April, in the last year.' (1842).¹⁸

This was the immediate background to the outbreak of the strike.

NOTES

1. J. F. C. Harrison, *The Early Victorians 1832–1851*, London, 1967, p. 34
2. *op. cit.*, p. 92.
3. W. Cooke Taylor, *Notes of a Tour of the Manufacturing Districts of Lancashire*, London, 1842, p. 195.
4. The slogans come from reports in, respectively, *Advertiser*, 30 April 1842; Cooke Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 68–9; and *Northern Star*, 23 July 1842.
5. *Northern Star*, 30 October 1841.
6. Figures for coal (1840–1), iron (1840–4), and raw cotton (1835–44), come from B. Mitchell, *Economic History of Europe: Statistical Appendix*, Vol. IV, London, 1971, pp. 37, 40, 47. The figures for steam engines (1840) are from D. Landes, 'Technological change and development in Western Europe 1750–1914', *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, Vol. VI, H. Habakkuk (ed.), Cambridge, 1965, p. 449.

7. Numbers in each occupation by county from 1841 census. Cotton workers include *all* sections of the labour force including handloom weavers, pp. 1844, XXVII.
8. Numbers by county (with a minimum of 500 qualifying for entry for metal miners and a minimum of 2,000 for metal workers). Metal miners includes *all* types of metal mining (iron, lead, tin, copper) and metal workers includes all occupations and crafts working on metal, pp. 1844, XXVII.
9. Factory Inspectors' report for half year ending 31 December 1841, pp. 1842, XXII. The factories were visited between 15 September and 31 December 1841.
10. Figures for Lancashire from the evidence of Jenkinson, appendix 2, 'First Report of the SC Export of Machinery, 1841', pp. 1841, VII, p. 230; figures for Yorkshire from evidence of Fairbairn, 'Second Report of SC Export of Machinery, 1841', pp. 1841, VII, p. 105.
11. *The Trial of Feargus O'Connor and 58 Others*, pp. 85-8, 279 (hereafter *Trial*).
12. Factory Inspectors' reports for half year ending 31 December 1841, pp. 1842, XXII. Short time is classified as all factories working under 69 hours a week.
13. *Northern Star*, 13 February 1841, 11 March 1841, 22 May 1841, 3 July 1841, 27 November 1841, 22 June 1841.
14. *Advertiser*, 21 May 1842, 4 June 1842, 15 January 1842.
15. *Guardian*, 12 March 1842.
16. *ibid.*, 23 July 1842.
17. *Trial*, p. 369.
18. *ibid.*, p. 3.

The Turn-out

The Strike Movement starts among the Staffordshire miners

The preceding pages have given some indication of the conditions of the working class in the years prior to 1842. They have also given a picture of the workers' struggles for a reasonable standard of life; of the building of trade unions and other forms of organization to help them win their aims and achieve the means for their protection.

The General Strike of 1842 was of nationwide proportions with its centre in Lancashire. A few weeks before the Lancashire cotton workers went into action, there was a strike of colliers in the Staffordshire area. The immediate cause of the strike was a proposal to reduce the wages of the colliers by 7d a day. On the 18 July 1842, a mass meeting of men at Hanley passed four resolutions and issued the following statement:

The colliers have agreed to the following terms, which will be the only condition on which they will resume work.

1. That we agree to work nine hours for one day's work, including one hour's cessation for food; that we receive for one day's labour the sum of 4s per day, together with our burn coal.
2. That each and every master pay in cash weekly the wages due for labour performed; and that the custom now practiced by many masters, which is only a continuation of the truck system in disguise, be immediately discontinued.
3. That until the whole of the masters agree to these just and fair propositions, the whole of the men shall stand out from work, let the consequences be what they may.

The fourth resolution warned against misdemeanour and imposters soliciting contributions.¹ A few days later two more resolutions were added:

1. That the masters who had acceded their just demands be allowed to draw stock for their water engines, providing they do not supply any other persons with same, and

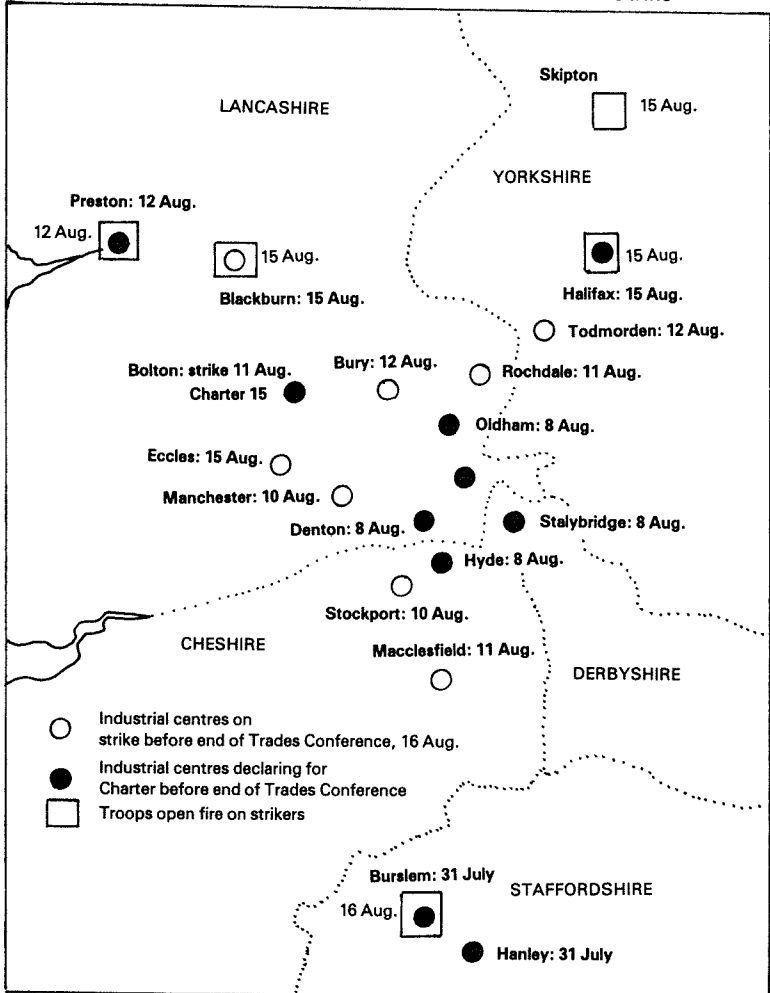
2. That five nights' work shall be paid for as six days' work, as usual without interruption.²

The strike spread through the Staffordshire coalfields as the owners pushed on with their attempts to get a reduction. The miners were even more determined to get their 4s per day, and the eight-hour day. In the main centres resolutions supporting the miners' demands were passed. The unemployed colliers at Hanley passed a resolution which read: 'That it is the opinion of this meeting, that nothing but the People's Charter can give us the power to have "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work"'.³ A great procession and mass meeting of paupers at Burslem (2,000 in the procession with band and 10,000 at the meeting) on Sunday, 31 July 1842, also passed a resolution calling for the People's Charter to become the law of the land, as a means of solving their problems.⁴

The miners were active and vigorous. They marched from pit to pit and from town to town. They marched northwards reaching Poynton, near Stockport, and westwards to Shropshire, closing down the pits.⁵ They organized impressive processions and meetings. The *Northern Star*, 23 July, reported that the turn-outs 'assembled (Wednesday 20 July) in great numbers and their line of muster if not of march, extended from Tunstal to Lane End, a distance of at least seven miles'.

The employers in the form of the magistrates were alarmed at the spread of the strike. They organized the swearing in of special constables, and they called the military in to deal with the 'Lawless mobs', the 'colliers and other desperate characters'. When the determination of the men and their pent-up anger responded to petty provocation and provocative arrests by window breaking, the setting free of prisoners at local police stations, the destruction of local police papers and records and the occasional setting fire to the property of particularly pernicious individuals, the inevitable happened. At Burslem, on Tuesday 16 August, after the beginning of the General Strike, there was a confrontation between a large 'mob' and a company of 33 dragoons. The Riot Act was read but the mob stood firm. The order to fire was given. The men in front were the leaders and one was more prominent than the rest. 'This man was aimed at as their leader and a dragoon with his carbine shot him

Figure 7 Early development of 1842 General Strike



through the head and his brains were literally blown out, with a hole as large as an egg, in a mass. The rest were rode over and dispersed like the wind. Many wounded were got away. . . .’ Such was the factual report in the *Manchester and Salford Advertiser* of 20 August 1842. The *Northern Star* of the same date reported these events and commented, ‘Thus proving that the ruling few are determined, at all hazards, to perpetuate their rule over the sons of labour.’

In spite of the terrible situation the miners found themselves in, they seemed to be able to retain a sense of humour – or was it a sense of deadly earnestness? At Burslem there had been an incident in which the police had confiscated collecting boxes. The *Northern Star* of 20 August reported the incident and concluded: ‘Posters are out offering £20 reward for the apprehension of the parties offending, on the Saturday night; and others are also out on the part of the turn-outs, offering £100 for the head of the first informer.’ The reporter added: ‘All is confusion.’

The miners’ struggle against continuous wage cutting and for reasonable wages and working conditions was not confined to the Midlands collieries. Extensive strike action took place in the Scottish coalfield, parallel with the Staffordshire turn-out. In a letter in the *Northern Star* of 13 August 1842 the secretary of the Airdrie Miners reported that thirty-two coal and ironstone pits were out in Holytown, forty-three in Coatbridge and twenty-eight in the Glasgow district, involving some 13,000 colliers. He adds that the strike was affecting East and Midlothian, Fife and Falkirk mining district. The miners demands were for the 4s per day and ‘our original weight, payment of our wages in money, without percentage . . . that we never cease our agitation until the Charter becomes the law of the land’. They also decided to form, ‘. . . Support Committees, who will grant Bills payable three or six months after date to those who have already offered victuals from their shops on the head of such security’.

However, some days before the Scots miners came out on strike, the cotton workers of Lancashire were already on the march.

Storm-centre of the strike: South-East Lancashire

During the month of July there had been a series of demands for reductions in wages on account of 'bad trade'. This was general at least in the Lancashire area. There were meetings of workers in particular factories. There were trades meetings and there were resolutions calling for resistance to reductions. There were resolutions for the ten-hour day, for ending the use of female and child workers as cheap labour, for the ending of fining and of truck, for ending the payment of wages fortnightly and even monthly, and for ending the payment of exorbitant rents for company cottages. There was a growing number of resolutions supporting the People's Charter as a means of bringing about the changes all the other resolutions were enumerating or demanding. Throughout this period there was intense activity on the part of the local trade union and Chartist leaders.

It was in this atmosphere of mounting tension that a number of masters in Stalybridge and Ashton-under-Lyne gave notice of reduction of wages by 25 per cent. The reaction of the operatives was one of anger. In Ashton, Stalybridge, Dukinfield and Hyde, public meetings were held condemning the reductions, threatening strike action and in some cases, calling for, 'A fair day's wage for a fair day's work' and for the People's Charter.

In the files of the Home Office is a placard which announced that a public meeting would be held on Tuesday 26 July at Ashton, called by the workers of Reyner's Mill, 'for the purpose of taking into consideration the propriety of stopping work until we obtain a fair day's wage for a fair day's work . . . By order of the Committee of Factory Operatives'. This placard is headed, '*Behold the Reckoning Day is Nigh*'. According to the *Advertiser* of 6 August, 6,000 were present. William Woodruffe⁶ of Ashton was chairman of the meeting.⁷ Woodruffe, a Chartist, was to be a delegate to the National Charter Association conference in Manchester on 16–17 August 1842. He was at the same time to be a delegate from the Ashton Cordwainers to the Great Delegate Trades Conference on the 15 and 16 August 1842. In opening the meeting he urged the people to stop work until they could get a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. He then introduced Mr William Aitken, an Ashton schoolmaster

and Chartist who was also to be a delegate to the National Charter Association conference 16–17 August at Manchester. In his speech Aitken, according to the Attorney-General at O'Connor's trial, advised, 'the cotton lords to keep within the precincts of their own palaces, as the dark nights were coming on and some bold hand more daring than the rest would reckon with them, for the reckoning day was near and a bloody reckoning it was likely to be'. According to a prosecution witness at O'Connor's trial he spoke, 'on the Charter and different things a considerable time'. Richard Pilling was the next speaker. In addition to making a speech, Pilling moved the following resolution: 'That the wages at present received were not sufficient to afford them that sustenance which nature requires; and that this meeting pledges itself that should the slightest reduction be again offered in this district, they will cease working until they can receive a fair day's wage for a fair day's work.' The resolution was carried amidst the most thundering applause. (According to a letter in the *Guardian*, 7 September 1842, a resolution calling for the Charter and for 10,000 stand of arms to compel the Corn Law repealers to pay income tax, were also passed.)⁸

Three days later on Friday 29 July, a public meeting took place on the Haigh, Stalybridge. James Fenton (Stalybridge shoemaker, described as one of 'Feergus's dupes') was in the chair. Alexander Challenger, a Chartist, spoke. He was a factory operative, and with the turn-out in Ashton he was made secretary to the weavers. He moved a resolution to the effect that a reduction in wages not only harmed labourers but shopkeepers and the whole community. Pilling moved a resolution which embodied similar points to the first resolution, but expressed the opinion that a fair day's wages could not be obtained without the Charter being made the law of the land. Both resolutions were carried unanimously. A third resolution was proposed by P. W. Brophy, a Chartist lecturer. This called for a memorial to be drawn up and presented to Sir Robert Peel for 10,000 stand of arms to be raised, to protect the lives and property of the working class against those who refused to pay the property tax. William Stephenson of Stalybridge, a Chartist who had been nominated for the general council of the National

Charter Association, and Thomas Storah of Ashton, also a Chartist and an operative, who seconded Brophy's resolution, were the other speakers at this meeting.⁹

A further three days later, on Monday 1 August, another meeting took place, this time near the Sportsman's Inn, Hyde. The meeting was called by the bellman of Hyde, Mr William Muirhouse, a local Chartist. The chairman of the meeting was George Candelet, a Chartist and factory worker who represented the Hyde factory operatives at the Great Delegate Trades Conference on 15–16 August. Candelet moved a resolution to the effect that if there was another reduction of wages offered by their masters would they one and all turn out? The resolution was carried amid cries of, 'Yes, yes.' In his speech he said – according to Wm Clayton, constable of Hyde – 'I hope you men of Hyde will be true to one another and then we will soon have our rights; that will be the Charter and nothing but the Charter.' The other speakers were John Leach of Hyde, tailor, delegate to the Chartist conference of 16–17 August, and co-delegate with Candelet at the Great Delegate Conference, and Robert Wilde and William Muirhouse.¹⁰

On the second or third August, a day or two after the Hyde meeting, a further meeting was held, this time at another town, Dukinfield. The meeting was at Hall Green and there were over 1,000 present. The chair was taken by Robert Wilde and Pilling and Challenger moved and seconded the principal resolution and were the main speakers. The resolution was: 'That if the masters persisted in the abatement the people should turn out and stop out until they got a fair day's wage and until the Charter became the law of the land.' Stephenson and Storah also spoke.¹¹

How deep the feeling was among the workers can be gauged by what happened as a result of the four meetings we have just described. Following the meeting at Ashton on 26 July, and the expiration of Reyner's notice, plus a day or two of strike action, Reyner's withdrew their reduction notice. This was quickly followed by some of the other firms withdrawing their notices. In the case of Lees they restored the cut. This was accomplished by Thursday 4 August. Bayley's notice did not expire till the following day, Friday 5 August. On Thursday 4 August, the weavers and others employed by Bayley's turned out in

consequence of the notice of 25 per cent reduction. A meeting was held and it was decided that the whole of the hands in the town of Stalybridge should cease work and that an aggregate meeting be held on Monday 8 August at five o'clock in the morning. On the following day, Friday 5 August, a deputation of Bayley's workers, according to the *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 19 August, 'appointed by the weavers in the employ of Bayleys waited upon them (the owners) and desired that no reduction might be made . . .', and that if the reductions were enforced they would resist such a measure. One of the firm told them that if they refused their terms they had better play awhile – which would perhaps alter their resolution. The *Guardian* reported: 'As soon as the men heard this, without waiting for any formal answer to their application, they set up a shout and the whole of the hands immediately left the mill, for which, in fact, they appear to have merely wanted an excuse' (10 August).

The Bayley workers formed up and marched in procession to Cheetham's Mill, sat opposite the mill for a short while and then marched up to the Haigh to hold a meeting with James Fenton in the chair and Thomas Mahon, John Durham and William Stephenson as speakers. They adjourned, deciding to meet again in the evening. They met, as arranged, and the same four speakers plus Patrick Murphy Brophy addressed them, calling for a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, and for the Charter. The meeting ended about ten o'clock with a decision to meet again the following morning at five o'clock. On Saturday 6 August, they met again, formed into a procession 1,500–1,600 strong and marched through Dukinfield to Hyde, returning through Newton. As they approached the mills in these towns the operatives stopped work, turned out and joined the march back to Stalybridge where they dispersed to go to the various mills to collect their wages. They agreed to meet again in the evening. Between 8–10,000 were present at that evening meeting. Fenton was in the chair and the same speakers as at the previous meetings addressed them. The meeting lasted about two and a half hours and they agreed to meet the following morning at Mottram Moor.¹²

At 10.30 on the Sunday morning, 7 August 1842, several thousand assembled in Mottram Moor where for years the Chartists had held their camp meetings. Mottram Moor was

three and a half miles from Stalybridge and a similar distance from Hyde. It was four miles from Ashton. There were two meetings on the Moor that day and William Muirhouse, the Hyde Chartist bellman was chairman at both. At the morning meeting, in addition to Muirhouse, George Candelet, Robert Wilde and William Stephenson addressed the meeting. At the afternoon meeting, in addition to these four there were four more speakers: Thomas Storah, Thomas Mahon, John Crossley (of Stalybridge) and John Leach.

In opening the morning meeting Muirhouse set the tone of the two meetings which were to play such an important role in the commencement and direction of the General Strike. He said, 'My friends and fellow workmen, I . . . must inform you that we are not met here for a wage question, or for a religious question. . . . It is a national question.' At the afternoon meeting, attended by 3-4,000, according to a police witness at the trial of Feargus O'Connor, and described by Mark Hovell as a great meeting of the Lancashire and Cheshire strikers on Mottram Moor on 7 August, Muirhouse again opened the meeting and informed the audience that he had a resolution to put to them: That the people of England were to give over work till such time as they got a fair day's wage for a fair day's work and the Charter becomes the law of the land. John Leach spoke of the church as an open hell, filled by cotton lords who are a set of thieves and rogues, and exhorting his audience not to damage property or persons; but above all to keep out of public houses. He informed them that 'tomorrow there will be a general turnout in both counties of Cheshire and Lancashire and the Charter will then be obtained'.

John Leach's statement that a general strike would commence the following morning, Monday 8 August, may or may not have come as a surprise to his audience, but was certainly the first public announcement of such a strike. To reinforce Leach's statement, Muirhouse in his closing remarks said:

You people have been told the evils that we labour under and I am requested also to tell you that tomorrow a meeting will take place at Stalybridge at five o'clock in the morning, when we will proceed from factory to factory, and all hands that will not willingly come out we will turn them out. And, friends, when we are out, we will

remain out, until the Charter which is the only guarantee you have for your wages, becomes the law of the land. I hope to meet you all tomorrow morning at Stalybridge; when we will join hand in hand at this Great National turn-out.¹³

The above account of the events that led up to the actual start of the General Strike brings to an end the preparatory stage of the strike. It also must seriously undermine the long held theory that the strike was a spontaneous outburst. Linked with part of this preparatory period was the expression of tendencies that formed themselves into attitudes that persisted throughout the strike and it would be just as well to note them now. There does not seem to be much doubt that the local Chartist leaders of this group of associated towns – Dukinfield, Ashton, Stalybridge and Hyde had decided upon a general strike as the only possible answer to the continuous cutting of wages: a general strike for the People's Charter.

Was their attitude irresponsible and idealistic, or wholly disruptive? Was this the attitude of the workers in their refusal to accept wage reductions, and their demands for a fair wage simply disruptive? If you read the *Guardian* editorials of the time, you would definitely think so. The editorial in its issue of Wednesday 10 August 1842 stated that these Chartist leaders found the reduction that Bayleys demanded, 'an excellent pretext for carrying out these plans into execution'. It accused them of being 'a set of political cobblers, hatters and others, who have no connection with the cotton business [and who] took upon themselves all the talking and ranted in furious style about the "millowner tyrants" and "oppressers"'.¹⁴ It accused the Bayley workers of speaking 'cavalierly' to the Bayley partner on that fateful Friday, and as a result, provoking the Bayley partner to tell them to go and play for a few days. The editorial notes that the workers went off without waiting for a formal reply, but does not note that the partner never volunteered a formal reply in spite of the fact that the editorial suggests, 'it was the intention of the firm, after what had occurred to their neighbours, not to persist in the notice they had given'.¹⁵

This latter fateful incident has been used to suggest that the workers were dupes of the Chartist leaders. Apart from an occasional expression of sympathy for the distressed operatives and some suggestion that they deserved more pay, the advocates

of this 'spontaneous outburst' theory just fail to recognize the workers as serious and sober, having stood all they could, and now taking action to achieve the programme of demands which would give them the minimum standards of livelihood and a basic legal protection for their gains. The workers' case is never stated (outside the workers' progressive press and publications) and therefore it is never thought necessary to answer it. Awkward points do, however, sometimes arise. The Attorney-General in his opening speech at the Trial of Feargus O'Connor and the fifty-eight others referred to the meeting between the Bayley operatives and the representatives of the management on Friday 5 August and said: '... a sort of meeting of the masters and men at that factory occurred at which something was said that gave offence to the men. I can hardly suppose that it was intended to give that offence.' Was it not offensive to refuse to withdraw a 25 per cent wage cut and to tell half-starved workers to go and play for a few days (or was it a month)? The question really becomes – who started the strike – the stubborn attitude of the Bayleys or the irresponsibility of the operatives?

A. G. Rose tells us that at that Friday meeting at Bayleys', Mr William Bayley who met the operatives did not know that Lees had agreed to restore the wage cut (Lees' decision was announced on the Thursday), and the workers did not tell him of this. Now what is puzzling is how it came about that some hundreds of workers employed by the two firms knew of Lees' decision, but the head and member of the management of Bayleys did not know. In so far as the workers are being accused of keeping it a secret, they are also being accused of closing a possible door to the withdrawal of the notice of reduction, and ultimately of being responsible for the breakdown of negotiations and for the strike. Rose continues the story. On the Sunday night, 7 August, after the meeting on the Friday, the procession and turn-outs of the Saturday, the mass meetings on Saturday night and the two mass meetings on Sunday on Mottram Moor, William Bayley went to the committee of operatives at the Moulders Arms, Stalybridge and expressed a wish to see them as '... he wanted to withdraw his notice of reduction. One Mahon said, "They had come out for the Charter. They would stick to it." The Chartists had grasped an opportunity and meant to keep it.' F. C. Mather, in spite of

stating that it was the stubbornness of the Bayleys that was immediately responsible for the outbreak in Lancashire, nevertheless states that it was the men who refused the olive branch. He recommends Rose, 'for convincing proof of this'.¹⁶

There is, however, one more piece of evidence on this problem, which gives a completely different story. The source is *The Trial of Feargus O'Connor and the 58 Others*. O'Connor is cross-examining a prosecution witness:

Mr O'Connor: Now are you aware, or have you understood that all the hands in Bayleys' Mills received notice to leave their work? Were they under notice if they did not consent to a reduction of 25 per cent on their wages?

Witness: Yes.

Mr O'Connor: If they did not consent to a reduction they were to give over?

Witness: Yes.

Mr O'Connor: Then you spoke of several gatherings of Bayley's men being in advance of the processions and taking part in the turn-out?

Witness: Yes, they were always the first.

Mr O'Connor: Now I understand you to say, that when a proposition was made for them to return to their work, that they said there was no use in doing so, because the masters said that they (*the hands*) should remain out for a month?

Witness: Yes.

Mr O'Connor (*turning to the Judge*): This, my Lord, I put because Sir Gregory Lewin seemed to think, from what the witness said, that it was the men themselves who refused to go back.

The Judge (*to the Witness*): Was that the way you put it?

Witness: Yes my Lord, they (*the mill hands*) said there was no use in going back because the mill doors were locked.

Mr O'Connor: Did not Bayley's hands go up in a body to request to be admitted to work?

Witness: Yes.

The Judge: Did you see them going?

Witness: I did.

There is evidence to suggest that the Anti-Corn Law Repealing employers did want to provoke the workers into taking strike action in order to force the government to repeal the Corn Laws. But whatever the political motivation of these employers there is no doubt that the employers in the Ashton,

Stalybridge area, Tory and Free Trade alike, were united on reducing wages and in thinking that the operatives, in view of their stubbornness, had to be taught a lesson, and that after a month out of employment they would come back starving and begging.¹⁷

One cannot help contrasting this inhuman penny-grabbing attitude of the employers with the long-suffering, patient and dignified attitude of the operatives. Winifred Bowman,¹⁸ dealing with the events leading up to the General Strike states, 'Since April 1842, the millowners had actually made two or three reductions in their employees already pitifully inadequate wages . . . By the summer of 1842 hunger, poverty and resentment had brought the people to a state of desperation. . . . Already the angry Ashton crowds had been threatened with bayonets.'

Monday, 8 August 1842: the Strike spreads

The meetings of 26 July and 29 July, 1 and 2 or 3 August ended any wavering among operatives in the individual mills, built up a militant determination not to suffer any further wage reductions and rallied support from workers outside those immediately threatened with reductions. The meetings over the weekend of 6–7 August – the two on Saturday and the two on Sunday – plus the procession on the Saturday, consolidated all this and brought to the notice of tens of thousands, the situation that had developed. The weekend meetings were used to introduce the more far reaching demands for a 'Fair day's wage for a fair day's work', and also to raise as an aim of the immediate struggle the demand for the People's Charter to be made the law of the land. To these many thousands, the local leaders of the Chartists and the workers announced and made public their plans for starting the General Strike.

At five in the morning of Monday 8 August, some 2–3,000 workers (according to the Attorney-General) gathered at the Haigh, Stalybridge. The core of this crowd was the Bayley workforce, plus workers who had turned out on the Saturday as a result of the procession of the Bayley workpeople. They were not bewildered people taking part in a sudden outburst, ready, wildly to lash out at anything in their way – or easy prey for

'political cobblers and hatters', as some would have us believe. They were sober and serious and had gathered to hear plans to turn out workpeople of the towns and villages of the neighbourhood. They were addressed by Messrs Durham, Crossley, Stephenson, Fenton and P. M. Brophy. The proposals for a procession to march to Dukinfield, Ashton, etc., were agreed to, and the meeting adjourned to re-assemble at 9 o'clock after breakfast, and to have a further meeting on Ashton Market place at 2 o'clock.

When they reassembled – the *Northern Star* estimated that nearly 14,000 people were present – speeches were made urging, among other things, peace, law and order. The crowd formed up and marched to Dukinfield. There were banners and placards carried – two drew particular attention and have received publicity ever since. They read:

*The men of Stalybridge will follow wherever danger points the way.
They that perish by the sword are better than they that perish by hunger.*

As the procession came within hearing distance of a mill, the work people put on their coats, left the mill and joined the procession. At Hindley's mill in Dukinfield, 'when the hands heard the procession coming they stopped the engine and "turned-out" before the procession arrived' (Henry Brierley, prosecution witness at the trial). The manager at Platts Mill (which was next to Bayley's) stated at the trial that he had argued with the turn-outs, but eventually the master gave instructions for the mill gates to be thrown open. At the notorious mill of J. & J. Lees of Stalybridge, the operatives wanted to join the turn-out but the management locked the doors and mill gates and would not permit their workers to leave. A prosecution witness at the trial describes what happened: 'They broke a plank off the gate from top to bottom and then they got in; and they turned the hands out at another door.' By two o'clock every mill and factory in Stalybridge, Ashton-under-Lyne, Dukinfield and some of the manufacturing villages had closed and the workers had joined the turn-out.

At two in the afternoon crowds had gathered on the Ashton market square. Very soon a point was reached where no more people could get into the square. It was agreed that the meeting

should move to a piece of waste ground behind Thackers' Foundry. By three o'clock all had assembled on the foundry waste ground, '... and never was there such a sight in Ashton before! More than 40,000 peaceable, half-starved, ill-clad men, women and children assembled and resolved either to die by the sword or obtain, "A fair day's wage for a fair day's work!"' The meeting was addressed by the same group of speakers as in the morning, but with the addition of Richard Pilling. The speeches called on the turn-outs to be peaceable, but at the same time determined. They exposed the hypocrisy and duplicity of the bosses, to which the workers themselves responded. 'The masters that reduced us most are those who are calling out for "cheap food". We want protection for our labour and we will have it too.'

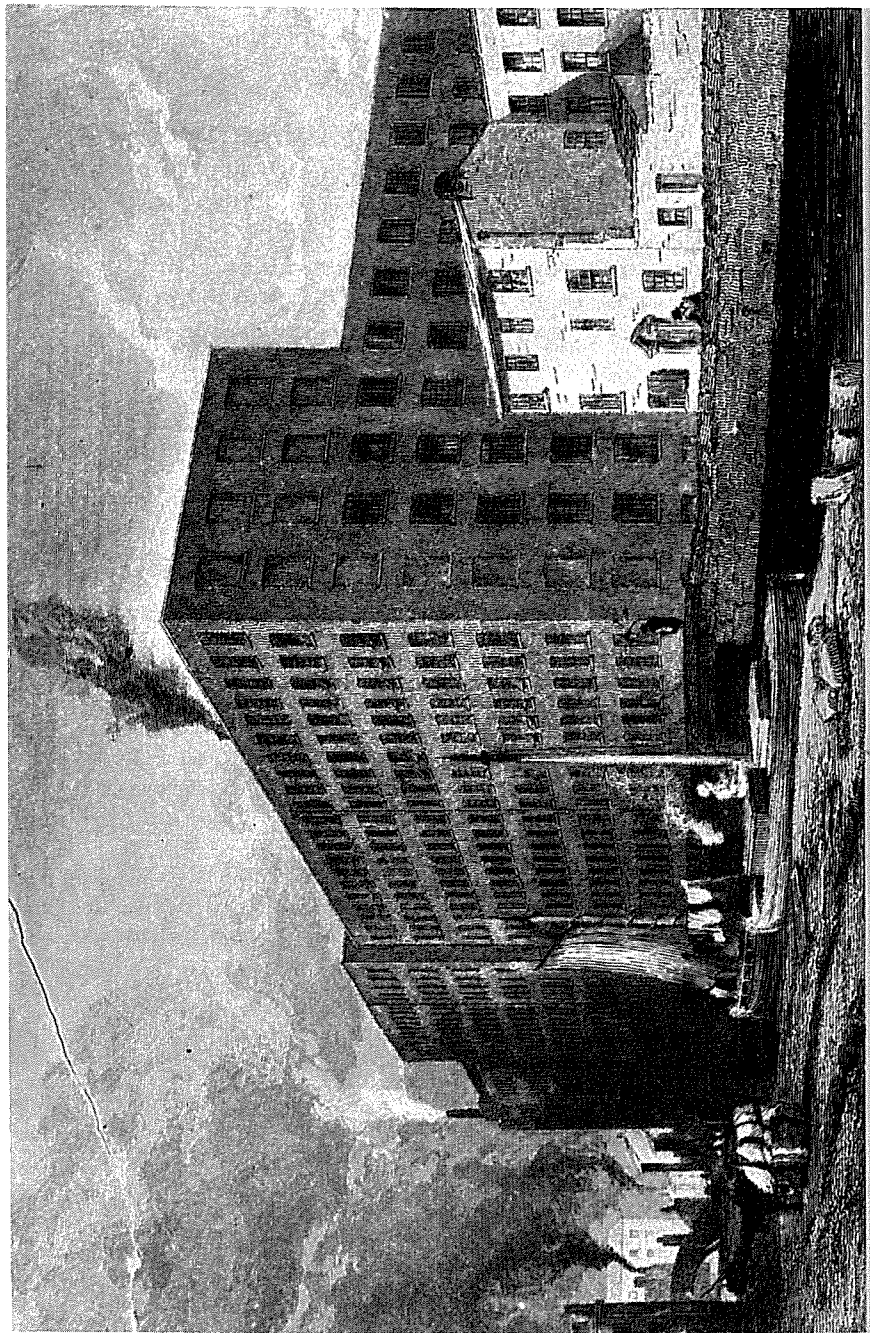
Richard Pilling had proposed that the people of Ashton should go to Oldham and those of Stalybridge and Dukinfield to Hyde. This was agreed, as was the proposal that the people of Stalybridge, Dukinfield and Hyde should meet in Ashton in the morning, Tuesday, at seven o'clock. The two sections separated, one to Hyde and the other to Oldham. The Stalybridge people passed through Hooley Hill and Denton to Hyde, stopping all the mills and where necessary pulling the plugs out of the boilers and so stopping the mill or the factory. They stopped the hatters' factories in this area and the hatters joined the turn-outs. At Hyde they divided into groups and proceeded to turn out the factories and mills in the town. A meeting had been arranged for half past four o'clock on a waste piece of ground near Cheapside, Hyde. By half past four some 12,000 people had assembled. The meeting was addressed by Muirhouse, Stephenson, Durham, Leach (of Hyde), Candelet and Mahon. A resolution was carried unanimously – against threatened reductions. It called upon the middle class to assist working people to obtain political equality; a fair day's wage for a fair day's work and for the Charter to be made the law of the land.¹⁹

Meantime, around four o'clock, the Ashton people, led by Richard Pilling, and numbering some 4–5,000, entered Oldham. They found an immediate response at the first mills they visited. They divided into two groups, one group went to the mills in the King Street area and the other to the west part of the town. At one mill the police decided to defend it against the

turn-outs, as a result of which some windows were broken and a few policemen hurt. Eventually the mill was turned out, as was every other mill visited. At seven o'clock in the evening a meeting was held on Curzon Ground, with between 8–10,000 people present. Speakers from Ashton in addition to local speakers, addressed the crowd. One local Chartist leader, Sam Yardley, advocated a return to work – a policy which he reversed later in the week based upon the open discussion at public mass meetings of factory and mill operatives, arising out of which there was general agreement among all sections to support the strike and no return until the People's Charter became law. Yardley played a leading part in the strike and was one of the forty-nine arrested in Oldham.²⁰ At the end of the meeting everybody dispersed in a quiet and peaceable manner. Earlier in the day, in addition to a large body of special constables and a mounted patrol being sworn in, a request had been sent to Manchester for military assistance. Some time after seven o'clock a body of the First Dragoon Guards, under Lt. Col. Wemyss, the officer commanding all troops in the Manchester area, arrived and stationed themselves in front of the town hall. Apart from the arrest of two turn-outs, the rest of the day passed off without further incident.²¹

Tuesday, 9 August and Wednesday, 10 August – Manchester turns out

On Tuesday 9 August, the second day of the turn out, 'a dense mass of people . . .' (estimated at between 12,000 and 20,000 by Sir Charles Shaw) had assembled in Ashton. A resolution was passed, 'that the people now turned out do not return to their work until the masters give the same prices for weaving, spinning, carding, etc., that they paid in 1840'. A further resolution was carried 'that the meeting form a procession and march into Manchester', which is what they did. They proceeded along the Ashton New Road, and in spite of groups breaking away and turning out mills and factories on the route, they reached the junction of Pollard Street and Great Ancoats Street, near the centre of Manchester, without incident. At Pollard Street they were met by the civil authorities, the police and the military. The civil authorities, in the shape of Daniel Maude, stipendiary magistrate of Manchester, argued with the



Manchester cotton factories. 1825

leaders of the procession, urging them to disperse and go home. The military said they would act if asked by the civil authorities, and the Chief Commissioner of Police of Manchester, Sir Charles Shaw, urged immediate and vigorous action to disperse the 'mob', claiming he and his police force were capable of doing just that.

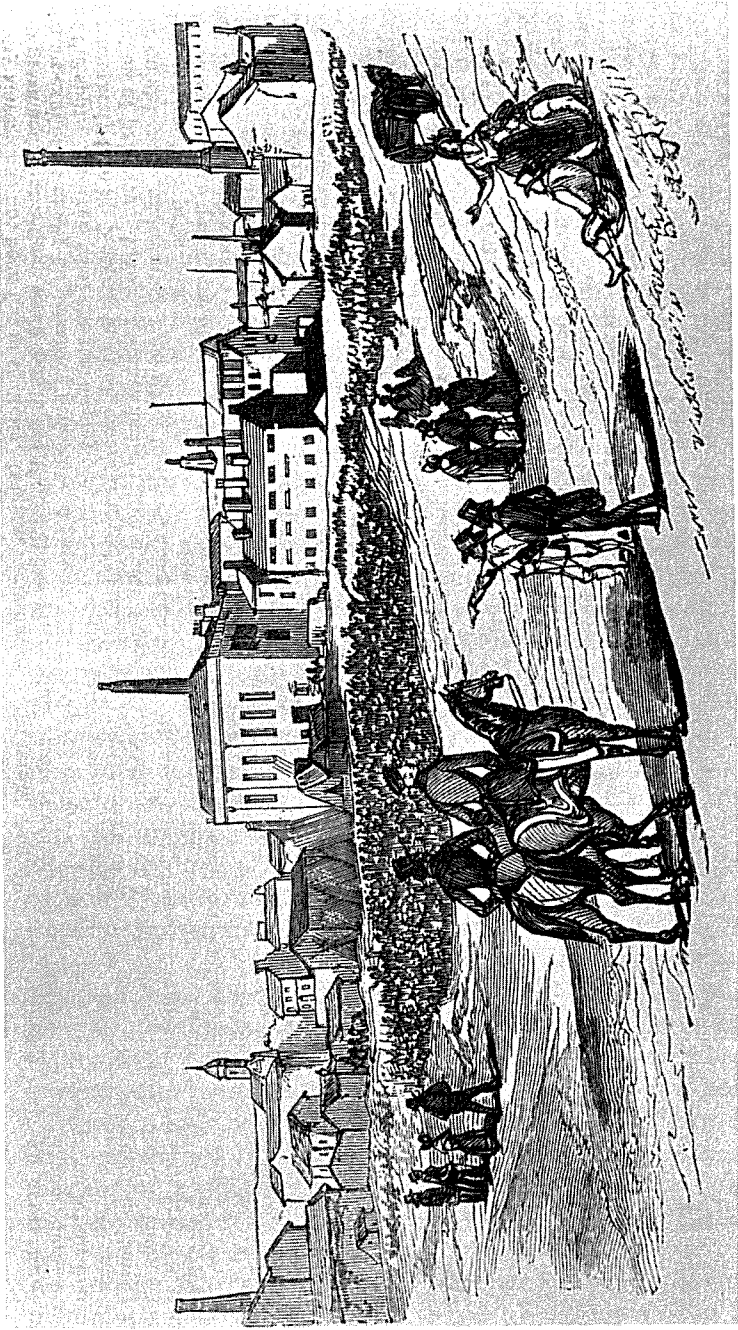
The procession was seen differently through different eyes! Mr Maude, the magistrate, who was there on horseback, said in a letter to the *Guardian*, 27 August 1842, he looked at the procession and saw that 'it was led by a large party of young women very decently dressed. Both they and the men who followed were arranged in regular file, and nothing could be apparently more respectful and peaceable than their demeanour.' (One is reminded of Samuel Bamford's description of the Middleton contingent to Peterloo, 23 years earlier.) The Attorney-General, who was not there and did not see the procession with his own eyes, six months later at the trial of Feargus O'Connor described the scene: '. . . some thousands of persons . . . with a certain description of arms, with bludgeons and banners – having some appearance of military rank and array and order.' At the trial Archibald McMullen, an inspector of the Manchester police force, gave evidence on behalf of the prosecution. In answer to Sir Gregory Lewin, he stated they were four abreast in a procession. They were not arm in arm and there were women among them. There were no banners and no flags. Asked about '. . . arms of any description', he replied, 'some had small sticks in their hands.'

The parley between Maude and the leaders of the procession continued. The workers drew strength from their numbers and their unity, as well as from the justice of their cause. One of their speakers at the meeting held a little later, made it clear that they had not come to destroy property or machinery. Maude was probably a better politician than the soldier or the policeman. He would sense the strength of the workers at that moment, and the last thing he would want would be a show-down in which the military and police charged into a densely packed, unarmed and peaceful crowd, thousands strong, with every possibility of the crowd being unable to go forward and probably unable to go backwards too. When he looked up Pollard Street, he must have had a vision of Peters Field, or did he know that the spirit and

the flesh of Peterloo were there at his elbow, at that corner of Pollard Street and Great Ancoats Street on that Tuesday morning, 9 August 1842?

Colonel Wemyss, commanding officer of all troops in the Manchester area, was confident that he could prevent the crowd from entering the town from Pollard Street, but that some violence would be necessary. He feared that it could result in the crowd getting into town through side streets, probably doing great damage in various parts of the town. On the other hand, Sir Charles Shaw wanted to stop them entering the town. Maude was strong enough to stick to his guns and refused to attack or provoke the crowd. The leader had explained that they had come to see the masters at the Exchange over the wage reductions and that they wanted to hold a meeting in Stevenson Square. Maude placed himself at the head of the procession and led them into and along Great Ancoats Street. As the procession proceeded, Maude decided to check some of the side streets, which he did, and found small parties of turn-outs. Some of these had detached themselves from the procession, others were part of another procession which had come in from Stalybridge along Ashton Old Road. The procession made for Stevenson Square, but this was occupied by the military and at Piccadilly a body of soldiers barred the way to the Exchange. After some consultation they proceeded down Portland Street, at the lower end of which troops were stationed. They turned off at Sackville Street and found themselves on the Granby Row Fields.

A cart was procured and a meeting held. Richard Pilling, who was elected chairman, told of what had happened in Ashton, Stalybridge, Hyde and other towns, giving details of price lists and of reductions the masters had imposed. He told his audience that the strikers were determined never to return to work until the prices of 1840 were restored. It was now around twelve o'clock and the Manchester mills and factories were closing, swelling the crowd to over 20,000. Challenger, Brophy and Leach (of Hyde) were among the speakers. They followed the line of their speeches in the Ashton, Stalybridge and Hyde areas. They had come to obtain the co-operation of the people of Manchester in seeking a fair day's wage for a fair day's labour. At around half past one, after a vote of thanks to the chairman and three 'deafening' cheers for the People's Charter, the



Mass meeting of strikers, 1842

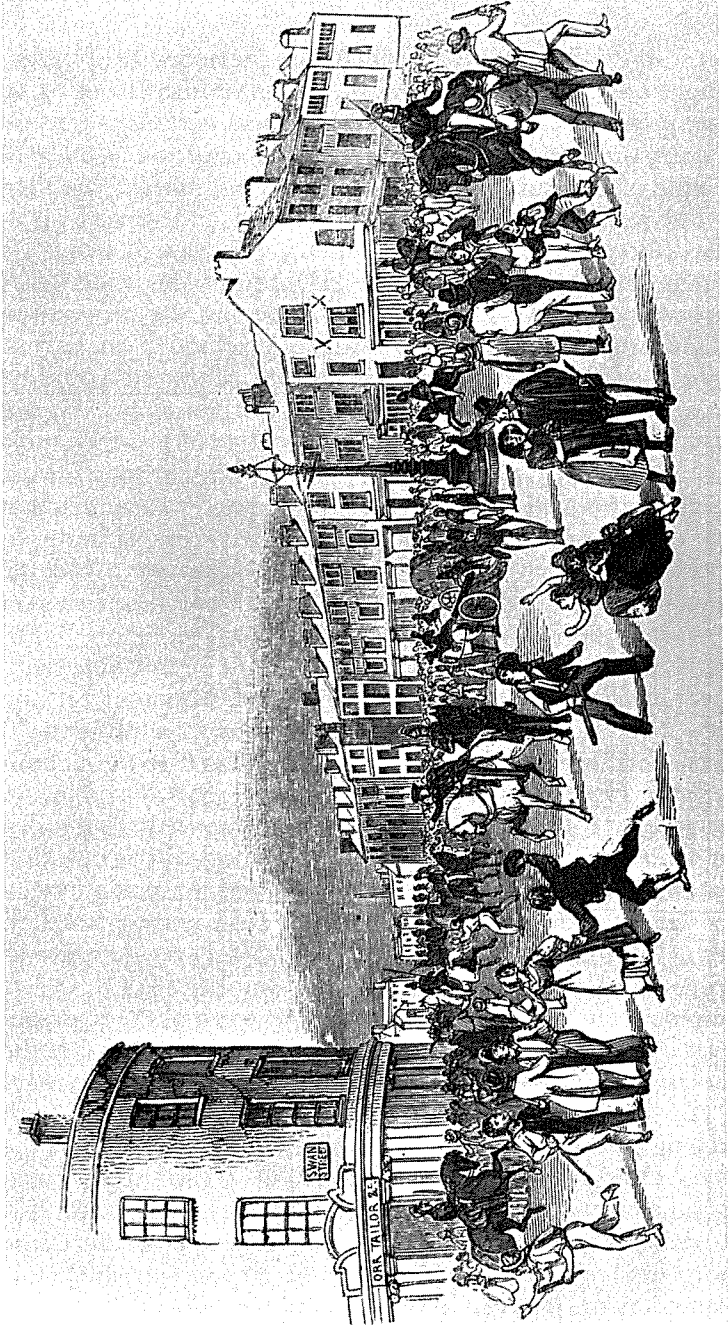
people of Ashton, Stalybridge and Hyde formed up and again in procession, took the road home in a peaceable and orderly manner.²²

'Peaceable and orderly' but only just. For had Sir Charles Shaw had his way there would have been a catastrophe, possibly of greater proportions than Peterloo. Sir Charles was a soldier who had seen service in the Low Countries and in Portugal, and before the General Strike '... Sir Charles Shaw's force at Manchester achieved a high standard of efficiency in dispersing mobs'. Around one o'clock on Monday 8 August, Shaw was informed of what was going on in Ashton and that a request for troops had been made. Later in the day he took it for granted that all was quiet in Ashton. Between nine and ten o'clock he was informed by two police inspectors he had sent to Ashton that all was quiet, that all mills were stopped and that a mass meeting had been arranged for five o'clock the following morning to deliberate as to whether to march to Manchester. He thereupon ordered a horse patrol to be in Ashton at four o'clock in the morning, together with one division of police to be on the Ashton Road at five in the morning. At three in the morning Shaw rose and after ordering a further two divisions of police to form up in Ashton Road and one in reserve behind the infirmary, he galloped to Ashton. He went through Ashton to Stalybridge, where he woke up the man he thought was the cause of the strike, but got little or no information from him. He returned to Ashton, attended the mass meeting, mixed with the crowd and spoke to six men who said they were going to Manchester to turn the 'hands' out there. They preferred death to starvation, they told him.

Shaw galloped back to Manchester where he found the commandant of the military forces and told him what he had seen and done. He impressed on him the great necessity of 'having the fight out of town' and pointed out 'some capital positions on the Ashton Road for a handful of troops to stop any mob'. He wanted the troops instantly on the move. The commandant said he was powerless without a magistrate present. Shaw wrote a letter to the stipendiary magistrate asking him to bring the Riot Act with him as he would find the commandant on the Ashton Road. Shaw, before quitting his office to join the police force, 'entreated the commandant to

impress upon the stipendiary magistrate the necessity of having the fight out of town, and that there was no time to think or argue upon legal technicalities, and to bear seriously in mind that every quarter of an hour spent in deliberation was the gain of a mile of ground to the rioters, if on their march.' He then left, but went to the wrong Ashton Road and turned up at Pollard Street to find that the military were placed in such a manner that the town was safe. He found the stipendiary magistrate in conversation with the leaders of the procession, who informed him that they wanted permission to have a procession through the town, which they promised would be peaceable, and then to return to their homes. Shaw 'reigned back a few paces and said in a loud, distinct voice [which must have been heard by the military], "Sir I must protest in the strongest manner against these people passing."' He added that these very men had told him that they were coming to Manchester to turn out the mills. The magistrate asked the troops to move and placed himself at the head of the procession and started down Great Ancoats Street, whereupon Shaw, drawing back, loudly proclaimed, I 'will not be mixed up with this affair, all [I] can do is count the enemy, who are attacking the town'. A little later Maude spoke to Shaw who told him, 'If you will permit me I will and can stop them, as I have got about 200 police close at hand.' Maude answered 'No, No, No, we must have no collision!' Shaw referred to these events as the 'evil hour' and said that there was 'confusion and disorganization from beginning to end.' (The above extracts are taken from a letter written by Sir Charles Shaw to *The Times* and reprinted in other newspapers. The letter is dated 11 October 1842 and was reprinted in the *Manchester Advertiser* 15 October 1842.)

Immediately below the surface the ugly spirit of the massacre of Peterloo lay seething, seeking to get out to teach again the breadless and voteless masses their place in society. They were the 'enemy attacking the town'. They were 'rioters' although marching peacefully along the highway. An editorial in the *Advertiser*²³ commented that Shaw and those others who demanded a public censure of the authorities felt that the civil and military authorities had '... neglected to seize the opportunity of repeating the Peterloo Massacre, which was presented by the procession of the people of Ashton'.²⁴



Procession of strikers, Manchester, New Cross, 1842

The procession through the centre of Manchester; the mobilization of the police and troops; the visit to the Exchange by some 600 of the turn-outs to the masters, without success; the visits by the turn-outs to the mills and factories on the route to Manchester and in the areas near to the town centre had an electrifying effect on the Manchester workers. By the time the turn-outs had left, many Manchester mills and factories had turned out and, in turn, started turning out other mills and factories. Industrial districts surrounding the town centre like Oldham Road, Great Ancoats Street, Ardwick, Pin Mill Brow and Oxford Road, were visited and most of the workers responded to the calls and turned out without hesitation. Again Mr Maude in the letter referred to above, testifies to the willingness of the workers to turn out. 'Number of mills were turned out with such expedition and by such insignificant bodies, as showed that the hands in [I believe] the majority of instances were ready to go out at the first invitation, and rendered it generally impossible for any force to be brought to the required point in time to prevent such a result.'

While it took only minutes to empty most of the mills and factories, there were some where the management refused either to let the turn-outs talk to their 'hands', or locked the 'hands' in, and refused to let them out. At Melton's timber yard the foreman, Mr Turnbull refused to let the men out. He was hurt in the scuffle that followed and the sawing machine destroyed. At Preston's spindle shop in Pin Mill Brow, the windows were smashed. At Messrs Stirling and Beckton, the turn-outs met with opposition and some windows were broken. At the Oxford Road Twist Company the lodge was completely gutted, but the mill was untouched. The workers had turned out. Around four o'clock crowds of turn-outs had reached Oxford Street and the Birley Mills. Here the management had succeeded in closing and barricading doors and gates and hose pipes were turned upon the turn-outs. This produced retaliation; two carts laden with coal were within reach and soon emptied and some hundreds (at the trial it was stated 3-4,000) of windows were smashed. The managers of the mill climbed to the roof and proceeded to hurl heavy pieces of stone, iron and other missiles on to the packed crowds below. A girl of thirteen, a turn-out from a nearby mill, was hit on the head with a stone and at first it

was thought she had been killed, but later reports denied this. The workers gave as much as they got, and much damage was done before the police and military arrived, dispersed the crowd and arrested seven turn-outs.

The *Northern Star* reporter described the scene at the Birley Mill on the following morning: ‘. . . nearly the whole of the windows in that large establishment were broken; and two dwelling houses in which the managers resided, with the lodge, had the entire framework of the windows and doors completely demolished’. That morning the Birley Mill started up with part of the ‘hands’ in, but many were stopped by the mass picketing. Police were brought to the mill. They used their staves and managed to clear the area. Because of the mood of the turn-outs and their resilience, the authorities deemed it necessary to maintain a military guard on the spot, and a body of riflemen together with a troop of dragoons, proceeded to clear all the streets and open spaces around the mill. The soldiers patrolled the neighbourhood all night. By Thursday afternoon the streets around the mill were impassable, jammed with turn-outs. Around three o’clock a fierce battle took place between the turn-outs and the police, the workers being repulsed only when a body of riflemen charged them with fixed bayonets. On the temporary retirement of the military a second and third attack was made by the workers. Many were injured, including a number of police officers.²⁵

By Wednesday night–Thursday morning, Manchester and Salford were at a standstill. Apart from two or three mills where pitched battles with the police and military were fought and bayonet or sabre charges took place, the turn-outs were increasing, were militant, and were living up to their maxim – ‘To die by the sword was better than to die of starvation’. The balance of strength was changing in favour of the turn-outs.

By the evening of Wednesday 10 August, Colonel Warre, the Manchester military commander, was writing to the Home Secretary asking for the immediate dispatch of another battalion of infantry by rail from London:

Applications have been made from Ashton, Oldham, Stalybridge and especially from Stockport requesting the aid and protection of troops, which I am utterly unable to offer them, as I have but a very inadequate force in this town under the altered and excited state of

things from the state of organisation among the working classes . . . I did not expect that a general turn-out of work would take place in the towns of Lancashire to the south of this place . . . and that they should venture to march in bodies into Manchester notwithstanding the police and garrison.²⁶

If large-scale violence was avoided on 9–10 August, it was because the authorities fully appreciated the weakness of their position and not from any wish to avoid confrontation itself. On 12 August, Graham, the Home Secretary, was writing back to Warre in the following terms:

I observe that from want of means to meet the demand for military assistance from distant quarters you have advised the magistrates to 'temporise with the people where they feel themselves unequal to enforce the laws'. It is quite prudent not to bid them to make attempts beyond their strength. But on the other hand I need not remind you that it is inexpedient to check the bold resistance even of individuals to unlawful outrage. . . .²⁷

Until further troops arrived, however, temporization remained the rule, and when the master cotton spinners met at midday on Thursday 11 August under the chairmanship of Richard Birley, the borough reeve, they issued the following statement:

. . . communication had been received from Colonel Wemyss, Mr. Maude and the other magistrates, intimating that they could not give their approbation to any plan with the object of immediately recommencing the working of mills, owing to their not having it in their power to command a force sufficient, in the present condition of the town, to protect the mills and the workmen employed therein.

By the Saturday – that is five days from the start of the turn-out – Birleys were forced to close. On Monday 15 August 1842 they issued a statement in the form of a handbill for distribution among their some 800 'hands' which was reproduced in the press. It read:

Chorlton Mills, August 15th 1842

We have thought it right determinedly to resist the demand and efforts of a lawless mob, and not to cease offering employment to the hands accustomed to work at these mills. In this course we have persisted, from the day when we were attacked, until the close of last week. On Friday and Saturday a large proportion of the hands did not come, and we reluctantly close our mills until we know that we

Printed for Distribution amongst
the Workers employed by Birley & Co. who
pay about 800 weekly.
Chorlton Mills,

August 15, 1842.

We have thought it right determinedly to resist the demands and efforts of a lawless Mob, and not to cease offering employment to the Hands accustomed to work at these Mills. In this course we have persisted from the day when we were attacked until the close of last week. On Friday and Saturday a large proportion of the Hands did not come, and we reluctantly close our Mills until we know that we shall again have *Hands to attend to the Machinery in the various departments.* We lament the necessity for suspending the payment of weekly wages to a large number of usually contented and well conducted individuals, on many of whom others depend for support.

BIRLEY AND CO.

T. BOWLER, PRINTER, ST. ANN'S-SQUARE, MANCHESTER.



Leaflet from Birley and Co.

shall again have hands to attend to the machinery in the various departments. We lament the necessity for suspending the payment of weekly wages to a large number of usually contented and well conducted individuals on many of whom others depended for support.

Birley & Co.

Three weeks later, on 3 September, the *Advertiser* printed the following paragraph:

Yesterday morning Messrs Birley thought it would be prudent to recommence operations and gave orders to the overlookers to be in attendance, with as many hands as they could muster. There are 680 looms in their extensive mills, each person attending to two looms; but only eight persons made their appearance, with which number it was not thought proper to start, and the mills were therefore closed.

The Birleys fought a political class battle, with all the hatred, venom and ruthlessness the early capitalists were capable of. The heads of the Birley concern used every weapon – from locking and barricading doors to prevent their ‘hands’ from joining the turn-outs, to the use of fixed bayonet charges to intimidate the turn-outs and try to destroy their class unity and solidarity, the one weapon which could give them superior strength over their masters, the capitalist class. But class feeling and understanding was so high among these workers at this heightened point of class struggle that even fixed bayonets could not prevent them achieving the closure of the Birley mills. The workers too fought a political class battle as far as the Birley family was concerned. Those first days of the turn-out released the pent up feelings and anger of the working class not only on wages, but also on something that had simmered below the surface for twenty-three years.

The Manchester working class had not forgotten the massacre of Peterloo and they looked upon the head of the Birley family as the person responsible for the senseless brutality that was perpetuated on the crowd on that fateful 16 August 1819. The officer who gave the order to advance was Captain Hugh Hornby Birley, head of the Birley concern. Joyce Marlow describes what happened: ‘With sabres drawn, their sharpened blades flashing ominously in the shimmering sunlight . . . the sixty members of Birley’s troop of the MYC (Manchester

Yeomanry Cavalry) advanced towards the hustings . . . with ranks broken it was every cavalry man for himself, each vieing with the other for the honour of being the first to reach the hustings and drag the radical scum into captivity . . . Birley was among the first to reach the hustings.' On the storm that followed Joyce Marlow comments, 'Hugh Hornby Birley rode the storm with aplomb. Given the same circumstances he would act in the same manner. His critics were either making political capital or were Radical trash.' Hugh Hornby Birley was promoted from Captain to Major, and on the occasion of the failure of a private legal action against him arising out of the massacre, the Manchester Yeomanry Cavalry presented him with an inscribed sword ' . . . in testimony of their esteem for him as a soldier and gentleman'. He was the first president of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce. Even in this vicious battle at Birley's the workers remained peaceable. There was no wanton destruction, there were no burnings. Material damage or physical hurt arose out of the use of brute force against them.²⁸

Let us return to the mainstream of the turn-out in Manchester. On the Tuesday night (9 August) the Manchester power loom weavers called a meeting of delegates for that night. The notice convening this gave some details of the way the weavers had been treated. In 1839 they had been paid 1s 10d per cut, in August 1842 they were receiving 1s 5d per cut, with the threat of a further reduction of 2d per cut. The delegate meeting decided to hold a mass meeting the following morning at four-thirty. Some 10,000 weavers and others assembled on Granby Row Fields on the Wednesday morning. The speakers included Daniel Donovan, Bernard McCartney, Christopher Doyle, J. Leach (of Hyde). The themes of the speeches were for a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. It was the avarice of the masters that was the cause of their poverty and of the attempt to impose the lowest wage possible. They called for peaceful conduct, to watch out for government spies and not to return to work until their object had been achieved. After the meeting they formed up and marched through the town. They proceeded along London Road, stopped a number of factories, and railway labourers joined them. Around nine o'clock they turned towards Salford forcing the gates across Blackfriars Bridge and made for the

mills in Chapel Street and Greengate where they succeeded in stopping many of them. At one or two factories they came into collision with police which ended with the arrival of the military.

At twelve o'clock a further mass meeting was held at Granby Row Fields. The *Northern Star* reported 15–20,000 present. The speakers were Donovan, P. M. Brophy, Lane and Dixon. The speeches were in line with the theme, that they would rather die than go back to work before they had a fair remuneration for their labour. They agreed to remain out until the prices of 1840 were paid, and to meet again the following day, Thursday at six in the morning. At half past three, that same Wednesday afternoon, a meeting of mechanics on a piece of waste ground near Oxford Road was attacked by a party of dragoons with sabres cutting right and left. With the assistance of a party of the Rifle Brigade, the meeting was soon dispersed, but not before the mechanics had agreed to meet at the Carpenters' Hall at six the following morning. These meetings on the Thursday were followed on the Friday with two parallel conferences of delegates which were amalgamated on the Saturday into one conference, and on the Monday and Tuesday 15 and 16 August the Great Delegate Conference was held. These conferences were the outcome of the pressure of the mass meetings and the sweeping movement of turning out the mills and factories and places of employment. On the Wednesday the workmen of Sharp Roberts and Co., of Faulkner Street, Oxford Road (the largest machine manufacturing works in the world), joined the turn-out. A procession from Manchester to Eccles turned out nearly all the mills and factories in Eccles as well as many on the route. The *Advertiser* reported that the procession was a quarter of a mile long.

Proclamations were issued by the authorities calling for the enrolment of special constables, warning people not to join 'promiscuous' crowds; declaring illegal the turning out of factories and warning all against taking part. Clashes with the police and military were occurring in Great Ancoats Street, and at half-past five in the evening of Wednesday, 10 August, a rather vicious attack was made by the police, using bludgeons and cutlasses against a demonstration consisting mainly of women and girls.

The *Northern Star*, concluding its reports of happenings on

Wednesday 10 August, stated: 'The town is in a state of great excitement. The military and the police are moved from one part of the town to another, in order to disperse the people, but without effect; for as soon as they have accomplished it in one part, their presence is required in another.' Richard Beswick, Chief Superintendent of Manchester Borough Police in evidence at the trial of O'Connor on behalf of the prosecution stated, 'on Wednesday morning, there were some few places working but during the day they were stopped'. So on the second day of the strike, Manchester was completely stopped.²⁹

Thursday and Friday 11 and 12 August saw the continuation of the extension of the turn-out, bringing into line small pockets of workers. The labourers on the railway line, between Manchester and Todmorden turned out, as did all the workers on the new station being built on the Manchester to Oldham line. Here and there aggressive employers, with the assistance of the police or military, reopened their mills or factories. The workers responded with mass picketing and inevitably won the 'hands' to stand up to their employers and rejoin the turn-out. In spite of this activity on Thursday and Friday, one can say that Manchester and the immediate area around were fully turned out.

The spread of the turn-out beyond Manchester

What was happening outside Manchester? The turn-out was spreading like wildfire. Marches were taking place from one town to another to extend the turn-out. In the majority of cases, as with Manchester and neighbouring towns, the workers left their mills and factories as the processions approached. Ashton and Stalybridge remained a centre from which delegates and groups were sent out and from which marches were organized. On Wednesday 10 August, with Manchester almost completely stopped, the Ashton-Stalybridge turn-outs sent a 'committee' to Rochdale, presumably to discuss with Rochdale leaders the extension of the turn-out. On the following day, Thursday 11 August, by ten o'clock in the morning thousands of turn-outs from Ashton, Stalybridge, Oldham and other places filled the streets of Rochdale. The procession divided up and visited the mills and factories of the town, most of the 'hands' willingly

came out, and while factory walls were climbed, or plugs pulled out of the boilers, 'not the least damage was done to property'. They received bread from bakeries. A public meeting was held on Cronkey Shaw with 'not less than from thirty to forty thousand persons present'. They passed a resolution declaring they would not resume work until they obtained a fair price for a fair day's labour.

After the meeting they formed up again and marched to Heywood, some 10-15,000 strong, where they acted in similar manner, turning out the mills and factories and at a mass meeting agreed to a similar resolution. On Friday morning at six o'clock a further meeting was held on Cronkey Shaw with 4-5,000 in attendance. After speeches by various operatives a procession was formed and they proceeded to Bacup where all the cotton and woollen mills came out without any resistance. The majority of the turn-outs proceeded to Todmorden where the hands at most of the factories had already given up working and the rest turned out. That Friday afternoon at Rochdale 'the whole of the hands in the cotton and woollen mills and operatives of every description for miles around had ceased to work and business was at a complete standstill'.³⁰ Rochdale, like Ashton and Stalybridge became an organizing centre for marches and processions for the extension of the turn-out. On Monday 15 August, a march was organized to Bacup and to Halifax, and on the 18 August, again to Todmorden.³¹

On Wednesday 10 August, a group of delegates from Manchester, Ashton, Stockport and other places visited Bolton and a public meeting was held on the Market Place, at which it was agreed that a procession be formed the following morning to go round the mills and factories to induce the 'hands' to join the turn-out. This was done and most of the mills responded. The following morning a number of mills, under police protection, restarted. On the Friday following a party of colliers from the mining areas around Bolton entered the town, after getting the 'hands' at one of the mills that was working to rejoin the turn-out, they made for the police station, but though they were now several thousand strong a body of armed police managed to disperse them. Troops were called out and surrounded the police office. A number of mills and collieries remained out. Mass meetings and marches were held on the

Saturday. On the Monday the cotton spinners met at six o'clock in the morning. The hall was packed. Six resolutions were passed (these are referred to in the chapter dealing with the trades conferences); one called for the Charter and another called on all trades to attend a trades conference to be held that afternoon. They also elected a delegate to attend the Manchester trades conference that same day. So by the first day of the second week of the turn-out Bolton was practically completely turned out, and what is more, that day established a leadership for the turn-out which not only united all trades in the town, enabling them to decide on policy and demands, but also created links with the Manchester trades conferences. Two days later, Wednesday 17 August, the *Bolton Free Press* was able to commence its report for that day with, 'Not the slightest indications appeared this morning of any general desire to return to work.'³²

A. G. Rose describes a crowd from Haslingden moving through Accrington on the road to Blackburn as a '... mob like a creeping paralysis'.³³ The word 'paralysis' is a very apt description of the state of the mills and factories and collieries of the towns the 'mob' passed through, but 'creeping' gives a wrong impression – 'galloping' paralysis would have been more correct.

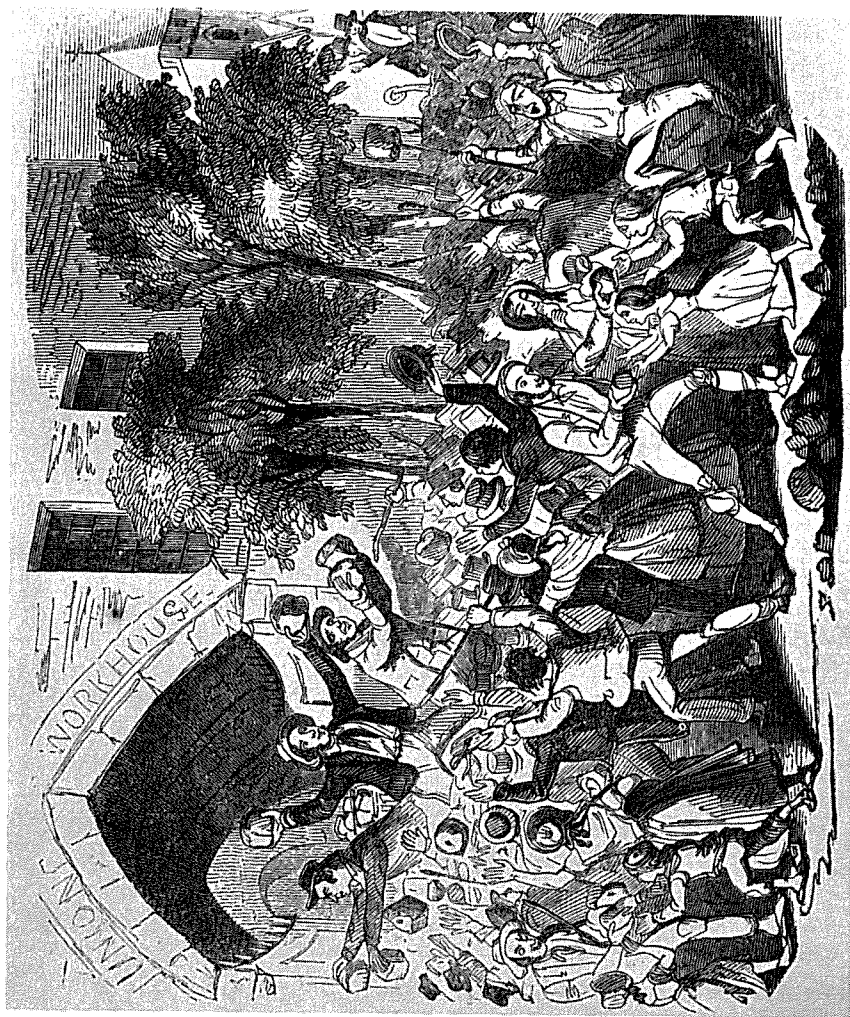
The course of events speak for themselves. What must have been the calculations of the local Chartist leaders proved correct. Once Manchester was won for the turn-out, it spread throughout the whole of Lancashire and into Cheshire and Yorkshire.

On Wednesday evening 10 August, a group of silk weavers and others visited Middleton and addressed a public meeting. Thursday midday another meeting was held and on both days, silk mills, cotton mills, dye houses and print works were won to join the turn-out. By Friday evening 12 August, the *Advertiser* could report 'when our reporter left, all trades were at a stand'. On the Friday morning, a mass meeting agreed to send a number of delegates to Leigh, another silk centre. This Middleton experience was repeated many times over. The same Wednesday evening two delegates from Ashton visited Bury and held a meeting in the Working Men's Hall. The following midday an open-air public meeting was held, and by five o'clock

that evening, with the help of large bodies of workers from Heywood, Oldham and other places who had stopped every establishment on the road to Bury, every establishment in Bury was stopped as well. The following day the turn-outs of Bury visited Elton, Tottington and other 'out townships' where they met with no resistance. When a column of 3,000 turn-outs from Bury marched into Heywood on the Friday morning 12 August, they found the whole of the thirty-three cotton mills in the town at a complete standstill.

There were no marching crowds in the streets of Stockport on the Tuesday and Wednesday of the first week of the turn-out, but the authorities were apprehensive. They made application for military assistance to Colonel Wemyss at Manchester. They only had two companies of the 79th Foot, but their request was refused. They applied to the Colonel of the Cheshire Yeomanry and by two o'clock on the Thursday morning the Altrincham, Dunham Massey, Tabley and Stockport troops were in town with another troop awaiting further orders. The Ashton and Hyde turn-outs had agreed to march to Stockport, but when Ashton learned of the military mobilization they decided to take possession of the Ashton railway station and so prevent the passage of troops to Stockport. The Stockport authorities heard of these plans and swore in some hundreds of special constables. At breakfast time on Wednesday, 10 August, a number of mills stopped working. At Thursday midday a large crowd of turn-outs from outside Stockport entered the town. The authorities armed the police and auxiliary forces with cutlasses. The magistrates made for the Market Square, read the Riot Act and posted notices up to that effect. While a mass meeting was proceeding at Waterloo Road another crowd which had been visiting the mills and calling upon the operatives to join the turn-out went to the workhouse and demanded that all workers employed there should join the turn-out. They were resisted by the lodge keeper but eventually they found the keys and some two to three thousand entered. Some entered the house and found 700 loaves of seven pound weight; some £5-7 in copper coin and a number of small bags of meal.

'... The military, magistrates and police accompanied by the town clerk and a formidable body of special constables, consisting of the tradesmen of the town . . .' made haste to the



Attack on Stockport Workhouse, 1842

workhouse. Fifty-one arrests were made. A court was set up in the workhouse and thirty-six of the prisoners were released, having only been found in possession of loaves. Sixteen were committed to Chester assizes for trial. They were accused of being armed with offensive weapons. They were leg ironed and conveyed to Knutsford en route to Chester, accompanied by two constabulary officers, under a strong escort of cavalry as far as Cheadle. At five o'clock the following morning, Friday, an immense meeting took place at Waterloo Road. At half past six they divided up, with one procession proceeding through Levenshulme, Heaton Mersey, Cheadle, Styal, and another large group proceeding to Hazel Grove. They joined up with a procession of turn-outs from Hyde and elsewhere and made for Poynton where all the pits were turned out, and they continued to Bollington and Macclesfield.

The pattern of events in the first days of the turn-out

With the close of the second day of the turn-out, it becomes possible to study the pattern of events. Firstly, we need to note the extensive public discussion that took place both prior to the start of the turn-out and on its first day. There were five meetings on Monday 8 August in the Ashton–Stalybridge area. The attendance at these meetings, taking the figures of the *Northern Star* and *Advertiser* and ignoring duplication, total 79,000. Assuming duplication did, in fact, take place, then the attendance would be no lower than 40,000 (that is the meeting at the waste ground near Thackers' Foundry, Ashton). It would not be unreasonable to say that not all the 40,000 attended all the other four meetings; therefore, it would be reasonable to suggest that some 50,000 people attended these five meetings. This could mean that every working-class family and many middle-class families were represented at one or another of the meetings.

The striking thing about these tens of thousands attending the five meetings is the fact that, irrespective as to how they came on strike, they had the opportunity to speak up for or against the turn-out, for or against the Charter, for or against the wage of 1840, for or against the demand for a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. Another striking thing about these first days was the

fact that the local Chartist leaders were united for a general turn-out, but not on its aims. At this early stage some of the local leaders – in line with some of the National Chartist leaders – were opposed to a general turn-out for the Charter, advocating limiting the aims of the strike to the wages question. The most striking thing of all, however, was the fact that no matter what was being advocated from the platforms, the great mass of the turn-outs were for wage increases, the 1840 rates, or a fair day's pay for a fair day's work, and for the People's Charter to be made the law of the land.

There were a few very bad incidents of violence when the military shot down demonstrating workers. The first was at Preston. On Friday 12 August a mass meeting had passed a resolution which stated that they would go on strike until they had a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, 'guaranteeing its continuance with the Charter'. A report in the *Northern Star* stated: 'Before night every cotton mill was turned out without any resistance.' On the Saturday morning another mass meeting was held at Chadwick's Orchard. The meeting ended and the crowd formed up and marched round the town. One version of what actually happened then was related by Mr Samuel Bannister, chief constable of Preston in evidence for the prosecution at the trial of Feargus O'Connor and the 58 others. He was examined by Sir Gregory Lewin.

Mr Bannister was with fifteen or sixteen policemen; some thirty men of the 72nd Highlanders; the mayor and magistrates – 'Not more than eighty persons altogether', when '... up Lune Street immense showers of stones were thrown at us by the mob'. They halted with a view to dispersing the 'mob'. He and Captain Woodford, chief constable of the county constabulary went on opposite sides of the street for the purpose of informing the workers that the Riot Act would be read. One of the 'mob' cried out, 'read and be damned'. A stone was thrown, which knocked the Riot Act out of the mayor's hand. He stated that showers of stones were coming at them from all sides. The mayor read the Riot Act.

At length, the mayor ordered the soldiers to fire. I did not hear what was the word of command; but they did fire. What was the consequence of the firing? I saw several of the foremost of the mob drop in the street. How many rounds did they fire? I don't know the



'Attack on the military', Preston, 1842

exact number; they did not fire in a body but by platoons. The mob stood mute; they did not attempt to run; they stood for some minutes as if thunder-struck. How long did they stand? About two or three minutes; I believe some were killed? Yes, How many? Four died ultimately and a fifth man who was wounded had his leg taken off.

The official verdict of the coroner's court stated: 'The unlawful assembly . . . proceeded with great violence to assault the persons who had so come to disperse them, and knocked down John Woodford, Chief Constable of the County of Lancaster . . . threw stones and other missiles at the said mayor. . . . In defence of themselves . . . justifiably and necessarily fired upon the said offenders with musketry. . . .'

The *Northern Star* report from one of their own correspondents stated: 'When the soldiers were near the top of Lune Street, the police were in the rear, each now and then running 'after the boys, striking them with their staves and retreating under the cover of the military. . . .' (20 August 1842). Feargus O'Connor cross-examined the witness and established the fact that the soldiers had not charged the 'mob' prior to firing.

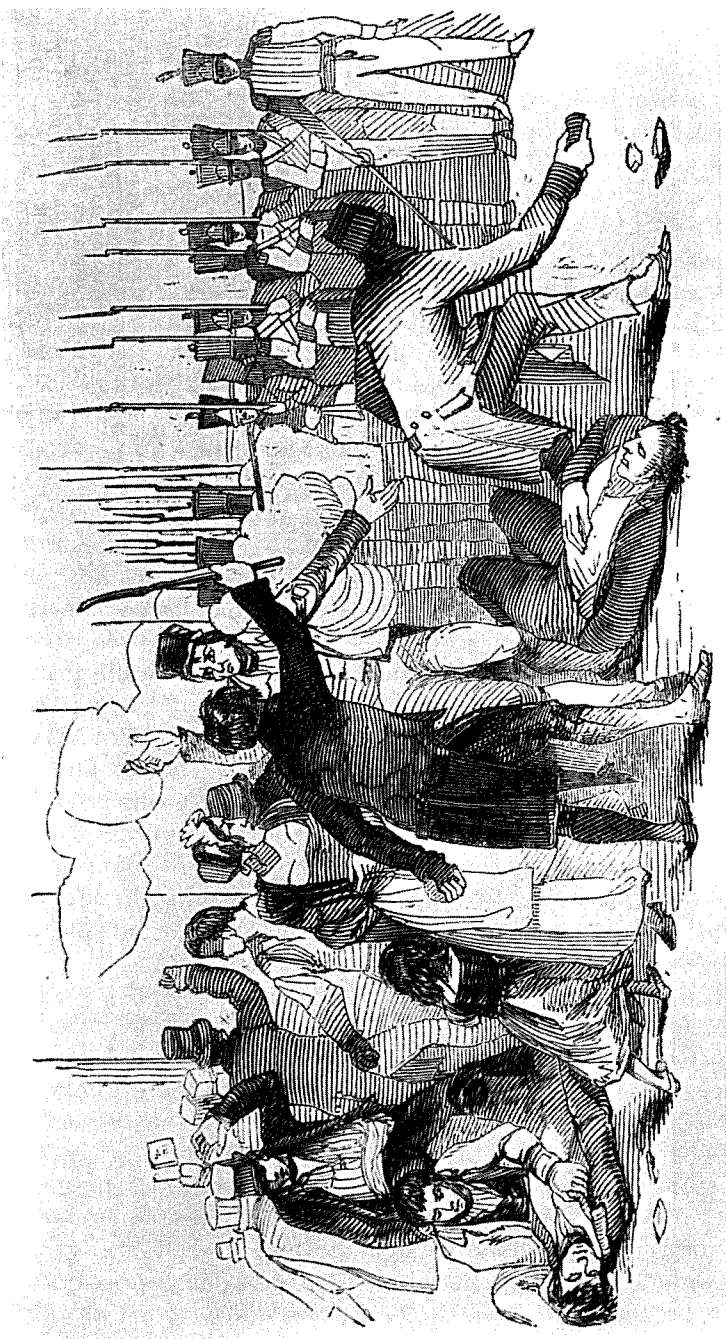
O'Connor: They fired in single platoons. Single firing! And the people did not stir? – After the first shot they appeared motionless, you say? Yes, from distance in which I was. Was there a pop each second? More than a second. I should think that there were three seconds between each. Was there pop-pop-pop, about twenty a minute; and did this continue for several minutes after the people were motionless? (*No answer*).

At the inquest on two of the men killed by the military, Captain Woodford, the chief constable, stated: 'Twenty shots in all were fired, not in a volley, but by file firing . . . The subdivision which had before been ordered to face Fishergate did not fire at all.' Inspector of police, Henry Rigby, also gave evidence. He said: 'Two or three-and-twenty of the soldiers fired. They fired one round apiece, but he thought the whole of the soldiers did not fire.' The coroner addressed a few words to the jury ' . . . from the evidence adduced, it was clear that a riotous assemblage had taken place, that every means had been taken to disperse the mob and to restore the peace, and that

from the nature of the attack upon the authorities, there was no alternative, however painful, than to give the order to fire'. If they were of the opinion that the authorities were so justified their verdict would be that of 'justifiable homicide'. 'The jury almost immediately returned a verdict to that effect.'

'Justifiable' murder. Who were these criminals who justified murder? One was a boy of seventeen years, Bernard Macnamara, a stripper who worked at Mr Oxendale's mill. Another was George Sowerbutts, nineteen, a weaver; a third was James Mercer, twenty-seven, a handloom weaver. The *Northern Star* gave a list of seven men sufficiently seriously wounded as to be kept in hospital. What were these men like? A correspondent wrote to the paper: 'I have just returned from visiting three of the dying men. What a sight! Men – poor, wretched skeleton-looking men, with as wretched looking and as wayworn wives by their bedsides: perforated by leaden balls.' He then goes on to describe the wounds and condition of these men. Was this terrible tragedy unavoidable? The coroner had stated that every means had been taken to disperse the 'mob' and preserve the peace, was that correct? For instance, there is no indication of the mayor attempting to parley, to talk to the turn-outs. True, Bannister and Woodford tried to tell them that the Riot Act was to be read, but they could not get near to these workers. One can understand the turn-outs attitude to the police officers. They had been using their staves on the turn-outs, minutes earlier. (One cannot help the feeling – reading the *Northern Star* report – that there might have been more chance of cooling the situation had the police not engaged in their provocative hit-and-run tactics under cover of the military.)

It is not unreasonable to believe that these workers would have responded differently to the mayor, had he acted in accordance with the responsibility, dignity and courage his office demanded of him. In the cross examination of Bannister by O'Connor at the trial, it was established that the military did not charge the crowd before firing. The question arises, why not? Another question that arises is, why was no warning shot fired over the heads of the crowd? To these unanswered questions must be added the fact that Lune Street was only thirty feet wide 'at the utmost' and that 'there was a dense mob, both in our front and rear'. No wonder the *Northern Star* correspondent



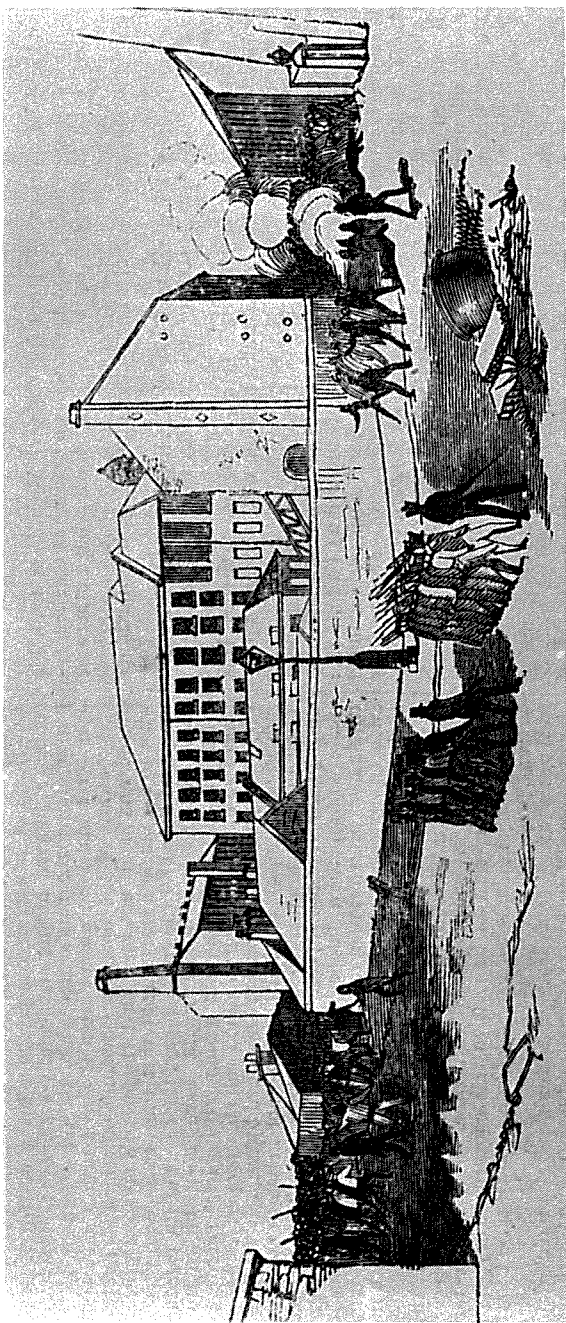
Riots at Preston, 1842

commented: 'People could scarcely believe their senses. Riots have before happened in Preston, but never before was the military ordered to fire . . . it being the almost unanimous opinion that the mayor ought to be tried for wilful murder.'

Here is the opinion of the government of the day. Sir James Graham, the Home Secretary, speaking in the House of Commons on a motion calling for a committee of inquiry into the conduct of the magistracy of the manufacturing towns during the general strike, said, relative to the Preston shootings:

I assert that the mayor behaved with the utmost courage, he was present during the whole of the proceedings when the troops were attacked, and when they fired and he exercised his civil authority, not ordering the firing to commence till the danger had become imminent, and causing the firing to close when the danger had been overcome. By the conduct of the chief magistrate the effusion of human blood was stopped, and I may state that the town was satisfied with the conduct of that chief officer; for if I am not mistaken, the Mayor has received the thanks of the citizens for his conduct.³⁴

Preston was not the only town where the soldiers fired upon an unarmed crowd. The *Advertiser's* own correspondent reported from Blackburn on Monday 15 August. Turn-outs marched in from Accrington and elsewhere and mills were turned out. At one mill the workers turned out without the slightest resistance or pressure and the employer, W. Eccles, declared his hope that a general advance in wages would be made by all employers. At two or three mills the employers organized the management and staff to resist the turn-outs. The result was broken windows, and doors showing signs of having stopped stones. At one mill, Messrs Hopwood, the turn-outs were repulsed 'by the proprietors who compelled all the managers and foremen to fire through the windows. . . . One woman was severely wounded and several were seriously injured.' He described how a coach and four arrived at the mill to take some prisoners away. 'A few stones were thrown at the soldiers, from the back of an old house near to the Wheatsheaf Public house. One of the officers advanced and gave the command to fire; and about four rounds of ball cartridge were fired down a narrow and densely populated street . . . the mob instantly retired in great confusion.'



Troops at Wilson's mill, 1842

Immediately following the Blackburn report is one from Halifax with a similar story. The same day, Monday 15 August, at a meeting at five in the morning, a magistrate addressed the crowd for half-an-hour with little effect, before they marched to Luddenden Foot to join up with the turn-outs from Lancashire. There the various trades, each composed of thousands of men from Hebden Bridge, Sowerby Bridge, Luddenden Foot, Todmorden, Rochdale and other places, united in one immense procession, variously estimated at between 20,000 and 50,000. They made for Halifax. At the North Bridge the military and police were drawn up. One woman went up to the magistrates and shouted, 'We didn't come here for bayonets, we came for bread.' At the same time another procession, again of immense numbers, arrived from Bradford, preceded by a number of the 17th Lancers from Bradford. Eventually, large groups left the main procession and visited mills and factories. Numbers of mills had been turned out. At Ackroyd's mill one of the masters gave them four sovereigns to buy bread for the women. At Bowling Dyke mill six turn-outs were arrested. Attempts were made to release the prisoners, and in the mêlée that ensued the turn-outs pushed the soldiers, throwing a volley of stones, sticks and missiles of various descriptions ' . . . which so exasperated the soldiers that they faced round and fired upon them . . . The spirit of the crowd was still unsubdued. In Well Lane another rush was made, and again the soldiers fired.' The spirits of the turn-outs can be judged from the fact that at two o'clock in the afternoon a mass meeting was held on Skircoat Moor with 10-15,000 present, where three resolutions were passed. These were, first, not to return to work till the People's Charter became the law of the land, till their wages were advanced to the standard of 1840, and till a guarantee was entered into by the employers that they would be kept up to that standard. On the following day, Tuesday 16 August, the prisoners who had been arrested the previous day were to be taken to Wakefield for 'safety'. They were to be taken in two omnibuses, each drawn by four horses and guarded by a file of Hussars. It was inevitable that the street would be crowded. Stones were thrown, and this led to 'incidents'. The *Northern Star* report states that unintentionally a man slightly obstructed the passage of the infantry. One of the soldiers pricked him with a bayonet, so the

man turned round and said something offensive to the soldier, who immediately struck him down with the butt end of his musket. A disturbance among the crowd ensued. The magistrates immediately consulted ' . . . for a few seconds . . . and the next moment the soldiery fired upon the people. The first fire consisted only of straggling shots, but the next fire was a regular volley of musketry from the whole body of the military . . . as they [the turn-outs] fled the military continued to fire and some of the men dropped wounded upon the grass.' 'We went to the scene of action immediately after the firing had taken place . . . From all that we can learn of the origin of the affair, we think there were no circumstances to justify the military in firing upon the people. No attack was made upon either person or property and the people were proceeding without disturbance along the road.' There were further shootings during the day and one man died.³⁵

So to sum up the first stage of the strike. Already by 15 August, before the trades conference had met and any generalized call for strike action had been made, something like 250,000 workers had come out on strike. Almost all the cotton workers of Lancashire, Cheshire and Yorkshire had turned out, and most miners from Staffordshire up to Lanarkshire. A large section of these workers, possibly already a majority, had declared themselves determined to continue on strike till the People's Charter became law.

It is easy in retrospect to forget what a remarkable mobilization this represented. As we have seen, the speed and scale with which the strike developed, as well as the tactics used for spreading it, took the local military commanders quite by surprise. In most places the magistrates were forced to temporize. In some they tried to resist and the workers had to achieve their ends despite this. Nowhere, however, was the strike wave halted. In terms of the previous history of the British working class it was an achievement without parallel. Before we go on, therefore, it would be useful to examine the calibre of leadership which enabled working people to outface the state machine in this way.

NOTES

1. *Manchester Advertiser*, 23 July 1842.
2. *Northern Star*, 30 July 1842.
3. *ibid.*, 20 August 1842.
4. *ibid.*
5. *Manchester Guardian*, 23 July 1842 (reprint from *Staffordshire Advertiser and Shropshire Chronicle*).
6. Of the fifteen speakers at the meetings held between 26 July and 7 August, Woodruffe and nine others were defendants in the trial of Feargus O'Connor and the fifty-eight others.
7. *Trial*, Attorney-General's opening speech.
8. HO 45/269; M. Bowman, *England in Ashton-under-Lyne*, Altrincham, 1960, p. 501; *Trial*, pp. 3, 11, 13, 15, 371, 385; *Manchester Advertiser*, 6 August 1842; *Guardian*, 10, 13, 20 August and 17, 28 September 1842.
9. *Trial*, pp. 15, 16, 17, 20, 73, 74, 256; M. Bowman, *op. cit.*, pp. 502-3; *Northern Star*, 5 February, 4 June 1842.
10. *Trial*, pp. 4, 26, 27.
11. *ibid.*, pp. 17, 73.
12. *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842; *Manchester Advertiser*, 13 August 1842; Rose, 'The Plug Riots of 1842', *Transactions Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, LXVII, 1957, p. 88, *Manchester Guardian*, 10 August 1842; *Trial*, pp. 4, 19.
13. *Trial*, pp. 4, 20, 27, 28, 64; Hovell, *The Chartist Movement*, Manchester, 1970, p. 260; Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement*, London, 1854, p. 217.
14. *Manchester Guardian*, 10 August 1842.
15. *ibid.*
16. *Trial*, p. 4; Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 88-9; Mather, 'The General Strike of 1842', *Provincial Labour History* (ed. J. H. Porter), University of Exeter, 1972, p. 10.
17. The extract from the cross examination is taken from *The Trial*, pp. 25-6. Continuing the cross-examination of the prosecution witness, Henry Brierly, O'Connor established the fact that some employers would not open their mills before the month was up. *Trial*, p. 26.
18. Bowman, *op. cit.*, p. 501.
19. *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842; *Trial*, pp. 4, 21, 65, 66, 86; *Manchester Advertiser*, 13 August 1842.
20. J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution*, London 1974, pp. 114-17.
21. *Manchester Advertiser*, 13 August 1842.
22. *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842, Rose, *op. cit.*, pp. 91, 94; *Trial*, pp. 100-2, 4, 5; *Manchester Guardian*, 27 August 1842 (letter from Maude to the editor).
23. *Manchester Advertiser*, 15 October 1842.
24. F. C. Mather, *Public Order in the Age of the Chartists*, Manchester, 1959, pp. 121-3; *Manchester Advertiser*, 15 October 1842.
25. *Manchester Guardian*, 13 August 1842, *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842, *Manchester Advertiser*, 13 August 1842.

26. Warre to Home Secretary, 10 August 1842, PRO HO 45/268.
27. Graham to Warre, 12 August 1842, Graham papers (microfilm spool 32, Cambridge University Library).
28. *Advertiser*, 13 and 20 August 1842, 3 September 1842; Joyce Marlow, *The Peterloo Massacre*, London, 1969, pp. 145–6, 181, 210.
29. *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842; *Manchester Advertiser*, 13 August 1842; *Manchester Guardian*, 13 August 1842; *Trial*, p. 104.
30. *Advertiser*, 13 August 1842.
31. *ibid.*, 20 August 1842, *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842.
32. *Bolton Free Press*, 20 August 1842.
33. A. G. Rose, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
34. *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842, *Manchester Guardian*, 20 August 1842, *Advertiser*, 20 August 1842, *Trial*, pp. 76–80; *Parliamentary Debates*, third series, volume 68, column 122.
35. *Advertiser*, 20 August 1842, *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842.

Richard Pilling

The conventional assessment

The most popular characterization of the 1842 General Strike is that it was a spontaneous outburst of downtrodden and enraged operatives. Both the old historians, like the Webbs and the Hammonds, and many contemporary historians, subscribe to this basic interpretation, even if it has been slightly modified recently with suggestions that trade unions played a part in preparing the strike. There is also acceptance that there was a somewhat more conscious attitude on the part of the active elements in the trade union movement of the time. But these modifications do not detract from the stamp of blind revolt given to this great strike. Referring to suggestions of conspiracy on the part of the Anti-Corn Law League, or the Chartists, F. C. Mather says: 'later historians, however, reacting sharply against such conspiratorial explanations have emphasised the strike's total spontaneity'.¹ A not too deep an examination of the events that led to the strike and the manner in which it was initiated lend themselves very strongly to the idea of a sudden eruption. The privations and distress of the operatives, the wage cuts, with the last straw a 25 per cent cut, the provocative attitude of the Corn Law League employers, the natural angry response of the operatives, the marches to other mills and the marches to other towns – all this easily leads one to the spontaneous strike theory.

Looking at the leadership of the strike, again, one is led to the idea of an unpremeditated strike. There was no General Council and no TUC. The events of those momentous days of 1842 apparently point to a spontaneous outburst and, from the point of view of establishment history-writing, it would certainly be very reassuring for the ruling class to believe this: that workers now and again react violently to unjustified impositions and oppressions, then, after an impulsive, leaderless demonstration, return – with a whipping or possibly some small concession – to the old forms of wage slavery. After all, something like that had

been happening for nearly three-quarters of a century before 1842.

It is important, however, to remember that this interpretation was itself a historical creation of the time, and dates in particular from the trial of the strike's leaders in March 1843. The fifty-nine charged were delegates to the Chartist conference which took place on 16 August 1842. One of the accused was Richard Pilling who played a leading role in initiating the strike. At the trial he was one of the defendants who elected to defend themselves and his speech had a profound effect on all who heard it from the Judge downwards.

Here I want to deal with the emphasis laid on parts of the speech, which in the first instance, it seems, was done quite consciously in order to meet the needs of the ruling class at that moment and which has formed the basis for the conventional assessment of the strike ever since.

In his summing up the judge, Baron Rolfe, refers to Pilling:

. . . Pilling who gave us that account of his family which all of us, I am sure, so deeply and sincerely felt. . . . It would appear, from what he said that he was connected with some other political party in the country. I do not see what that party has to do with the question at all. . . . With regard to Pilling, it seems to me that the general tendency of his addresses, as described by witnesses . . . consisting more in describing the masters as hard hearted towards the work people, and that they should get more wages, rather than forming part of any conspiracy.²

Was this an objective estimate of Pilling's speech from the dock?

Why so much emphasis on this side of Pilling's speech? It is true that the speech deals with the strike and the wages question. It is true that he skilfully made use of his experience and knowledge of the conditions and struggles and the economic position of the working class, crystallizing all this into his own personal and family situation and using it for a plea for the dismissal of the case against himself and therefore, against all the defendants. There is nothing depressing about the speech. It conveys confidence, militancy and defiance. The judge goes out of his way to limit the 'criminal' activities of Pilling in the period up to and during the strike to 'describing the masters as hard hearted towards the workpeople and that they should get more



Manchester operative

wages'. He distinctly ruled out Pilling's connection with the Chartist party and therefore, Pilling was not part 'of any conspiracy'.

Thus he was characterized as a simple, straightforward, honest workman, suffering real privations, possibly misled (he did say something about the Charter and that he combined against the masters), but not sufficiently to be included in the conspiracy. He entered the General Strike with the genuine desire to prevent wage cuts and, if possible, to get wage improvements. The spontaneous upsurge of the masses carried him on the crest of the wave and overnight he became one of the leaders of the first general strike in the world!

There is no doubt that the speech had a profound effect on the court. Pilling's emphasis on the suffering and the moral and domestic misery of the working class, and his own personal situation in illustration of that, was correct and in the event justified. He and his comrades were on trial for conspiracy to produce change in the constitution by 'alarm and terror' with some sixteen varying counts. They faced the possibility of years of imprisonment. Thus Pilling's speech indicates a knowledge, conscious or instinctive, of the vulnerable side of capitalism at that time. He attacked at that spot, with telling effect.³ 'There is no reason to believe that Pilling was exaggerating the plight of the workers.'⁴ The speech became an indictment of the capitalist system. It contained portions where he declared his philosophy. He spoke up for the women operatives. He stated that he combined to keep himself alive and he told how the strike started.

Was the emphasis placed on the distress side of the speech by Judge Baron Rolfe and the Attorney-General fair or honest? It characterized Pilling as a man limited in outlook, concerned only with the immediate suffering of the working class, and himself and his family. Was he such a limited personality? Here is an extract from the speech:

I am not one of those who would, like the Irish, live on lumpers – nor would I be, like a degraded Russian serf, sold with the land. I want to see the people here well educated, and if a man has the means in his pocket he will get his children educated; and if the people are once well informed, then the Charter will be the law of the land.'

His final words to the court were:

And, now Gentlemen of the Jury, you have the case before you; the masters conspired to kill me and I combined to keep myself alive.⁵

The evidence suggests that the estimate by the judge, assisted by the Attorney-General, was deliberate political policy. Ever since then historians, academics and students have accepted that characterization as proof that the strike was a spontaneous outburst caused in fair measure by hard-hearted employers, led by simple, sincere workmen thrown up in the turmoil of the time, and in the same manner that it flared up, the strike petered out. The accepted estimate that the strike had nothing to do with Chartism could not be further from the truth.

Class leader and Chartist

Pilling had been connected with the movement since Peterloo. He 'took his philosophy from his own bitter life experience, with a large share of common sense and keen observation'.⁶ Pilling was a Chartist and an active member of the Chartist organization. The evidence for this exists and yet there has been a general unwillingness to recognize it. Large numbers of workers at that time took their philosophy from their own bitter life experience, and in practical terms embraced the Chartist philosophy.

In 1839 there was a general upsurge of Chartism, with Stockport as one of its centres. On Saturday 11 May, a big Chartist meeting took place on a plot of ground near the Sunday School, New Bridge Lane, with Pilling as one of the principal speakers. Pilling estimated that there were 6,000 people present, along with two spies whose reports were sent to Lord John Russell. One of these depositions states:

Mr Richard Pilling in introducing the next resolution exhorted the people to support the Convention and the Charter, attacked the profligate expenditure of a Government professing retrenchment and no patronage, reviewed the cheerless condition of our foreign and home policy and the disheartening state of trade and the general state of the comforts of the people. Had the working people been in the legislature by their Charter this Nation would now have been the most prosperous nation in the world. The working people as the origin of the arts, improvements, ingenuity and wealth, of the

empires are the only fit persons to govern this or any other nation. The people will never be happy until then and I hope the working people will stand by the convention to obtain the Charter morally if they can, but have it we will (*'hear, hear' and 'by arms'*) . . . the Chairman says I am out of order, therefore I will no longer trespass upon your time than by calling upon the working people to support the Charter . . . I say the Charter, the Charter, and the Charter we'll have (*cheers*).

The resolution put by the chairman, Charles Davies, moved by Pilling and seconded by James Leah, the honorary secretary, read: 'That the working classes do support Feargus O'Connor and the *Northern Star* so far as it advocates democracy.' The resolution was carried unanimously.⁷

Subsequently, some twelve workers were arrested and appeared before the local magistrates. At one stage of the proceedings the magistrates directed that James Leah, former secretary to the Local Chartist Association, and Richard Pilling should be taken into custody. Pilling, who was in court, was placed in the dock. The *Northern Star* of 10 August 1839 reported: 'Richard Pilling is committed to the Assizes for conspiring, sedition and attending unlawful meetings.' Bail would be accepted in £400 and two sureties of £200 each. This excessive bail all the prisoners indignantly declined to put in; and were, therefore, committed to Chester to their trials. There were 1,500 special constables in the town, along with a small party of the 20th Infantry guarding the trial rooms. The local labour movement conducted a campaign on behalf of the ten men, including Pilling, due to face trial. Appeals for funds were made ' . . . to defend them from the machinations of their and your enemies'.

At the trial on Saturday 11 April 1840, the Attorney-General said he thought that the case against Pilling was not sufficient to justify further proceedings. He was then discharged.⁸

At the trial of Feargus O'Connor and the fifty-eight others in March 1843, Abraham Longson, Stockport policeman, gave evidence against Pilling. In answer to the judge he stated ' . . . in 1839 he was agitating for the Charter very much my Lord'.⁹

At the time of the Stockport trial Feargus O'Connor was serving a sentence of eighteen months in York Castle. He was being held under barbarous conditions. He was sleeping on a

bare iron bedstead, doing menial tasks and was not allowed visitors. Mass meetings of protest were taking place up and down the country. At the beginning of June 1840 one such meeting was held in Stockport. Pilling was not present at the opening of the meeting because of his involvement in the eight-week weavers' strike. As he walked into the meeting he heard the chairman call upon him to move the main resolution. The resolution read: 'That it is the opinion of this meeting that the punishment inflicted upon Mr Feargus O'Connor is harsh, cruel and unprecedented.' He spoke to the resolution: '... the punishment of that gentleman was inflicted not really because he had published this or that, but because he was considered the head of the present movement ["hear, hear"] and because he had established a press which spoke the voice of the people of this country, and which through Mr O'Connor has been the means of inflicting upon a base Government that punishment they so richly deserve.' He went on to talk of the importance of a press in the fight for the Charter. Hence the hatred of the government. They wanted to put down the *Northern Star* '... and for no other purpose than to put down the *Northern Star*, the great moral advocate of the rights and liberties of the labouring classes of England, Ireland and Scotland great applause'. He expressed his confidence that government oppression and intimidation would fail, that O'Connor and his comrades would come out of jail strengthened in their determination to fight for the Charter. He gave his own experience when locked up and how he determined when released '... to advocate those principles ten times stronger than ever he had done'. He linked this protest meeting with the turn-out and the prosecution of the turn-out pickets that week, and concluded with a stirring call to get up petitions to the government '... nor ought they to relax in their struggle for the great principles until they had obtained them'.¹⁰

This evidence indicates that Pilling was already an experienced local Chartist leader. It would be naïve to think he had developed from a local strike leader to a mature, experienced Chartist overnight. A couple of months later, a meeting was held of the old Working Men's Association and the *Northern Star* of 29 August 1840 reported: 'Resolutions moved by Messrs Wilde, Carter, Chappell, and Pilling were carried without opposition. (1) That it is the opinion of this meeting that

the Working Men's Association be dissolved. (2) That it is the opinion of this meeting that we incorporate ourselves into the National Charter Association of Great Britain.' Pilling was part of the local Chartist leadership and must have played an active part in the struggles and action of the Stockport working class. Stockport, at this time, was a hive of activity, with meetings, lectures, trade union activities, Chartist organizations and co-operative stores. As the Chartist leaders were released from prison, arising out of the 1839 arrests, so they were welcomed back at mass meetings and social functions in the bigger towns. In August, Stockport welcomed Dr McDouall with a reception at the co-operative stores, and a mass meeting in the Chartist rooms at Bomber Brow – a ticket only meeting. The hall was filled to capacity with 800–900 present and 2,000 outside. Windows in the hall had to be broken in order to allow more air in. A few weeks later a welcome was given to John Collins.

Pilling, victimized in Stockport, moved to nearby Ashton-under-Lyne, where he was immediately accepted into the local Chartist leadership. When O'Connor was released from Chester jail, public meetings, processions and functions were organized throughout the country to welcome him. Ashton held a welcome meeting and the *Northern Star* reported on 4 December 1841: 'The meeting at the Charlestown Chartist Rooms was crammed almost to suffocation. £9 was paid at the door, nearly as many outside. Pilling was called to the chair and opening the business in a neat and appropriate speech, read the placard calling the meeting. He introduced Feargus O'Connor stating that "he had devoured the Whigs and would, by the assistance of the people, eat the Tories".'

As the General Strike broke out, Pilling attended a South Lancashire Chartist delegate conference held at the Brown Street Chartist Room, Manchester, on Sunday 24 July. There were delegates from the carpenters, joiners, mechanics, blacksmiths, painters and local Chartist organizations. Credentials were established, 'R. Pilling, Ashton-under-Lyne'. 'Mr Pilling moved "That each locality in South Lancashire do send a sum of money not less than sixpence, for the purpose of establishing a fund to carry out the recommendations of the last delegate meeting, relative to the propagation of Chartism in Ireland" – carried.'

At the Feargus O'Connor trial the Attorney-General treated Pilling as part of the national leadership of the Chartist Association. The Chartist Association had arranged a two-day national conference on 16 and 17 August 1842. The conference was to unveil a monument to Orator Hunt, the principal speaker at Peterloo, and at the same time discuss internal problems of Chartist organization. When held, the conference associated itself with the General Strike, called for support for and the extension and continuance of the strike until the Charter became the law of the land. Pilling had not attended the conference, but in spite of this, was charged with conspiracy.

In his summing up at the trial the Attorney-General stated: 'Now gentlemen, the case will be this: you will find that Woodruffe attended many meetings, Aitken, Challenger, Fenton, Pilling, Brophy, Stephenson and several others attended meetings before the conference meeting at Manchester. Several of the persons who attended these meetings were themselves members of the conference at Manchester.'

Pilling did not deny attendance at these pre-conference meetings, so the implication is that Pilling did take part in the preparatory meetings for the conference. Therefore, it would not be wrong to assume that Pilling was accepted as part of the national leadership – in the broadest sense – of the National Charter Association, before the General Strike took place.

National mass leader

If there is doubt as to Pilling's participation in the broad leadership of the Chartist party up to and at the time of the general strike and the trial of 1843, there can be no doubt about his being part of the national leadership following 1843. He took part in the most important of the national conferences, played an active part in the formulation of policy and the shaping of decisions. In 1844, on 15 April, the Chartists held a national conference, the National Convention of Industrious Classes, at the Carpenters' Hall, Manchester. Pilling was a delegate to this conference, and P. M. McGrath was in the chair. The resolutions before the conference dealt with the Ten-Hour Bill, Irish Registrations Bill, Masters and Servants Bill,

Commons Enclosure Bill and an Address to the Industrious Classes.

They discussed a plan of organization and agreed to elect a committee to consider the several plans submitted to the conference. The *Northern Star*, 20 April 1844, reported: 'Mr Pilling moved Mr Connor as one of the committee.' On the Masters and Servants Bill, 'Mr Pilling moved "That the petition be forwarded to Mr T. S. Duncombe, for presentation (to Parliament)."' The delegates reported on the 'State of Things' in their localities and the instructions they had received from their constituents. Pilling spoke in the discussion. 'Mr Pilling thought that the Chartists would do well to take part in all local affairs and prove their power by putting their friends in office.' They discussed the work of the Executive and Mr O'Connor moved 'That the Convention do consider the conduct of the Executive from the commencement of their sittings to the present time; and that the Executive present their report.' 'Mr Pilling seconded the motion, which was agreed to.' When discussing finances, 'Mr Pilling moved, "That the last quarter's balance sheet be printed and paid for by the localities who require them."' Mr O'Connor seconded the motion.

The year 1845 was a difficult one. There was the threat of food scarcity and O'Connor had talked of famine. The potato crop had failed in Ireland and there was famine. An extraordinary meeting of Chartist delegates was held on Monday, 22 December 1845, to consider the crisis and adopt necessary measures. The conference was held in the Carpenters' Hall, Manchester. The problem that dominated it was the attitude of the Chartists to the Corn Laws. Up to that moment the Chartists had followed a rigid policy of refusing to cooperate with anyone for the repeal of the Corn Laws and themselves refusing to do anything towards repeal. They were firmly convinced that while the repeal of the Corn Laws would reduce the price of bread it would also result in a lowering of wages and that that was the real aim of the repealers, the capitalists. Now, however, they were faced with an actual shortage of food.

A resolution before the conference said that the scarcity would place the Chartists in a false position if they continued their opposition to the repeal of the Corn Laws. They had no faith that the repeal would better the conditions of the working

classes. It would equal free trade without first winning political power for the working classes and, therefore, it would be of class interest and not of national interest. The resolution tended towards neutrality. Pilling – whose credentials representing Ashton-under-Lyne had been accepted – spoke in the discussion. The *Northern Star*, 27 December 1845, reported: ‘Mr Pilling was convinced that the majority of the people in his district were in favour of opening the ports, it would be folly to oppose them, but it is a duty to show them that that measure would not be productive of the benefits predicted.’ Pilling addressed the conference on at least two further occasions.

Pilling showed not only close contact with the mood and feelings of the people he represented, but also an ability to react to a changing situation. He also showed a political maturity and understanding which justified his inclusion in the Chartist national leadership. How far he was integrated into that leadership is shown by what happened outside the conference. A meeting was held in the Manchester Hall of Science to receive the convention and hear the resolutions adopted by that body. This was followed by a ‘Great Chartist Supper’. The *Northern Star*, of 27 December 1845, reported:

When the convention had closed its sittings, Mr O’Connor invited the several delegates, together with Messrs Murray, Leach, Dixon and Wm. Gray of the Chartist Council to sup with him, after the public meeting on Tuesday at the Mosley Arms Hotel. At 12 o’clock forty sat down to an excellent supper, Mr O’Connor officiating as host and Mr Roberts as Vice Chairman. Never was there a more cheerful and convivial party assembled together. There were cheering speeches, songs and recitations. There were toasts: ‘The people, may they soon possess their rights, and be, in reality the source of all power’; ‘Thomas Slingsby Duncombe, Esq., M.P., the Chairman of Liberty.’ ‘W. P. Roberts, Esq., the Miners Attorney General, Labour’s most able legal defender . . . may he continue his glorious work, protect the poor.’

The toast moved by Mr O’Connor was ‘The Plug Drawers of 1842: and if they are to be drawers of water, may they always know the right well to go to.’ (Greater laughter and cheers.) Mr O’Connor: ‘I call upon Mr Pilling, the father of the movement, to speak for his children.’ Mr Pilling spoke to the toast in his usual style of simple but effective eloquence.

Before the third Chartist national petition was presented to Parliament in 1848 the movement campaigned to obtain five million signatures. Mass meetings and demonstrations were held up and down the country. Under the influence of the February 1848 events in France the movement grew and intensified. On 19 March 1848, a great mass meeting was held at Oldham Edge, about one mile from Oldham. O'Connor estimated the attendance at a quarter of a million. 'As soon as the meeting assembled the clouds gathered and the rain, driven by a sharp wind, began to fall; but presently the weather somewhat cleared and Richard Pilling was voted to the chair. He told the meeting that if they intended to carry the Charter they must be prepared to stand something more than rain.'¹¹ O'Connor and a number of other national leaders addressed the meeting.

On 3 April 1848 a National Convention was held in London to consider the state of affairs and to prepare for the presentation of the third national petition to Parliament on 10 April. It decided, in the event of the petition being rejected, 'That this Convention agree to the convocation of a National Assembly, to consist of delegates appointed at public meetings, to present the National Memorial to the Queen, and to continue permanently sitting until the Charter is the law of the land.'¹² The petition was rejected. The Convention, riven with differences, ended. The National Assembly met on 1 May. It was to act as an alternative to the government until the Charter should become law. Pilling was a delegate to the Assembly, representing Ashton-under-Lyne.

Among a number of questions discussed was that of the standing army. The *Northern Star* 13 May 1848 reported:

Mr Rankin moved 'That the Assembly is of the opinion that a standing army is contrary to the principles of the British Constitution and inimical to the liberty of the subject; we therefore recommend to the country the necessity of large public meetings in favour of a gradual abolition of the army, by allowing the men to retire upon giving timely notice; also, in favour of the abolition of flogging; and equalisation of pay; raising officers from the ranks; and a better provision for veterans – the provision to be in proportion of their services and to be given either in money or land.'

The *Northern Star* also reported:

Messrs. Pilling, Child, McCarthy, Shaw (Tower Hamlets), Basset, Dixon and other delegates supported the motion, not because they wished to see any claptrap to secure the sympathies of the soldiers, but in order to show that the Chartists were desirous that all their fellow subjects should enjoy the rights of citizens and the brutality of flogging as well as the system by which the poor man was precluded from rising in the army was strongly condemned.

The motion was carried unanimously.

Another discussion took place on a resolution about the raising of funds, moved by Ernest Jones. Pilling took part in the debate and the *Northern Star* on 13 May reported him as saying:

He believed that it would be some time before the Charter was made the law of the land. The Convention had met and broken up and the National Assembly had now met and unless they adopted some definite line of policy which the people of England saw, as well as themselves, was likely to prove successful, they would say the convention had been gammon and the assembly humbug (hear, hear.) They would not collect the money unless they saw some plan laid down for obtaining the Charter. In the year 1842 he was the sole cause of the turn-out in Lancashire, the originator of the whole proceeding and that organisation did not cost him £1. If then, an individual so humble as himself could with an outlay of a single pound bring about such a state of confusion in Lancashire, Cheshire and Derbyshire, what might be done if the people of this country would but unite and raise a large sum to carry on the contest? (hear, hear). It was his firm opinion that they would never obtain the Charter until they showed themselves by their union and energy, prepared to take it.

He had no illusion as to what they faced. Money alone would not bring them the Charter. His experience had taught him that unity was a necessity, that a practical policy was necessary which the masses could understand and which would unite them. The Charter was not around the corner. His stature and confidence had risen to a point where he could say all this to a gathering of the top leaders of the Chartist party.

The making of a working-class militant

Evidence has been given to show that Richard Pilling was not just a simple, ordinary, intelligent workman who made an extremely able plea for amelioration of distressing conditions. That he was a Chartist and one of the leaders of Chartism must now be beyond doubt. However, this is not the complete man. To know the whole man one needs to know not only of his devotion to the cause of Chartism, but also of his energy in the struggle to defend and improve the conditions of the people. One needs to know of his versatility, his humour, his tact, his broad, all-round interest in the human problems of the people of his time.

At a meeting of 5–6,000 at Waterloo Road, Stockport, on 15 August 1842, a constable reported Pilling as saying:

Fellow Townsmen, for I may so call you having lived amongst you so long and having been at so many meetings attended by thousands, and having been in prison, I do not know whether it would be safe for me to own it or not; but I may avow that I have the honour to be the father of this movement and the sole cause of your being ladies and gentlemen at the present time; for the masters of Ashton had thought proper to offer a reduction of 25 per cent upon their wages. I then caused the bellman to go round and call the meeting swearing by the God of Heaven that, if the reduction took place, we would annihilate the system and cause the day of reckoning. I then addressed a meeting of 12,000. I later went to Stalybridge and addressed a meeting of 10,000. I then addressed a meeting at Hyde of 10,000 and at Dukinfield of 5,000. At every meeting they came to a resolution to work no more till they got the same wages as they had in February 1840.

He then said he addressed a meeting at Royton which came to the same resolution. He called a meeting at Oldham.

In the course of the last three weeks I have addressed upwards of 300,000 in different parts of Lancashire and Cheshire. We then went to Droylsden and Manchester, and the people of Droylsden swore by the God of Heaven they would not work any more until they had got their price of 1840. They then came to Stockport and caused all mills to be stopped.

He said he had been in all parts of South Lancashire and at

Burnley, Chorley, Bolton, Preston, Colne, Padiham, Clitheroe, Todmorden, Blackburn.

You must be sure and stick out, and not go to your work; for if you do the masters will crush you down . . . I know the law of conspiracy and there never yet was a good thing got, but some one had to suffer for it. But they may put me in prison for I don't care a damn for being within the prison walls.¹³

He finished by exhorting them to stick out.

Apart from the evidence this offers of Pilling's campaigning to prepare for the General Strike and to ensure a one hundred per cent turn-out, this prodigious effort indicates the energy of the man in the interests of the workers. Considering the energy he must have expended in these months of campaigning, one would have thought he would have been physically exhausted at the end of the General Strike. Add to this the emotional exhaustion he must have felt at the end of the trial, and one would be justified in thinking that he would reduce his activity for a period.

However, within months of the ending of the trial the cotton workers of Ashton and district were to prove that not only were they not defeated or intimidated, still less demoralized, as a result of the General Strike. On the contrary they took the offensive against the cotton masters for wage increases, with Pilling again playing a leading role.

Richard Pilling was destined to pay a price for his participation in and leadership of the workers' struggles. In his speech from the dock at the trial, he told the tragic story of his dying second eldest son. 'I have seen that son lying on a sick bed and dying pillow, and having nothing to eat but potatoes and salt . . . with neither medical aid, nor any of the common necessaries of life.' That ' . . . good and industrious lad', sixteen years of age, who had worked twelve hours a day in a factory for six years, died before the commencement of the General Strike. In reporting the conclusion of the 1843 Ashton strike – the turn-outs got the 'list' prices – the *Northern Star's* Ashton correspondent stated:

I will give one act of tyranny, Mr Editor, poor Pilling has a son 19 years of age; a weaver. He is as good a workman as any in our town, and as good a character. And, yet, on Wednesday morning after the

men were in, his heartless, cold blooded tyrant employer turned him upon the street without a moment's warning, assigning as his only reason 'That he was Pilling's son!' O, Sir, what practical Christians these modern heathens are; IN VISITING THE SINS OF THE FATHERS UPON THE CHILDREN!!!

The *Northern Star* added an editorial footnote:

On this we have but 2 or three words to say; if the operatives of Ashton in whose service Pilling has well and boldly acted, permit Pilling's son to be without the means of existence, *they ought to 'fall too and be d--n--d'*. The remedy is in their own hands, and very simple. They can subscribe a few pounds, either as shares in a Co-operative Provision Store, of which young Pilling could be manager; or by way of *loan*, to start him in business for himself; and when he is so started, either in one way or the other, *they can buy their provisions off him*. They can do this, and they must do it, or consent to be considered *ungrateful* and classed with the tyrant master who seeks to doom PILLING to starvation.¹⁴

Pilling, while concerned about his family, saw the defence of their interests in the defence of the interests of the working class as a whole. The ill-fortune and persecution he suffered did not deter him from the struggle. Nor was he hidebound in his thinking and conduct in the vicious battles that were being waged.

This is best illustrated by his attitude to the Corn Laws and to strike action. In March 1842, the Ashton-under-Lyne cotton employers came forward with a demand for a reduction in wages of ten per cent. A mass meeting of operatives was held. Pilling was one of the speakers, but he was not an irresponsible agitator or fomentor of strikes. He judged the situation as unfavourable to the operatives and advocated no strike action. 'If they would take notice of the state of the country, no one would recommend a turn-out.' It was a period of trade recession, mass unemployment, and a series of strikes in Lancashire towns had been broken, with operatives forced back to work for reduced rates 'By those Corn-Law repealing gentlemen. . . .'

The *Northern Star* reported him as saying of the latter, 'He had no doubt that if the Corn Laws had been repealed, the cotton masters, instead of taking ten per cent, would have taken twenty, thirty, or forty per cent. There was no hope but in the

achievement of their political rights. They would never be protected until they had the vote.' Leaving aside the implication of the political side being primary, we have to note that nearly four years later at the Extraordinary Chartist Conference in December 1845, Pilling declared in favour of, '... Opening the ports (to corn).' He was versatile enough to make changes in his tactical thinking and approach to the political and practical questions of the day.

He could be tactful when necessary, he could show a sense of humour on occasion; he was not limited to fighting on the wage issue alone, though he saw that as the most important part of the class struggle at the time. He was interested in the social problems of the people, not only in the sense of the daily struggle against worsening standards or for slight immediate improvements, but in a deep class sense. He fought for the Ten Hour Bill, against the physical exhaustion of the working class and for permanent improvement in the physical condition of the working class. Again he took his own personal position typifying the position of the working class as a whole. In his speech at the trial he said '... I worked 12 hours a day... and the longer and harder I worked the poorer and poorer I have become every year, until, at last, I am nearly exhausted... Gentlemen, I am somewhere about 43 years of age. I was asked last night if I were not 60. But if I had as good usage as others, instead of looking like a man of 60, I should look something like a man of 36.' Reporting the Chartist Camp meeting at Oldham Edge in March 1848, the *Guardian* says 'About 1 o'clock, an old man named Richard Pilling from Ashton-under-Lyne (one of the Chartists tried at Lancaster in 1843) was called to the chair.' Pilling was then around 48 years of age. In his speech at the trial he said that if it had not been for the General Strike, '... I firmly believe thousands would have starved to death.'

At the Feargus O'Connor trial, when assailed by the most powerful forces of the state and possibly facing a sentence of years in prison, Pilling nevertheless felt duty bound to include in his speech of defence from the dock an exposure of the conditions and treatment of women workers. 'I have seen in the factory in which I have worked, wives and mothers working from morning till night with only one meal and a child brought to suck at them twice a day.' After describing how certain

employers will not employ men, only women, he quotes two examples (both from Stockport). Mr Orrell, the then mayor of Stockport, employing 600 hands, would not allow one *man* to work within the mill and a similar situation existed at Mr Bradshaw's mill. He went on to say, 'These are a few instances that came within my own knowledge; but there are thousands of others. In consequence of females employed under these circumstances, the overlookers, managers, and other tools take most scandalous liberties with them.'

The class-conscious worker

'Pilling's speech in defence was distinguished from all the rest by a particularly impressive description of the misery prevailing among the working men in 1841 and 1842. . . . After this speech neither judge nor jury could any longer shut their eyes to the fact that it was only the frightful misery that was responsible for the excesses during the strike, and that on the whole the workmen had displayed much patience and self-control.'¹⁵ Max Beer's treatment of Pilling and the strike is sympathetic, as is that of other historians, but his estimation of Pilling's speech is the same as that given by the judge and taken up by O'Connor and others. There seems to be grounds for believing that both prosecution and defence welcomed Pilling's speech and the particular emphasis given to it. That was 1843, in the midst of and immediately after the trial. In the century since then, it should have been possible to have made a more complete and objective analysis of the speech and assessment of the man. Limiting the story of Pilling to his exposure of the misery and suffering of the working class in 1841 and 1842, limits the man and is a distortion of both his speech and his political position.

The key to understanding Pilling, the man, and the speech he made at Lancaster Assizes lies in the fact that he combined his leadership of the daily struggles of the working class with a broad vision of social change and never lost an opportunity of urging it. Pilling was a class-conscious worker. 'What might be done if the people of this country would but unite.' He is of the firm opinion, '. . . That they would never obtain the Charter until they showed themselves by their union and energy, prepared to take it.' He showed a depth of understanding of the

role of the press in modern society. At the 11 May 1839 meeting he moved the resolution of support for Feargus O'Connor, '... and the *Northern Star* so far as it advocates democracy.' A year later at the meeting to protest against the harsh conditions which O'Connor was enduring in York Castle he said that the punishment being inflicted on O'Connor was not because he had published this or that, but because he was the head of the movement, 'And because he had established a press which spoke the voice of the people of this country.'

Nearly eighty years later, Lenin wrote a letter to Tom Bell, one of the founders and leaders of the newly formed Communist Party of Great Britain. Referring to the developments in the British labour movement, he said, 'What is important is . . . to start a paper of the working class . . . not in the ordinary and usual manner – but as an economic and political tool of the *masses* in their struggle.'¹⁶ That was how Pilling treated the *Northern Star*.

Taking account of his statements on the ten-hour day, on women factory workers, on soldiers in the standing army, on an educated working class which would result in the Charter becoming the law of the land, plus the fact that his master had promised to take him back '... So long as I am a good workman', Richard Pilling emerges, not as a 'mob orator', 'a plug-rioter', 'a casual leader', but as a skilled, class-conscious workman, an able leader and organizer of working men, prepared to sacrifice for his class. He seems also to have been an able speaker who could move an audience. He was a mild mannered man and obviously devoted to his family.

This comes across with much feeling in a letter he sent from America to his wife. Like many thousands of active Chartists, victimized, without work or prospects of work, hounded and driven from pillar to post, he emigrated to the United States towards the end of 1848. In his very first letter he wrote:

Dear Wife and Children, I write to you hoping to find you in good health, as these few lines leave me at present. I landed on the 11th of October, and stopped in New York six days, but could not get work. I heard they wanted weavers at this place. I left New York City at five o'clock in the afternoon and landed at Kindernook at five o'clock on the following morning, which is 130 miles from New York City up the Hudson River, and five miles from this place. They landed me in

a wood by myself, and there was neither man nor house to be seen. I walked into the wood and found a tavern, and stopped till daylight, and got my breakfast for twenty-five cents. I had then ten cents left. It was a wet morning, and the roads very bad. I commenced on the following morning weaving on four looms, twenty-eight inches wide, sixty picks in one inch, thirty-eights yards long, 32's weft and twist, for 10d per cut.

The letter is mainly about conditions and hours of work in the factory, and the price of every day necessities, and in spite of his own plight and that of his family, he raised the question of the ten-hour day for workers in America. He asked his wife to give a copy of the letter to George Julian Harney and convey his respects to Mrs Harney and to a number of other friends. He asked her to get the letter published in the *Northern Star* and concluded: 'Dear Wife and Children, let me know how you intend to act with respect to coming to this country, and I will begin to prepare. . . . So no more at present, from your affectionate husband and father.'¹⁷ Evidently his wife was at one with him. She must have been a capable and understanding woman. In his trial speech he said of her, 'I have a nervous wife—a good wife—a dear wife—a wife I love and cherish. . . .'

Richard Pilling was a rounded personality, even if not a polished politician. He was deeply interested in the day-to-day struggles of the working class, and at all times conscious of the need for social change as the only way in which there could be radical and permanent change in the terrible exploitation and oppression of the working class. In the light of all this the characterization made by Judge Baron Rolfe, cannot be accepted as complete or final. In so far as this estimate of Pilling had a bearing on the characterization of the General Strike, the 'spontaneous outburst' theory must be equally suspect.

NOTES

1. F. C. Mather, 'The General Strike of 1842', in *Provincial Labour History* (ed. J. H. Porter), University of Exeter, 1972, p. 10.
2. *Trial*, pp. 367–89.
3. *ibid.*, p. 252.
4. W. H. Crook, *Communism and the General Strike*, Connecticut USA, 1960, p. 14.

5. *Trial*, p. 255.
6. Crook, op. cit., pp. 16–17.
7. PRO HO 40/41 ff. 90, 107, 108.
8. *Northern Star*, 18 April 1840.
9. *Trial*, p. 61.
10. *Northern Star*, 6 June 1840.
11. R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement*, London, 1854, p. 298.
12. *ibid.*, p. 309.
13. *Trial*, pp. 53–5.
14. *Northern Star*, 9 December 1843.
15. Max Beer, *History of British Socialism*, London, 1940, Part 3, p. 152.
16. V. I. Lenin, *On Britain*, Moscow, n.d., p. 563.
17. *Northern Star*, 16 December 1848.

Alexander Hutchinson

Champion of trade union unity

The preceding chapter showed that long before the strike commenced one of the most important leaders had a record of struggle and some basic understanding of the class confrontation taking place in society at the time. As this was new evidence – in the sense that it had not been fully used, in so complete a sense, in previous accounts of the 1842 General Strike – it of necessity modified the estimation of the spontaneous character of the strike. Our evidence so far has been limited to one leader of the strike and to one particular phase – that of popular mass leadership. Alexander Hutchinson typifies the trade union side of the strike.

Hutchinson, like Pilling, had a record of service to the working class prior to the General Strike. While not so colourful as Pilling's, his whole life and activity in the trade union movement inevitably led – as it did with Pilling – to his playing an active leadership role in the strike. Like Pilling, Hutchinson had his record suitably trimmed so that he appeared on the scene of history as a literary and not political member of a trade union.

At the time of his arrest and court case (during the General Strike) the *Guardian*¹ gave some biographical details of Hutchinson. He was 34–35 years of age, married but ‘. . . we believe has no children’. He was a smith, highly skilled. He was a socialist of long standing, he had attended meetings of Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trade Union,² and he was a Chartist.

Following the failure of Owen's Grand National Consolidated Trade Union in 1834 there was a general falling off in efforts for trade union unity – in fact, a drawing inwards on the part of each individual trade union organization. The smiths of Manchester and South Lancashire, on the other hand, did not give up the striving to achieve unity among the five trades of

mechanism – millwrights, engineers, iron moulders, smiths and mechanics. The prime movers in this were the smiths of Manchester and leading them was a group of workers employed at Sharp, Roberts & Co., machine manufacturers, at Oxford Road, Manchester, at that time the largest and most advanced machine-makers in the world. The outstanding figure in this group was Alexander Hutchinson who was chairman of that decisive trades conference which on Tuesday, 16 August 1842, issued the calls for labour to cease ‘until the Charter be the law of the land.’

That Hutchinson played this role was no accident. From what one can gather from contemporary publications, he seemed to have followed a general line of defence of working-class interests and at decisive moments could present a clear working-class line which helped to carry the movement forward. It was he who, early in 1840, made the proposal for the publication of a monthly paper for the smiths, but which should be open to all in the five trades. In an article headed ‘History of the United Trades’ Association’ in the eighth issue of the *Journal* (1 March 1841) the story is briefly told of how the paper came into existence. It was written by the editor and was unsigned.³

It recounts the efforts to build unity among the five trades of mechanism and quotes extracts from the prospectus put before a meeting. ‘A General Delegate Meeting of the Associated Smiths (now called the Smiths’ Benevolent Friendly Sick and Burial Society) held at Bolton on Monday April 6th 1840; when . . . the principal portion of their time was taken up in considering the causes that have produced so much evil, disunion, differences of opinion and division of interests among the great body of trade unions in this country.’

A lengthy and important discussion ensued upon the subject. It was in consequence resolved that a monthly periodical be established to serve as the organ of communication between the various societies; to represent their interests and feelings; and to defend the rights of the industrious population at large.’

The ‘Trades Journal’

The first issue of the paper appeared on 4 July 1840. The Webbs assessed it as ‘a well written 16 pp 8vo. issued at first fortnightly

and afterwards monthly at 2d'.⁴ Twelve issues appeared up to 15 September 1841. The motto below the heading read: 'Numbers without Union are Powerless, and Union without Knowledge is Useless.' The paper was called *The Trades Journal*.

Alexander Hutchinson was the editor of the paper. At the same time he was the general secretary of the smiths' trade union. The character of the man comes out in the statement and speeches that exist. The August 1840 issue of *The Trades Journal* contained a brief report of an anniversary dinner of the Manchester Smiths' Benevolent Friendly Sick and Burial Society held on the night before the first issue of the paper appeared. One hundred-and-fifty members sat down to an 'excellent dinner' at the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street, Manchester. The following toasts were given during the evening: The Queen; Prince Albert and the rest of the Royal Family; Prosperity to the Smiths' Benevolent Friendly Sick and Burial Society. The latter toast was most enthusiastically received and was responded to by Mr Hutchinson, in a speech of considerable length and ability, showing the best means of improving the society by moral and temperate conduct on the part of its members and by attention to union and cultivating brotherly love in all its proceedings. He congratulated them on the great progress made by the society in the last two years and attributed their improvement and stability to the great moral revolution in character and habits, observable not only in the members of that society, but in the working classes generally. He concluded by urging the importance and necessity of all interested, joining the society; that as all received equal advantages, they might all bear equal burdens. The speech was frequently cheered during its delivery. It indicated the moral tones of the man – 'improving society by moral and temperate conduct'. He could talk of the feelings of jealousy . . . engendered between masters and men. He could refer to the habits of intemperance, but all this did not blind him to the realities of the situation of the working class; of the relationship between the working class and the capitalists.

It was this understanding which gave him a robust confidence in the working class. For him the workers were not cowed, demoralized slaves; for him they were intelligent workmen with skill and ability, but with a great need to organize and unite. For him this applied to the working class as a whole, but his

immediate practical test was to help his own fellow workmen – the men of the five trades of mechanism – to organize and unite.

The Webbs and *The Trades Journal* tell us something of this man's efforts to build unity among the engineering workers in the period prior to the 1842 General Strike, the period of the early days of Chartism. The Webbs tell us of the eight months' strike of London engineers for shortening the hours of labour to sixty per week with extra pay for over time, which was successful. In the continuing struggle for reduction of hours, the idea of national amalgamation took shape. They say 'Whilst Newton was bringing the London societies into line, the Lancashire engineers were moving in the same direction.' In 1839 a committee of engineering trades at Bolton urged the establishment of, 'one concentrated union'; and in the following year, through the energy of Alexander Hutchinson, the secretary of the Friendly United Smiths of Great Britain and Ireland, a United Trades' Association was formed in Lancashire, to comprise the 'Five Trades of Mechanism, viz: mechanics, smiths; moulders; engineers and millwrights.'⁵

The Bolton committee issued a letter in July 1839 which read:

Fellow Workmen: It is hoped the time has at length arrived when working men, who are desirous of uniting for the protection of their labour, will no longer be led astray by the fancied notion that their own individual trades can secure them from the oppressive encroachments of the capitalists and others, who, from their very circumstances, are ever on the watch for opportunities of reducing the value of labour, not caring for the happiness of those whose ingenuity and industry have contributed to their ease and enabled them to accumulate princely fortunes.⁶

A number of proposals were made for discussion. Early in 1840 the Manchester Smiths held a meeting and discussed these proposals. On 6 April 1840 'A General Delegate Meeting of the Associated Smiths (now called the Smiths Benevolent Friendly Sick and Burial Society) was held at Bolton'.⁷ Following this, 'A committee consisting of deputies from the five trades in Manchester had been holding meetings at stated times since the month of October last'.⁸ They agreed on three general propositions and eight resolutions.⁹ The outcome of these preparatory discussions was 'The General Meeting of the Five

Trades of Mechanism held on Wednesday, 17th February, 1841 at the Hall of Science, Campfield, Manchester'. Mr Clarke of the Mechanics' Society was in the chair. He called on Mr Hutchinson to propose the first resolution 'That . . . a union . . . be formed by the five following trades – viz – millwrights, engineers, iron moulders, smiths and mechanics.' Hutchinson spoke to the resolution:

It is said that union is strength; and if one single society can do good, five can effect much more. You are all engaged upon the same work – often in the same workshops; your interests are inseparably the same. Yet when an oppression comes, your employers do not reduce you all at one time; it better serves their end to do so gradually and when one or two branches have been conquered, the rest become an easy prey. Instead of one shop or place having little disturbances, let it be general and by such a practice we shall avoid that ill feeling and contention I have before mentioned.

On the premiss laid down by the Bolton smiths, 'oppressive encroachments of the capitalists and others . . . of reducing the value of labour', Hutchinson deprecated '. . . little disturbances'. He appealed, 'let it be general', not an outright call for a general strike, but in that direction. February 1841 was a stage on the road to August 1842.¹⁰

The United Trades' Association

The meeting unanimously passed Hutchinson's resolution, and also another which dealt with the organization of the new body and its name: it was to be known as *The United Trades' Association*.¹¹ How important these developments were at the time can be gauged from the secret interest which the local police, military authorities and the Home Office took in these activities. Colonel Thomas Wemyss, Assistant Adjutant General of Manchester, wrote to Samuel March Phillips, Under Secretary at the Home Office on 2 February 1841, that he had attended a meeting the night before at the Carpenters' Hall. There was no disturbance. Doyle and Leach were the lecturers. Their aim appeared to have been to induce trade unions to join the Chartists. He had been told that machine makers, blacksmiths, iron founders, millwrights and iron turners

proposed forming a general union embracing twenty miles round Manchester so that if masters attempted any reduction of wages, all could resist it. They proposed to hold a meeting at the Carpenters' Hall on the 17th. (The meeting was held at the Hall of Science.)¹²

This prolonged and determined effort to unite these local and sectional interests into one trade union organization in these, as yet, early days of trade unionism did not result in immediate success. Of this particular effort to unite the five trades of mechanism, Angela Tuckett comments: 'Unhappily, differences of outlook, custom and practice both between the five societies and between sections of trades within them, prevented this federation of independent craft unions ever being established. Instead, from its remnants ten years later the Amalgamated Society of Engineers was formed as a single union to cover Great Britain and Ireland,' and adds: 'At least 50 towns by 1861 were also linked in the United Order of Smiths. Their headquarters were in Liverpool, carrying forward the traditions of the Friendly United Smiths of Great Britain and Ireland which, thirty years before, led by Alexander Hutchinson, had played an important part in trade union affairs in Lancashire.'¹³

Was this striving for unity and for strong trade union organization on the part of Alexander Hutchinson the work of an average trade unionist wanting to protect the narrow craft interests of a highly-paid skilled section of workers? Or did this man have a class-consciousness that saw and understood the interests of his class as a whole? Perhaps a little light can be thrown on this question by relating some incidents arising out of his trade union activities and responsibilities.

During 1841 a strike of stone masons working on the House of Commons, Nelson's Monument and Woolwich Dockyard aroused a great deal of sympathy and support among trade unionists throughout the country. The Tory and Liberal papers supported the masters, refused to state the case of the masons and in some cases maliciously calumniated them. Meetings and conferences were held in the main towns and cities to organize moral and financial support for the masons. One such conference was held in the Carpenters' Hall, Manchester, on Wednesday evening, 3 November 1841, composed of men from all trades. 'A dense mass of working men were assembled',

reported the *Northern Star* of 13 November. It proceeded to report:

Mr Hutchinson, a member of the National Smiths Society moved the next resolution. He said it was regarding the press and he hoped the reporters present would bear with him, as they were connected with the press. The masons had been denied the privilege of speaking their sentiments through the means of the press. In giving them a specimen of the conduct of the press towards the masons, he read an extract from the *Sunday Times* which drew forth strong symptoms of disapprobation. The masons had been refused a reply, even if they paid for it as an advertisement. The speaker proposed the following resolution: 'That this meeting cannot pass unnoticed the malicious manner in which *The Times*, *Weekly Dispatch*, *Morning Advertiser* and *Sunday Times* have falsified and misrepresented the strike of the masons, and feeling as we do that such unjustifiable pandering to the sordid motives of the capitalists is a direct invasion of the rights of the productive classes of the British Empire, pledges itself to discontinue its support to the above named papers while they pursue such a course, and to support those only which advocate the broad principle of universal rights and the emancipation of the working classes of this country.'¹⁴

Like Pilling, he understood the role of protest, but protest against falsification and misrepresentation was not enough. He demanded universal rights and the emancipation of the working classes. That was the political and ideological position of socialists and class-conscious Chartists at the time.

Support for Chartism

Another incident which demonstrated his association with and loyalty to Chartism was the attempt of the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL) to inveigle Hutchinson and some of his workmates in their scheming to entice trade unionists and the trade union movement, if possible, to support their campaign to get the repeal of the Corn Laws. They organized a conference of operative delegates at the beginning of 1842 at which Hutchinson and some of his associates were present. In his speech or 'address' to the conference he offered no objection to the demand for the repeal of the Corn Laws.

Alexander Hutchinson was a big fish to hook and to have

landed him would have given a tremendous impetus to the Corn Law Repealing manufacturers' campaign, hence the attempt to enlist his support. A resolution was passed by the conference asking him and another, 'To organize the trades of Manchester on the question upon which the conference had met.'¹⁵ On Wednesday, 2 March 1842 a conference was held at the Hop Pole Inn, Deansgate, with the object of organizing a demonstration on Kersal Moor in support of the Charter and the abolition of the Corn Laws. Hutchinson was elected to the chair. He explained the object of the meeting and stated 'That his trade would come out for the Charter and nothing less.'¹⁶ Every delegate from the trades (there were nine trade union organizations represented) expressed himself in the same manner, that is, that they were instructed to say they would advocate nothing short of the whole Charter. As the meeting had been called at short notice and the attendance was not as large as expected, they decided to convene another conference, calling on all trades to hold special meetings to elect delegates.

If these statements had a disheartening effect on the Repealers, then the conference that followed on 14 March 1842, and the address that was issued must have been a body blow to their schemes. It may be worth while to deal with this conference in a little detail as in some ways it was an important step in the build-up to the General Strike. It clearly defined the attitude of the trade unions to the Anti-Corn Law League; it indicated the widespread support for Chartism among the trade union organizations and the association of Chartism with the General Strike.

The *Northern Star* of 19 March 1842 reported that there were a total of sixty-four delegates present, and gave the names of the delegates and the organizations they represented. Of the sixty-four, sixteen were non-trade union, non-factory delegates, and eleven of the sixteen were delegates from Chartist organizations. Forty-eight delegates represented some twenty-four different trades and factories. Hutchinson, a delegate from the Smiths, was called to the chair. The chairman explained the object of the meeting and after agreement was reached that five minutes be allowed each speaker and delegates to speak but once to one resolution, the discussion opened. The delegate of the silk dyers was first in discussion. He was instructed to say that his

constituents would come out for the People's Charter, for nothing less and would allow no appendage. The calico printers were next. They were for the Charter, nothing less and nothing mixed with it. The delegate from the fustian cutters said he was instructed to vote for the Charter, nothing less, and no appendage. The delegate from the bricklayers supported the question of coming out for the Charter, unmixed with anything else.

Messrs Donavon and Lane were coming out for the Charter alone, nothing less, without any appendages and some ten or a dozen others spoke in similar strain. Earlier in the discussion, Mr Hutchinson, '... said that he had great experience with the trades and he knew that there were thousands who were strict Corn Law Repealers whom recent circumstances had made Chartists'. The resolution put to the conference read: 'That if any union takes place betwixt us, the sixty-four delegates assembled in this room representing the trades and workshops and political bodies of Manchester, it must and shall be a union based on principle, and not expediency. We, therefore, acting in accordance with our instructions, now pledge ourselves to agitate for the Charter, the whole Charter, and nothing less than the Charter, unmixed with any other question.'¹⁷ An amendment for the Charter and Repeal received five votes, the resolution received fifty-nine votes. A committee was elected to prepare an address 'to the trades and public generally on the principles of the People's Charter.' Five delegates, one of whom was Alexander Hutchinson, were elected to draft the address.

With such overwhelming support for the Charter, the address issued on behalf of the 64 delegates inevitably represented an appeal to the trades and public generally on behalf of Chartism.

The opening and closing lines were not without an undertone of general strike. 'If ever there was a time when coming events cast forth the shadows of mighty convulsions in society it is now.' Towards the end of the address, '... Bring the devouring monsters – class legislation to the ground . . . convene your shops and trades' meetings; elect your councils . . .' The address dealt with the struggle of the trade unions to maintain their standards; with class legislation; with the growth of the national debt; with the standing army, etc., '... And this for the aggrandisement of an idle, vicious, reckless, pampered

aristocracy, and a grasping avaricious, knavish, plundering moneyocracy . . . very shortly, there will be only very rich and very poor in this country.' It called for 'Securing political power to the working classes.' Then the six points of the Charter with an explanation of each was given and it concluded with the above call.

These meetings and the issuing of the address took place less than five months before the General Strike. In view of Hutchinson's role in these events, can he be treated as an innocent in relation to the General Strike? Can the contribution these events made to the preparations for the General Strike be ignored, and can we dismiss or underestimate the association of the trade union movement with the Chartists? Throughout the months leading up to the strike large numbers of trade union organizations held discussions on whether to affiliate to the National Charter Association. Hardly an issue of the *Northern Star* appeared without its 'Chartist Intelligence' columns containing items reporting specially convened meetings of trade union branches addressed by speakers from the NCA and then taking decisions to form a trades branch of the NCA. Regular reports appeared of trade union branch meetings addressed by national and local leaders of Chartism.

Trade unions prepare for the General Strike

Here are three examples of such reports. They follow the Hop Pole Inn meetings and precede the General Strike. Hutchinson was personally involved in the second. On 4 June 1842, is a report headed: 'Important meeting of the Mechanics of Manchester.' 'A general meeting of the above body took place . . . on Tuesday evening, May 31st, to take into consideration the propriety of joining the National Charter Association. The following resolution was carried with . . . a forest of hands in favour . . . and only three against. . . . "That we, the mechanics of Manchester, do forthwith join the National Charter Association, and that a committee of nine, with power to add to their number, be appointed to carry out the forthgoing principles."' James Leach of the national executive committee of the National Charter Association had addressed the meeting.

Fifteen days later the Manchester smiths held a meeting

convened by circular. At the appointed hour the large room of the Olympic Tavern was densely crowded. There could not have been less than 200 smiths present, ‘. . . Delegates from the carpenters and joiners . . . plainly and excellently explained the principles of the Charter . . . Messrs Harrison, Dann and Nuttall, on behalf of the Mechanics, addressed the meeting . . . Mr Leach next addressed the meeting in his most powerful argumentative manner . . . after which the following resolution was moved, “That we the smiths of Manchester do forthwith join the National Charter Association.”’ The resolution was carried unanimously amidst loud cheers. A committee of nine was appointed with Alexander Hutchinson as a member, after which ‘Mr Hutchinson, late editor of the Trades Journal, addressed the meeting in a speech replete with good sense on the necessity of union to obtain the Charter.’¹⁸

The third meeting reported was held on Tuesday 12 July. It was a general meeting of the hammermen of Manchester to discuss ‘The propriety of joining the National Charter Association. . . . Deputations from the mechanics and smiths laid their views on the subject before the meeting. Then Mr Leach spoke. He was received with repeated rounds of applause; and in a masterly manner unmasked the monster class legislation.’ The six points of the Charter were read to the meeting and the resolution, ‘That we, the hammermen of Manchester, being convinced of the truth and justice of the People’s Charter, do forthwith join the National Charter Association as a body’, was passed.¹⁹

One further word about this man to help us estimate his role and leadership in the General Strike. At the height of the strike he was arrested and charged with malicious and seditious libel and attending an unlawful assembly. At his trial some two months later, with the strike broken, the prosecution went out of its way to give him a good character. He had never been a Chartist or a political character. He had taken pains to instruct the lower classes. His paper had been merely literary and not political!²⁰ The *Morning Chronicle* of 23 August 1842, reporting the decision of the trades conference to dissolve at the end of the second week of the strike, said: ‘This praiseworthy resolution has been marvellously accelerated by the arrest of the president of the Chartist Delegates. . . . His name “Alexander

Hutchinson” has appeared at the foot of all placards publishing the resolutions of the Delegates’ Conferences as chairman of that body.’

The arrest of Hutchinson was carried out without regard to legality, but quite consciously with the aim being to ‘marvellously accelerate’ the breaking of the strike. So, while Hutchinson was a ‘Chartist’ and ‘Socialist’ when leading the strike, with the strike broken, he became a man of ‘good character’. The authorities did not underestimate Hutchinson and the role he was playing. His years of effort in building trade union unity and improved organization and communication acted as a form of preparation for the General Strike.

As standing chairman of the central trades conference, he acted as linchpin – on guard for the charter and for unity. Opening the second day’s proceedings of the Great Delegate Conference (Tuesday 16 August), he stated, ‘He had seen a great change in the opinion of the working men of Manchester . . . They were as earnest as ever and appeared to see more than ever the necessity of a great struggle for their political rights.’ He added ‘They would not be men if they did not adopt every measure they could to ensure a triumph and gain their political rights.’ He firmly guided the conference towards unity behind the Charter. ‘The two amendments would leave a minority, which, though small, would tend to weaken their measures; because on such important questions they should by all means be unanimous. If they were not, the consequences would be injurious to the great body of the working classes.’²¹ He urged the delegates to refuse to accept the authority of the magistrates in dispersing the meeting on the Tuesday evening. In opening the conference on the Wednesday morning, he said: ‘He hoped the delegates would not consider that their meeting at the Hall of Science had been forcibly broken up by the magistrates. The delegates maintained their ground in an orderly and becoming manner until they concluded the business of the day, and then peaceably dispersed.’²²

A testimonial from his fellow workers

At the time of his arrest and trial, a special general meeting of the smiths was held and an appeal was launched to raise £200

for his defence. ' . . . Our brother has at all times endeavoured to render his services for the benefit of his fellow men, and has always maintained a character of honour and integrity . . . no labourer in this high and holy cause is more justly entitled to see your benevolence than the victim for whom we are appealing.'²³ Hutchinson, like Pilling, was a leader, in contact with the masses – an active participant in the day to day struggles of the time, clearly influenced by his workmates, the callous character of the employers, and the vigorous discussions and debates going on in the ranks of the trade union and Chartist movements. He took his stand for militancy, for the General Strike, and for Chartism.

Without the political authority and experience of men like Hutchinson, it is inconceivable that a general strike could have taken place.

NOTES

1. *Manchester Guardian*, 24 and 27 August 1842.
2. S. and B. Webb, *History of the Trade Union Movement*, London, 1913, pp. 137–8.
3. *The Trades Journal*, Manchester, 1 March 1841, p. 115; S. and B. Webb, op. cit., p. 138, ' . . . Probably written by Alexander Hutchinson, general secretary of the Friendly United Smiths of Great Britain and Ireland.'
4. *ibid.*, p. 190.
5. *ibid.*, pp. 189–90.
6. *The Trades Journal*, August 1840, pp. 30–1.
7. *ibid.*, March 1841, pp. 114–15.
8. *ibid.*, February 1841, p. 97.
9. For the full story of the struggle for unity and amalgamation among the five trades of mechanism, see Angela Tuckett, *Blacksmiths History*, London, 1974, pp. 41–4.
10. *The Trades Journal*, March 1841, p. 117; Col. Wemyss to Phillips, 2 February 1841, HO 45/43; Col. Wemyss to General Napier, 18 February 1841, HO 40/45.
11. *The Trades Journal*, March 1841, pp. 117–23.
12. Wemyss to Phillips, 2 February 1841, HO 45/43.
13. Tuckett, op. cit., p. 2.
14. *Northern Star*, 13 November 1841.
15. *Manchester Guardian*, 5 January 1842.
16. *Northern Star*, 5 March 1842.
17. *ibid.*, 19 March 1842.
18. *ibid.*, 18 June 1842.

19. *ibid.*, 16 July 1842.
20. *The Times*, 14 October 1842.
21. *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842.
22. *Manchester Guardian*, 20 August 1842.
23. *British Statesman*, 17 September 1842.

The Trades Conferences

Inasmuch as the trades delegates in Manchester endeavoured to rise to their responsibilities, it would be difficult to maintain that the general strike for the People's Charter failed for want of leadership.¹

Men of the Trades. The country owes you a debt of everlasting gratitude . . . your conduct in the Carpenters' Hall has crowned you with immortal honour. There is not a working man in the three Kingdoms – there is not a son of poverty all the world over, to whom your names will not be dear, and whose hearts will not throb with ardent affection for you, when they shall come to know what you have done.²

The Evolution of the Trades Conference and of the strike policy

A leaderless general strike is not only a contradiction in terms, but also something difficult to imagine. In spite of what historians may say, the 1842 strikers consciously fought to create central and local leaderships. Simultaneously with the pulling of the plugs and the stopping of the factories, went the struggle to build a leadership for the guidance of the strike. There developed a persistent and conscious effort to unify the various trades and groupings of strikers by the method of the trades conference. This was not new to the trade union activists of the time. It was a method of bringing trades and delegates together to deal with particular problems. One such had been held on 26 June 1840 in Manchester to rally support for the Stockport weavers' strike (*Northern Star*, 4 July 1840). Another, held at the Carpenters' Hall on 3 November 1841 (*Northern Star*, 13 November 1841) was to organize support for the London Masons on strike. There had been others. They were not permanent organizations with regular delegates, like our modern trades councils, but convened as occasion demanded, convened by differing bodies and composed of delegates elected for the particular conference.

From the first day of the strike in Manchester there was

discernible a determined effort to establish a central strike leadership. On the evening of the day the strike commenced in Manchester, Tuesday 9 August 1842, a delegate meeting from all the power loom factories in Manchester was convened by the striking power loom weavers, 'to take into consideration the best means to be adopted to prevent the reduction which the masters are about to make'.³ Simultaneously with the steps taken by the weavers, the mechanics of Manchester independently proceeded to try to establish some central leadership. By Wednesday noon, 10 August, they had called a public open air meeting of millwrights, mechanics, moulders, smiths and engineers, near the gas works, Oxford Road, and it has been suggested that the meeting was called by Alexander Hutchinson, and a group of fellow workers from the Sharp, Roberts & Co. factory where they worked and which was near to the meeting place.

When the meeting had assembled, a party of the Rifle Brigade charged into the crowd, and one man had his hand run through with a bayonet. In the circumstances the mechanics had no alternative to disperse, but before doing so they agreed to meet later in the day at the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street. At that meeting they agreed to convene a public meeting of their trades in the Carpenters' Hall, at six o'clock the following morning. A formal notice requiring all mechanics, engineers, millwrights, moulders and smiths to attend was issued.⁴ At six o'clock on the morning of Thursday 11 August, the Carpenters' Hall was full of the men of the 'five trades of mechanism'. Later in the day delegates from other trades arrived and also delegates from other towns.⁵

Parallel to the evolution of the trades conference there was the evolution of policy for the General Strike. What did this meeting of mechanics do? It passed nine resolutions and adjourned to the following day. The most important resolutions were as follows: 'The People's Charter contains the elements of justice and prosperity and we pledge ourselves never to relinquish our demands until that document becomes a legislative enactment'; 'That a committee be appointed by this meeting to endeavour if possible, to secure a more general union before entering into any practical measures for redressing our grievances'; 'That this meeting pledges itself not to return to work until the decision of

the trades of Manchester generally be ascertained.’⁶ These resolutions were issued in the form of a placard over the signature of ‘John Middleton, Chairman’.

What clearly emerges from these resolutions is the changing character of the strike – an understanding that the main aim of the strike was for the People’s Charter. The demand for the Charter had already been voiced at the mass meetings where resolutions were passed, and three cheers for the Charter given at Mottram Moor on Sunday 7 August, at Hyde on Monday 8 August, at Granby Row, Manchester on Tuesday 9 August and probably at many more meetings, most of them unreported in the press at the time. It was this meeting of Manchester mechanics – an important section of the skilled trades – plus some delegates from other trades and other towns, that formally made the People’s Charter the aim of the strike. Secondly, and just as important, the aim was linked with the effort to secure a more general union, and with this a pledge not to return to work on their own. Finally, they looked to Manchester as the centre. They decided to meet again the following day.

Alongside the ‘mechanics’ efforts was another attempt to organize a delegate conference. On the same day, Thursday 11, a preliminary meeting of various trades and mill hands decided to organize a conference of ‘various trades and mill hands’ for the following day, Friday, at the Fustian Cutters room, 70 Tib Street at 10 o’clock in the morning ‘to consider the crisis . . . to elect delegates . . .’. This placard is signed by ‘William Boyd, Chairman’.

The two parallel lines of development of the trades conferences continued into the Friday with two trades conferences being held. The conference initiated by the ‘mill hands’ and others, met in the Fustian Cutters room at ten o’clock in the morning and passed two resolutions – one, a declaration that the strike was for the Charter, and the other that the operatives offer themselves as ‘conservators of the public peace’.⁷ The conference initiated by the ‘five trades of mechanism’ met in the Carpenters’ Hall at two o’clock. This was to allow time for the delegates and individuals who had attended the previous meetings to organize trades and general meetings in the morning and there to elect delegates to the afternoon conference. (Placards were on display calling

meetings of various trades at seven, nine, ten o'clock, and so on, and calling for delegates from these meetings to attend the conference at two o'clock.)

This conference – with representatives from Yorkshire as well as Lancashire – heard delegates report on the situation in their trade and on their attitude to the strike. Almost without exception they declared themselves in favour of turning the strike into one for the People's Charter. The conference passed a resolution which ended by stating: ' . . . That the only remedy for the present alarming distress and widespread destitution is the immediate and un mutilated adoption and carrying into law [of] the document known as the People's Charter. That this meeting recommends the people of all trades and callings forthwith to cease work until the above document becomes the law of the land.'⁸ This was the most authoritative declaration for the Charter, and call for strike action yet made. The conference also passed a resolution 'That a general meeting of delegates from all the various trades of Manchester be held on Monday afternoon in the Carpenters' Hall. . . .'

News of the decision of the Carpenters' Hall conference to call for a general meeting of trades' delegates swept round the town and the surrounding areas. The *Northern Star* correspondent writing on Sunday morning, 14 August, said the people are looking forward to the decisions of the trades delegates on Monday and that this 'evinces a firm settled purpose'. On the Saturday, a further trades delegate conference took place in the large room at the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street. This amalgamated the two Friday conferences. Again Mr John Middleton was called to the chair. A number of resolutions were passed and it was unanimously agreed to post the town with a placard headed:

JUSTICE! PEACE!! LAW!!! ORDER!!!!

We the delegates . . . Empowered by our constituents to watch over and guard the interests of the people we represent. . . . We call upon you to be prompt in the election of your delegates to the Great Delegate Conference which will be held in the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street, on Monday, August 15th 1842 at ten o'clock in the forenoon.

The Trades of Britain carried the *REFORM BILL*

The Trades of Britain shall carry the *CHARTER*

Three hundred and fifty-eight delegates were present.⁹

One of the other resolutions agreed to was 'That no person will be admitted to the delegate meeting on Monday next, unless such delegate brings his credentials duly signed by the chairman or secretary of a public meeting of the trade he represents.'¹⁰

That long weekend, Saturday and Sunday 13 and 14 August 1842, was a weekend of meetings large and small. Big meetings such as the power loom weavers meeting in the Carpenters' Hall on the Saturday evening passed six resolutions. Number two stated they would not go back to work until they obtained the prices paid in 1839. Number four called for the People's Charter. Number six protested at the factories employing women only. They elected a delegate to the conference on the Monday. (*Northern Star*, 20 August.) The block printers met on the Friday at the Fairfield Tavern, Fairfield Street, to hear a report from their delegate who had attended the mechanics' conference earlier in the day. A resolution was passed with acclamation adopting the resolutions of the mechanics' conference. They gave three cheers for the Charter and adjourned until the following day, Saturday (*Northern Star*, 20 August). At five o'clock on the Monday morning, the cotton spinners and card room workers met in the Carpenters' Hall. The large room was filled (it accommodated 3,000). Here too, six resolutions were passed. The first called for the ten-hour day; the third for an end to the practice of having to pay for the artificial light they worked in; and the sixth pledging not to return to work until the Charter was the law of the land, should the trades conference so decide. In spite of the fact that the magistrates had declared this particular meeting illegal and that all such meetings would be stopped, they decided to hold a further meeting to receive the report of the delegate conference (*Northern Star*, 20 August).

It was not only in Manchester that these big meetings of the trades took place, they were organized in all parts of the country. The scope of this study does not extend very far beyond Manchester and so suffice it to say that the towns, townships and villages affected by the strike, held public meetings – some, like Oldham on Monday morning, 15 August, with 18,000 people present and later in the day sectional meetings to elect delegates to attend the Manchester trades conference (*Advertiser*, 20

August). Similarly, there was a meeting at Bacup which continued for an hour and twenty minutes after the Riot Act had been read (*Northern Star*, 20 August). There were meetings in trade union clubs and premises and in pubs, where discussion took place on the aims and objects of the strike, where reports of the trades conferences that had already taken place were given, where resolutions were discussed and voted on, where delegates were elected to the 15 August trades conference. Nearly all these delegates were instructed how to vote.

The above, detailed account of three meetings that took place around that weekend gives some idea of the mood of the turn-outs and the direction of their thinking. These three meetings, however, were only a fraction of the meetings that took place over the next few days. If we ignore the *Northern Star* and *British Statesman*, both staunch Chartist newspapers, devoting a large amount of their space to reports of the strike and the activities of the strikers, and if we ignore the rest of the local and national press except the *Guardian*, if we ignore the existence of the turn-out outside Manchester (the whole of the press was reporting turn-out activities from Glasgow and the Scottish coalfields through the industrial areas of England to Merthyr Tydfil in South Wales) and if, further, we examine the issues of the *Guardian* for Saturday 13 August, Wednesday 17 August, and 24 August, we find that some twenty-five trades meetings were reported in the columns of these three issues and as the dates limit these meetings to the period immediately before and after the Great Delegate Conference of 15 August, then it is not difficult to see that the issues dealt with at these meetings mainly concerned that conference.

So, in the first week of the strike, the pattern of the growth of the trades conferences and their development towards a central trades conference as a leadership, takes shape. With it, too, the central aim of the strike became clear and the process of clarification was rapid. There was argument about the Charter versus the 1840 wage rates but the understanding of the great mass of the strikers was such that it became a sweeping movement of resolutions and other expressions for the Charter. As the conference of Monday 15, drew near, so the excitement and expectation increased. Everywhere pledges to carry out its decisions were made. Local decisions were postponed until a

report of the conference had been obtained. Local conferences and meetings were arranged to receive reports of the Monday conference.

This development towards a central trades conference, and therefore, a central leadership, was not only a natural consequence of what had gone before – the trades conference was already a recognized and accepted form of both achieving unity and organizing action on issues of local and national importance to the trades, but also the conscious effort of the local strike leaders to build that central leadership. The actual process which took place proves this to be correct. There were the general mass meetings with thousands attending, followed by mass meetings of particular trades: loom weavers, mechanics; the trades conferences of certain trades – the power loom weavers, the mechanics, the various trades and mill hands; then finally, the general trades conference. Each stage led to a higher one, leading to the central trades conference. Up to this point, while there were delegates from trades and towns attending the Manchester trades conferences, the delegates in the main were from Manchester itself, and all the delegates represented meetings of the trades or mass meetings. With the 15 August Great Delegate Conference we have, in addition, delegates attending who were elected at local trades conferences outside Manchester.

Local trades conferences outside Manchester

The first delegate trades conference in Bolton referred to in the press was held on Tuesday 16 August at the Crown Inn. It arose out of a mass meeting of operative cotton spinners held the day before, also at the Crown Inn. This meeting passed six resolutions. In addition to deciding to convene the trades conference, it pledged itself for lawfulness and the People's Charter. It embodied in the second resolution a detailed indictment of the employers:

Second – that this meeting views with disgust and abhorrence those principles of injustice and tyranny that we, as operatives, have so long laboured under; namely, in the reduction of our wages, in unjust and unreasonable abatements, in forcing upon us unhealthy and disagreeable houses, in charging us unreasonable and

exorbitant rents, and in meanly and avariciously employing apprentices to supersede the regular journeymen, and in various ways, curtailing our wages by not paying up to the list that the masters almost unanimously agreed to, thus proving their unprincipled meanness and trickery.¹¹

John Molyneux was appointed as delegate to the conference of trades delegates at Manchester.

The Crown Inn Conference the following day endorsed these resolutions. They also resolved 'never to resume their work until the People's Charter becomes the law of the land' (*British Statesman*, 20 August 1842).

Simultaneously with the operative spinners' efforts the 'iron trades' workers of Bolton were organizing a trades conference. This was held the following day, Wednesday 17 August. They published a placard announcing their adhesion to the People's Charter and their determination to support the strike (*Bolton Chronicle*, 20 August 1842, *Bolton Free Press*, 20 August 1842).

Stockport had its own trades conferences. The first reported in the local press was held on Monday 15 August '... of foremen, overlookers, managers and delegates of all descriptions of trades employed in the Borough ... at the Cotton Tree, Heaton Lane. . .'¹² John Weathered presided. Twelve people took part in the discussion, some, three or four times. One was a delegate from Hyde, another was a delegate from Manchester. It is not clear whether he represented one trade or acted as a link with the Manchester conference. A further delegate meeting was held the following day, Tuesday 16 August.¹³ The *Stockport Advertiser* reported that 'another public meeting was held at Waterloo Road for the purpose of making final arrangements as to the appointment of delegates to represent the different trades at Manchester the next day' (Wednesday, 17 August). The *Stockport Chronicle* of 27 August 1842, reported that the Stockport trades conference elected two delegates to attend the Manchester trades conference on 22 August, the two delegates being Edwards and Bentote.

Bolton and Stockport were not the only towns to organize local trade conferences. Many larger towns did this. *The Times* of 23 August, reports delegate trades conferences at Blackburn and Macclesfield where silk weavers organized a General Delegate Body (*Macclesfield and Stockport Chronicle*, 20 August 1842). Many

of these conferences sent delegates to the Manchester trades conference. All eagerly awaited the reports and decision of the Manchester conference, as did many mass meetings. Generally, the strikers in Lancashire and Yorkshire looked to Manchester as the centre of the turn-out. The *Northern Star* of 20 August carried news items such as 'Dewsbury—A public meeting was held on Monday evening, 15th at Batley Carr, to elect a delegate for the Manchester Conference.' On Tuesday morning, 16, one of the largest meetings Oldham ever had was '... anxious to hear the decision of the delegate meeting at Manchester' (*Northern Star*, 20 August 1842).

The *Guardian* of 13 August 1842 reported that at Macclesfield '... 12,000—14,000 assembled on Park Green and were addressed by various speakers, when it was determined to stand out and wait the directions of the conference to be held in Manchester on Wednesday next', and a week later the paper reported that a '... mass meeting at Leek decided not to resume work pending the results of the Manchester Conference'. The *Stockport Advertiser* of 26 August, reported the meeting held at Waterloo Road, Stockport, on Friday 19 August, which issued an address calling, among other things, on 'the wise of all classes to adopt and abide by the resolutions of the delegates representing the trades of Manchester and surrounding districts'. This portion of the appeal was in capital letters.

The Great Delegate Conference

The Great Delegate Conference of the trades of Manchester and surrounding districts, of Monday 15 August 1842 took place in an atmosphere of intense interest and excitement, and with a representation and authority not previously experienced. The conference opened at ten o'clock in the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street, Manchester. Alexander Hutchinson representing the Manchester wiredrawers and card makers, was elected chairman. Charles Stuart, representing the mechanics of Patricroft was elected secretary, and a finance committee of three was appointed. Outside the hall a great crowd had gathered. In view of the proclamations of the government and the local authorities banning assemblies of any sort, this was a

serious hazard. Although the assembly outside the hall was peaceful – they were anxiously waiting to hear the outcome of the conference – it was nevertheless thought advisable to make an appeal to them to disperse and go home. It was agreed that Bernard McCartney, the delegate of the Leigh silk weavers (he was one of the defendants in the trial of Feargus O'Connor and fifty-eight others, March 1843), should go out and address the crowd. By this time it was found that the Sherwood Inn was too warm and too small to accommodate the delegates and so two delegates were appointed to see if the Carpenters' Hall was available. At twelve o'clock they adjourned and reassembled in the Carpenters' Hall.

At one o'clock Hutchinson reopened the meeting and a discussion arose respecting the reading of names at the meeting. There was some opposition to this – it might leave the delegates open to victimization. On this the chairman said 'those who were under any feelings of dread had better retire from the room because the time was come when every man must act honestly, openly and with a final determination (Cheers).'¹⁴ Mr McCartney rose to inform the delegates that there were three reporters present.

The strictly defined terms of reference for the election of delegates to this conference, passed by the trades conference of Saturday 12 August, inevitably created difficulties at the very commencement of the conference. Delegates were only to be those elected by mass meetings of trades, but because of the short time between the public announcement of the Saturday decisions and the opening of the conference, many mass meetings of factories, workshops and of a general character had taken place and had elected delegates. These, as well as delegates without credentials, turned up at the conference. A committee of three was elected to scrutinize the credentials of the delegates; these were Messrs Robinson, Binns and Buxton. A discussion arose as to whether two delegates from Mossley and Oldham who had signed credentials, but were elected by mass meetings of all the trades should be admitted as delegates. It was agreed that they be permitted to attend the conference, but all others claiming to be delegates, but without proper credentials were to sit in the gallery, without taking part in the conference. It was

agreed that no delegate speak for longer than ten minutes and that each delegate should report on his instructions from his constituents.

A number of delegates gave their reports. A draft of an address was then put before the conference and a committee of three – Messrs Duffy, McCartney and Melrose were appointed to redraft it. It was agreed that the conference adjourn to the following day, Tuesday 16 August at the Hall of Science.

At ten o'clock on Tuesday morning, Alexander Hutchinson again occupied the chair. The secretary called over the names of the delegates, everyone answering to his name. The gallery was occupied by non-delegates and outside a crowd had gathered. The chairman opened the proceedings by reading the address which had been agreed to and published by the committee. The following are extracts:

TO THE TRADES OF MANCHESTER AND THE SURROUNDING DISTRICTS.

Fellow citizens . . . We hasten to lay before you the result of our sittings. We find, by reference to the reports of the delegates assembled from various parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire . . . that no sufficient guarantee is afforded to the producers of wealth, but from the adoption and establishment of the people's political rights, as a safeguard for their lives, liberties and interests of the nation generally. . . . The meeting proposes appointing delegates to wait upon and confer with shopkeepers, dissenting clergymen and the middle classes generally, for the purpose of ascertaining how far they are prepared to assist and support the people in the struggle for the attainment of their political rights. . . . We, your representatives, call most emphatically upon the people to discontinue the production of creation of wealth, until the result of our deliberations is made known to the people whom we represent. . . . For ourselves, we have no other property than our labour; but in the midst of you we live and have our being; our parents, our wives and children are the hostages we present to you as our securities that we will do nothing ourselves, nor recommend anything to others inconsistent with their safety, or your interest –
Alexander Hutchinson, Chairman; Charles Stuart, Secretary.
Manchester, 16th August, 1842.¹⁵

The chairman hoped they would conduct their proceedings with

calmness and caution, but still with firm determination, 'the eyes of all England were upon that day's proceedings, and it depended upon the decision to which they should come, how the movement would in future be conducted through the whole country, and more especially the success of such movement (cheers) . . . much that had excited enthusiasm had abated, and they had begun to act and speak with reason, judgement and reflection.'¹⁶

For two days, until about five o'clock on the Tuesday, the delegates rose one after the other and gave their reports. Some reported the bare facts of their constituents' opinions – they were for the Charter, or they were for wage increases only. Some reported the decisions of their constituents in full – the Bolton delegate read resolutions on colonization of land, on the ten-hour bill, on the Charter. A few made speeches. McCartney made a 'bold and manly speech'. The delegates of the dyers and dressers said there were 14,000 in the union when the strike commenced and now there were 21,000.

The Ashton delegate reported that he represented 25–30,000 and while 'unshackled respecting the Charter, believed they were unanimous for the Charter'. The delegate from Mossley said he represented twelve factories. The Royton power loom delegate said he represented not only the weavers but the whole village – a meeting of 3,000 had voted for the Charter. The Stalybridge delegate reported that the shopkeepers had agreed to support them as a wages question alone. The Leeds delegate said he represented all branches of the cotton industry and a meeting of 15,000 had the Chartist question brought before them and they determined to stand by the decision of that meeting.

In the course of the day a number of resolutions and amendments were put forward, some of which were quickly rejected. The conference was not going to be diverted on to secondary matters – the discussion was to be around the Charter, and the means to achieve it. There was a resolution and two amendments before the conference. The resolution moved by Joseph Manory, bricklayer, of Manchester and seconded by A. F. Taylor, power loom weaver and one of the fifty-nine defendants at the Lancaster trial, called for the adoption of the

Charter, for the sending of delegates to every part of the United Kingdom and for all classes of people to cease work until the Charter became the law of the land. One amendment called for a return to work and the other for the lifting of restrictions on commerce. Interspersed with the reports of the delegates was the debate on the resolution and the amendments. Some concern was expressed over the problem of how to feed the strikers and their families. Linked with this was the need to win support from the shopkeepers and the middle class generally, but at this stage, a general policy had to be agreed upon, the big question was the Charter. The argument that wages was the issue was effectively demolished, though it had only minority support, and was perhaps best summed up in the general feeling that an improvement in wages is not maintained for long, and there was nothing to secure the continuance of that advance.

Benjamin Stott, bookbinder of Manchester, dealt with the question, 'What will support the people while waiting for the enacting of the Charter?' 'What will support the turn-outs while waiting for an advance in wages?' How deep was this feeling that wages alone would not solve their problem can be gauged by the statement of Charles Stuart, the secretary to the conference, 'that upwards of £3,000,000 had been expended by the mechanics during the last 15 years in an endeavour to advance wages and without success. The same amount of energy, and capital that had been thus fruitlessly expended would have obtained the Charter (hear, hear).'¹⁷ 'Political rights are imperatively necessary for the preservation of our wages.'

On the Monday, 143 delegates were present and on the Tuesday, at the time of the vote on the amendments and the resolution, 141 were present. A published list of delegates and the trades and towns they represented gave particulars for 134 delegates. The amendments were defeated and the resolution for the Charter carried by over 120 votes. There were eighty-five trades represented and eighty-five delegates spoke or indicated the opinions of their constituents. Fifty-eight declared for the Charter, seven were for making the struggle for wages only, nineteen had been instructed to abide by the decision of the conference, and one – the stone mason's delegate – had received no instruction, but said that his members individually were for the Charter.¹⁸

As the discussion was drawing to a close at around five o'clock, news was brought into the conference that magistrates, police, special constables and troops had surrounded the hall. Mr Beswick, the chief constable of Manchester, entered the room, and the chairman asked him if he was a delegate. It was then established who he was. Beswick stated there was alarm in the neighbourhood over the crowds around the hall, and that proclamations had been issued prohibiting all large assemblies. The chairman, Alexander Hutchinson, insisted that the meeting was perfectly legal; the gallery was open to the people, and reporters of the public press were allowed to attend. They had several times been out to appeal to the crowd to disperse. This was all proof of their desire to conduct themselves peaceably and with order. Mr Beswick went out to report to the magistrates and returned with a gentleman who repeated the statements of Mr Beswick. The chairman held his position. Finding they could not intimidate either the delegates or the chairman, they left again, only to return within minutes with two more magistrates, who declared the meeting illegal and without any further parley gave the conference ten minutes to disperse, saying if they did not they must abide by the consequences. On the departure of Mr Beswick and the magistrates, the chairman resumed the regular business as if no interruption had take place. He put the amendments and resolution to the vote. They agreed to meet the following morning at the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street at ten o'clock.

After the meeting an address was issued and was placarded on the walls. In part it stated:

LIBERTY – To the Trades of Manchester and the Surrounding Districts:

Fellow Workmen. We hasten to lay before you the paramount importance of this day's proceedings. . . . In consequence of the unjust and unconstitutional interference of the magistrates our proceedings were abruptly brought to a close by their dispersing the meeting, but not until in their very teeth, we passed the following resolution: 'Resolved – that the delegates in public meeting assembled, do recommend to the various constituencies we represent, to adopt all legal means to carry into effect the People's Charter; and further we recommend that delegates be sent through the whole country to endeavour to obtain the co-operation of the

middle and working classes in carrying out the resolution of ceasing labour until the Charter becomes the law of the land.'

Alexander Hutchinson, Chairman

Charles Stuart, Secretary pro tem

Manchester, August 16, 1842.¹⁹

The following morning, Wednesday 17 August, the conference met again at the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street, with Hutchinson in the chair. As a number of the delegates had returned to their localities to report on the work and decisions of the Great Delegate Conference, there were fewer in attendance, although a number of new delegates had their credentials checked and were admitted to the conference. There were large crowds outside and because of this the conference decided to move to Brown Street, Travis Street. It was reported that Charles Stuart, the secretary of the conference, had been arrested. The chairman opened the meeting and stated that the conference of the day before had not been forcibly broken up, but that on the contrary they had finished their business and dispersed. The meeting then concerned itself with the questions involved in carrying into practice the decisions of the Great Delegate Conference. They elected an executive committee of twelve, plus the chairman. They called for the formation of local committees to organize and lead the strike; for them to issue bills of credit to be given to provision dealers and others till the turn-outs resumed their labours. They also proposed an approach to shopkeepers and the middle class for support. They agreed to meet again the following day at one o'clock. Their decisions were embodied in an address which was placarded on the walls on Wednesday afternoon.²⁰ So in the course of the first nine days of the strike, through a process of public meetings and conferences the question of the aims of the strike was thrashed out and a great measure of unity won. Practical decisions were taken for the extension and carrying through of the strike. Moreover, the process produced a form of central leadership acceptable to the majority of the turn-outs: a broad co-ordination of all the trades and unions involved in the strike, based on the popular democracy of the public mass meeting and free and unfettered discussion inside the conference.

The interest in these trade conferences was widespread and recognized by the press at the time. The *British Statesman*, 13

August 1842, published a report datelined 'two o'clock in the afternoon, Thursday 11th August. We have just received letters from various towns, and delegates have arrived, who state everything is at a complete standstill in Bolton, Heywood, Rochdale, Denton, Bury, Stockport, Lees, Mottram, Hollinwood, Oldham, Royton and all the villages near. The writers of the letters all appear anxious to ascertain what steps the Manchester men will take and whether they are resolved to make a determined stand. If so, they in their neighbourhood will do the same.' The *Guardian*, four days later, dealing with the decision to call the Great Delegate Conference and the resolution that all delegates had to be elected at public trades meetings and have signed credentials stated, 'This announcement and the various meetings of trades to appoint delegates to the meeting gave the meeting in the present state of the town a good deal of interest, it being regarded as a sort of general convention of the operatives' (*Guardian*, 17 August 1842).

A 'General Convention of Operatives!' And so it was. At the trial of Feargus O'Connor and the fifty-eight others in March 1843 Richard Beswick, chief superintendent of police at Manchester, gave evidence on behalf of the prosecution. He was questioned about the Great Delegate Conference on Tuesday 16 August, which he attended at eleven in the morning and at the closing stages.

Attorney-General: About how many persons did you find assembled there?

I believe there were several hundred persons altogether.

You say they called themselves delegates?

The majority of them did.

Mr Beswick was cross-examined by Mr Dundas representing one of the defendants:

Mr Dundas: I think you said there were six or seven hundred there?

Yes inside the building. There was a very large number of persons outside. The street was entirely filled.²¹

The *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842 opened its report of the conference of 16 August: 'The gallery was occupied by parties from the country who took great interest in the important business for which the meeting had been convened.' The gallery

must have contained many delegates from the country who failed to bring credentials.

The organization of the conference, the control and guidance by the chairman, and the responsible conduct of the delegates all contributed to making this conference important and authoritative. Reporting the session of the 15 August, the *Northern Star* stated: 'The most intense interest pervaded the assembly the whole day. Their deliberations were marked by great earnestness and extreme good order. An imposing array of military specials, pensioners and policemen were several times marched past the door of the Hall, evidently with the intention of intimidating the delegates.' (20 August 1842) The atmosphere among the delegates and their intense activity is briefly – all too briefly – conveyed in two letters read at the Feargus O'Connor trial. They were written by John Lewis from Glossop who represented the strippers and grinders and was one of the defendants in that trial.

The first letter from Manchester, is dated 16 August 1842 and is addressed to the committee meeting at Glossop: 'It took all day for the different delegates to state the feelings of the constituencies they represented . . . the meeting is this evening adjourned till tommorrow morning, when some measures will be adopted, as to the means whereby the above resolution can be carried out.' Three days later writing from the Sherwood Inn on 19 August to the committee at Glossop and Mottram, he wrote: 'I have to attend a meeting of the four mechanical trades which will be held this evening in the Carpenters' Hall and the Executive meets early tomorrow morning; and at ten o'clock a public delegate meeting will be held in the Charter Association Room, Brown Street, Travis Street, Manchester. You had better convene a public meeting at six o'clock on Monday morning . . .' This letter is signed 'I remain, yours, In the cause of political freedom, John Lewis.'²² It was written three days after the dispersal of the delegates at the Hall of Science!

How many of the rest of the delegates gave written or verbal reports is not known but it would not be unreasonable to assume that the overwhelming majority of them did report back to their committees and constituents. The *Guardian* of 20 August stated: 'There are numerous reports of other trades groups continuing to meet in Manchester. They had probably been

sitting continuously throughout the strike and either acted independently of the central conference or, more likely, were receiving daily reports from their delegates.' This applied not only to Manchester. The influence of the central trades conference stretched well beyond Manchester. At the Feargus O'Connor trial the Attorney-General had to admit that 'within fifty miles of Manchester all was still'.²³ This growing authority of the Manchester conference, along with the inability of the existing civil authorities to break the strike created a serious situation for the government.

What would things be like if this situation continued? What if these trades conferences had continued and fully matured as organs of leadership and struggle? The government had the answer. On 15 August 1842 Sir James Graham, Secretary of State for the Home Department, wrote to Major-General Sir William Warre, Army Commander for the North, 'It is quite clear that these delegates are the directing body; they form the link between the trades unions and the Chartists, and a blow struck at this Confederacy goes to the heart of the evil and cuts off its ramifications.' To enforce his point of view he sent a Metropolitan Police Magistrate to Manchester to give legal advice – to force the pace, for there was hesitancy on the part of the local Magistrates. Four days later '... by 19th August he was able to report to the Queen that five of the principal delegates had been arrested and that warrants were out against four others'.²⁴

In the face of all this harassment the delegates fought back. F. C. Mather comments: 'Even after this meeting (Hall of Science, Tuesday 16 August) had been dispersed the delegates met again each day that week and carefully explored every avenue of approach for keeping the strike going. This they did, notwithstanding the fact that their ranks were being constantly thinned by arrests.'²⁵ By the Saturday morning, 20 August, the principal officers of the conference – Alexander Hutchinson, the chairman and Charles Stuart, the secretary, along with other delegates and leaders of the strike were behind prison bars.

NOTES

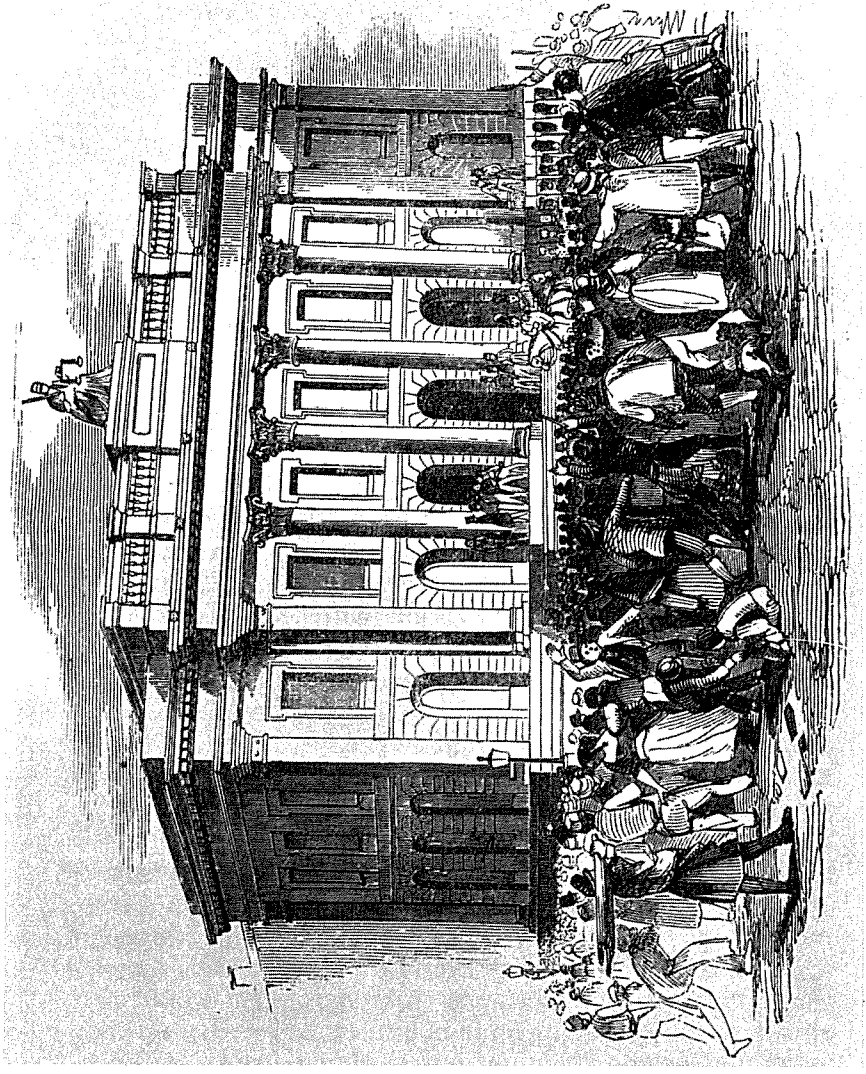
1. F. C. Mather, 'The General Strike of 1842', in *Provincial Labour History* (ed. J. H. Porter), University of Exeter, 1972, p. 22.
2. *The British Statesman*, 20 August 1842 (Editorial).
3. *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842.
4. *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842; *British Statesman*, 13 August 1842.
5. *British Statesman*, 13 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842.
6. *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842; *British Statesman*, 13 August 1842.
7. A Leicestershire delegate, Mr H. Hodgeson, reporting back to two public meetings on the work of the Conference, stated that he was one of 200 delegates (*Northern Star*, 20 August 1842).
8. R. W. Postgate, *Revolution from 1789 to 1906*, London, 1920, p. 132.
9. R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement*, says that 320 voted for the Charter (p. 218); a prosecution witness at the trial of O'Connor and the fifty-eight others, said 340 voted for the Charter (*Trial*, p. 32).
10. *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842.
11. *The Bolton Free Press*, 20 August 1842.
12. *The Stockport Advertiser*, 19 August 1842.
13. *The Times*, 26 August 1842.
14. *British Statesman*, 20 August 1842.
15. *Bolton Free Press*, 20 August 1842.
16. *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842.
17. *British Statesman*, 20 August 1842.
18. *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842; *British Statesman*, 20 August 1842.
19. *Manchester Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Manchester Advertiser*, 20 August 1842; R. W. Postgate, op. cit., p. 133.
20. *Manchester Guardian*, 20 August 1842.
21. *The Trial of Feargus O'Connor and the 58 Others*, p. 106.
22. *ibid.*, pp. 149-50.
23. *ibid.*, p. 7.
24. Quoted in F. C. Mather, 'The Government and the Chartists', in *Chartist Studies* (ed. A. Briggs), pp. 389-90.
25. F. C. Mather, 'The General Strike, 1842', in *Provincial Labour History*, Exeter, 1972, p. 21.

The Second Week: The Strike becomes a Class Struggle

The Chartist Conference

The arrest of the trades conference officers came at the end of the second week of the strike. That week marked the strike's fullest *political* development. On the Monday the trades conference met for the first time. The following day it pledged itself to use strike action to achieve the Charter. The same day, 16 August, the national executive of the National Charter Association met in Manchester, and took decisions which transformed the potential scope of the strike from a regional to a national contest.

This meeting of Chartist leadership had been fixed some time in advance to commemorate the anniversary of Peterloo, and was scheduled to discuss the thorny issue of Chartist organization. How far the timing and place of this meeting was deliberately pre-arranged, remains a matter of speculation. We know that there were strong disagreements within the National Charter Association leadership about the use of industrial action – with O'Connor's powerful voice in opposition. We also know that in South Lancashire and Cheshire (Peter McDouall's stronghold and the area which proposed the Peterloo anniversary), there was considerable support for the idea of a general strike and for carrying forward the unfinished work of 1839. It is tempting to suggest that the Peterloo commemoration represented an attempt by certain Lancashire Chartists to ensure the presence of the Association's national leadership at a time when the strike movement would have already taken on a momentum of its own. Given what we know about the personalities involved and the nature of inner-Chartist politics, such an interpretation has its attractions. Certainly, the man who made the proposition in March 1842 for the executive to be present at the 16 August celebration was the



man destined to be chairman of the trades conference, Alexander Hutchinson.

However, of one thing there can be no doubt. The outcome did transform the scope of the strike. It meant that the country-wide organization of the National Chartist Association – at that time more extensive than that of formal trade unionism – was to some extent at least drawn into the work of active mobilization. Faced with a situation in which the best organized contingents of the industrial working class had themselves taken the lead, the Chartist executive had little option but to follow suit. Those favouring industrial action took the initiative, and Peter McDouall himself drafted the two addresses committing the National Chartist Association to support the strike.¹

These two addresses are worth quoting at length. The first, from the Conference to the Chartist Public, acknowledged the lead which the trade unions had already given. ‘Eternal thanks to the brave and independent Trades of Manchester! They saw the evil and nobly threw their comparative comfort into misery’s scale. They struck, not for wages, but for principle. . . . They have declared they will cease to toil till all labour shall be justly required; which in their opinion cannot be effected till the Charter becomes law. . . .’²

The main address of the Chartist executive to the People went on to stress the uniqueness of the opportunity which now presented itself.

We have solemnly sworn, and one and all declared, that the golden opportunity now within our grasp shall not pass away fruitless, that the chance of centuries afforded to us by a wise and all-seeing God, shall not be lost; but that we now do universally resolve never to resume labour until labour’s grievances are destroyed, and protection secured for ourselves, our suffering wives and helpless children by the enactment of the People’s Charter.³

The strike was to be *national* and *total*.

The blood of your brothers reddens the streets of Preston and Blackburn, and the murderers thirst for more. Be firm, be courageous, be men. Peace, law and order have prevailed on our side – let them be revered till your brethren in Scotland, Wales and Ireland are informed of your resolution; and when the universal holiday prevails, which will be the case in eight days, then of what

THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE OF THE NATIONAL CHARTIST ASSOCIATION.

TO THE PEOPLE !!! BROTHER CHARTISTS,

The great Political Truths which have been agitated during the last half century, have at length aroused the degraded and insulted White Slaves of England, to a sense of their duty to themselves, their children, and their country. Tens of Thousands have flung down their implements of Labour. Your taskmasters tremble at your energy, and expecting masses eagerly watch this great crisis of our cause. Labour must no longer be the common prey of masters and rulers. Intelligence has beamed upon the mind of the bondsman, and he has been convinced that all wealth, comfort, & produce, everything valuable, useful, & elegant, have sprung from the palm of his hand; he feels that his cottage is empty, his back thinly clad, his children breadless, himself hopeless, his mind harassed, and his body punished, that undue riches, luxury, and gorgeous plenty might be heaped in the palaces of the taskmasters, and flooded into the granaries of the oppressor. Nature, God, and Reason have condemned this inequality, and in the thunder of a peoples' voice it must perish for ever. He knows that labour, the real property of society, the sole origin of accumulated property, the first cause of all national wealth, and the only supporter, defender, and contributor to the greatness of our country, is not possessed of the same legal protection which is given to those lifeless effects, the houses, ships, & machinery which labour have alone created. He knows that if labour has no protection, wages cannot be upheld, nor in the slightest degree regulated until every workman of twenty-one years of age and of sane mind is on the same political level as the employer. He knows that the Charter would remove, by universal will expressed in Universal Suffrage, the heavy load of Taxes which now crush the existence of the labourer, and cripple the efforts of commerce; that it would give cheap government as well as cheap food, high wages, as well as low taxes; bring happiness to the hearthstone, plenty to the table, protection to the old, education to the young, permanent prosperity to the country; long-continued protective political power to labour, and peace, blessed peace to exhausted humanity, and approving nations; therefore it is that we have solemnly sworn, and one and all declared, that the golden opportunity now within our grasp shall not pass away fruitless, that the chance of centuries, afforded to us by a wise and all-seeing God, shall not be lost; but that we do now universally resolve never to resume labour, until labour's grievances are destroyed, and protection secured for ourselves, our suffering wives, and helpless children, by the enactment of the People's Charter.

ENGLISHMEN! the blood of your brothers reddens the streets of Preston and Blackburn, and the murderers thirst for more. Be firm, be courageous, be men. Peace, Law, and Order have prevailed on our side—let them be reversed until your brethren in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, are informed of your resolution; and when a universal holiday prevails, which will be the case in eight days, then of what use will bayonets be against public opinion. What tyrant can then live above the terrible tides of thought and energy, which is now flowing fast, under the guidance of man's intellect, which is now destined by a Creator to elevate his people above the reach of want, the rancour of despotism, and the penalties of bondage. The Trades, a noble patriotic band, have taken the lead in declaring for the Charter, and drawing their gold from the keeping of tyrants. Follow their example. ~~Lead us who be others where with to scourge you.~~

Intelligence has reached us of the wide spreading of the strike, and now within fifty miles of Manchester, every engine is at rest, and all is still, save the Millers' useful wheels and the friendly sickle in the fields. Countrymen and Brothers, centuries may roll on as they have affected past, before such universal action may again be displayed; we have made the call for Liberty, and we must stand, like men, the lizard of the die. Let none despond. Let all be cool and watchful, and, like the hiddemalds in the parable, keep your lamps burning; and let your continued resolution be like a beacon to guide those who are now hastening far and wide to follow your memorable example.

Brothers, we rely upon your firmness; cowardice, treachery, or womanly fear, would cast our cause back for half a century. Let no man, woman, or child break down the solemn pledge, and if they do, may the curse of the poor and the starving pursue them—they deserve slavery who would manly court it.

Our Machinery is all arranged, and your cause still, in three days, be impelled onward by all the intellect we can summon to its aid; therefore, whilst you are peaceful, be firm; whilst you are orderly make all be so likewise; and whilst you look to the law, remember that you had no voice in making it, and are therefore the slaves to the will, the law, and the price of your masters.

All Officers of the Association are called upon to aid and assist in the peaceful extension of the Movement, and to forward all monies for the use of the Delegates who may be expressed over the country, strengthen our hands at this crisis. Support your leaders. Rally round our sacred cause, and leave the decision to the God of Justice and of Battle.

CHARLES TURNER, PRINTER, TURNER-STREET, NEAR ST. PAUL'S CHURCH, MANCHESTER.

Address of the Chartist Executive

use will be bayonets against public opinion? What tyrant can live under the terrible tide of thought and energy which is now flowing fast. . . .'⁴

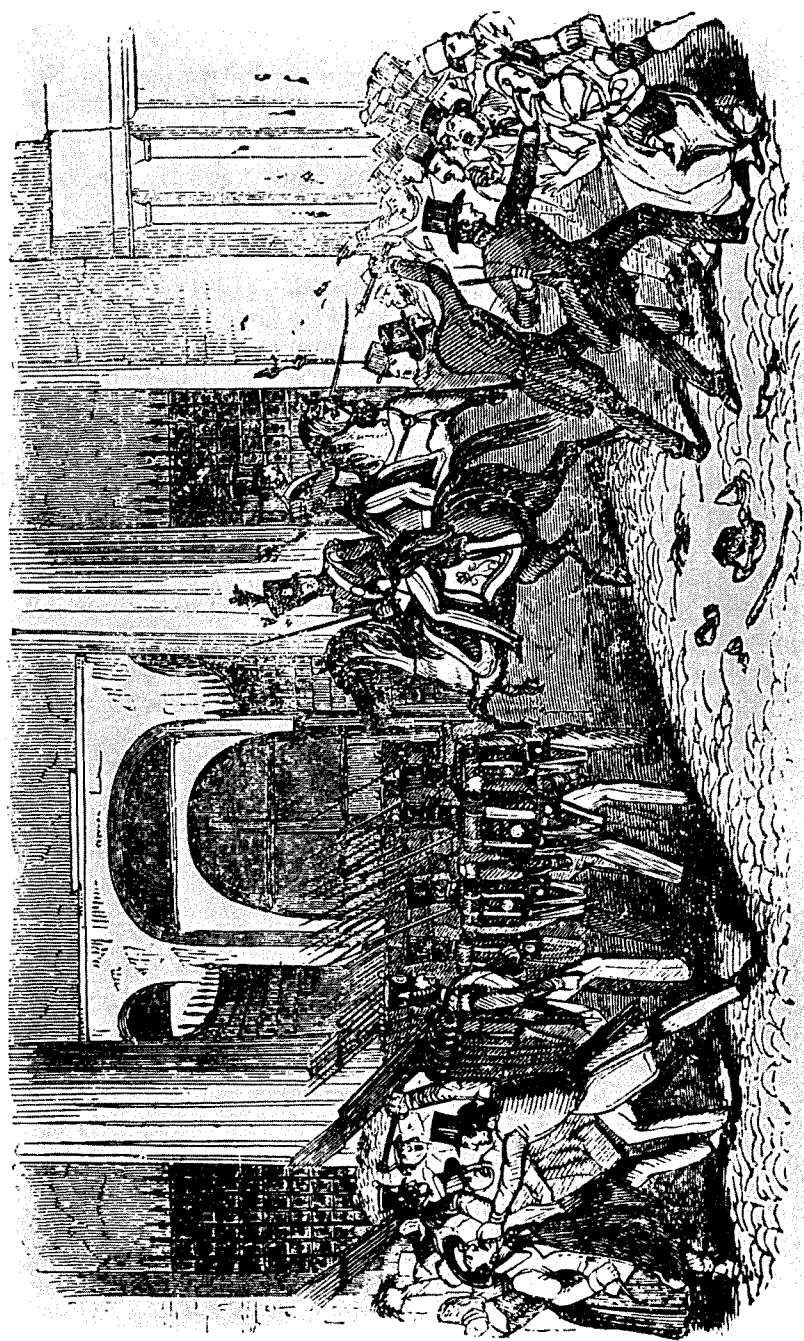
The address ended by committing the National Charter Association leadership to detailed organizational support for the strike.

All officers of the association are called upon to aid and assist the peaceful extension of the movement, and to forward all monies for the use of delegates who may be expressed over the country. Strengthen our hands at this crisis. Support your leaders. Rally round our sacred cause, and leave the decision to the God of justice and of battle.⁵

From the moment of this proclamation the strike became fully national. Across the country all units of the National Charter Association became pledged to organize support. Areas that had previously remained quiet, the Merthyr valley in South Wales, certain parts of Scotland, the Dorset and Somerset textile industry, now joined the strike.⁶ What this chapter will examine, therefore, is the 'terrible tide of thought and energy' which this released. It will begin by looking at the response of the London workers – the least organized section of the country's urban workforce – and then go on to examine the efforts of both employers and workers to win the battle of argument and organization.

London workers support the strike

On the day of the Chartist conference the *Manchester Guardian* carried the following report: 'The last quarter of a century has not witnessed so fearful a state of apprehension and suspense as that which was beheld in the metropolis on Saturday.'⁷ Saturday 13 August, was the sixth day of the general strike in the north and despatches and deputations (of 'gentlemen') were arriving at the Home Office about the state of the towns or neighbourhoods from which they came. That morning a special meeting of a Cabinet council was held. The results of that meeting are shown by the movement of military and of military equipment. Lord Blomfield at Woolwich ordered a detachment of 150 men and four pieces of artillery, each piece drawn by four horses, to be



Departure of troops from London, 1842

got into instant readiness. Similar orders were sent to St George's Barracks, Charing Cross, for the departure of the third battalion of the Grenadier Guards, with artillery, to Manchester via Birmingham.

While this was the response that the deputation of 'gentlemen' came for and welcomed, there was an entirely different type of response from the London working class and Chartist movement. The movement of such numbers of troops and equipment drew large crowds on the route of the march. 'The feelings of the multitude were in many instances uttered in language which added to the excitement of the scene.' The *Guardian* quotes the *Observer*, *The Times* and the *Globe*. The *Observer* is quoted first:

By the time the troops reached the Quadrant, we regret to state that murmurs of groans and hisses burst from the crowd, which continued to increase as they advanced up Regent Street, mingled with exclamations of 'Remember, you are brothers.' By the time they got to the middle of Regent street the crowd was pressing so closely on the band, the officer in command directed the band to strike playing and at the same time ordered the soliders to 'fix bayonets' which order was immediately obeyed. The hisses and groans were not silenced. They continued until the station was reached.

Another account is from *The Times*. The Foot Guards followed the Artillery Guard '... they came in front of the station, and were received in a manner even worse than the Artillery; several of the mob shouting out "Don't go and slaughter your starving fellow countrymen", and groaning. These troops consisted of the 3rd Battalion of the 1st regiment of Foot Guards from St George's Barracks numbering 700 men with three wagons laden with ammunition.' The *Globe* of Monday 15 August reported that on the day previous, the Sunday, another troop of the Royal Artillery left London for the North, and later in the day, the 34th Regiment of the Foot, more than 600 strong, with baggage and ammunition waggons arrived from Portsmouth and immediately proceeded by the Birmingham Railway to the 'scene of tumult'.⁸ From Chatham a division of Royal Marines consisting of 430 officers and men arrived at Woolwich on Wednesday 17 August. They were there for the purpose of replacing the 73rd Regiment, numbering some 600 men which had been ordered to Yorkshire.

On Monday 15 August, there were more movements of troops from London to the North. The *Northern Star* reported that troops had to make several bayonet charges before they could get into the railway station, and that 400 policemen were stationed at Chalk Farm to prevent any attempt to destroy communication by railways.⁹

The London working class and progressive people showed their solidarity with the general strike and the people of the North in the great mass meetings that were held in London. One of the biggest meetings held in this period took place on Stepney Green on Tuesday 16 August. At seven o'clock in the evening, 10,000 people gathered as the chairman, Mr Dron opened the meeting. By the time he had finished speaking, 20,000 people were present. Mr Blackmore, the first speaker, moved the following resolution:

That this meeting views with great apprehension and alarm the present dire and unprecedented discontent and dissatisfaction which prevails throughout the Northern districts and hereby determine to memorialize Her Majesty to withdraw the troops and adjusting the existing dispute regarding the reduction of wages and passing the People's Charter as the law of the land.

Mr Knott from Ashton-under-Lyne addressed the meeting, detailing the horrible state of distress to which the operatives were reduced. The resolution was put and carried unanimously. 'Such a forest of hands as never before was seen in London.' 'There were cheers for the turn-outs, cheers for the Charter and cheers for the *Northern Star* which might be heard for miles.' Constant communication was kept up by the Superintendent of Police with the Home Office, and cavalry were under arms in nearby barracks. 'There is no doubt that the meeting was intended to be dispersed, but the numbers present made it of too terrific a character to be lightly meddled with.'¹⁰

There is no doubt too that an atmosphere of tension and expectancy existed in the capital. On Friday evening, 19 August, the Lord Mayor of London received a communication to attend at the Home Office. There he had a meeting with Sir Robert Peel, the Prime Minister, Sir James Graham, the Home Secretary, and Mr Mayne, the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police. On his return the Lord Mayor held a meeting of

magistrates and all aldermen, where arrangements were made to meet any emergency that might occur. Suspicions were entertained that an attack would be made on the banking houses in Lombard Street and so detachments of the City police were sent into that neighbourhood. The government issued orders that the military should be in readiness '... to bring their awful power into action, if matters came to an extremity'.

Regulations were made which placed the whole police force in such a state of action that they could at once bear down on any part of London with at least 500 men. On the Saturday a proclamation was issued against 'illegal assemblages'. The authorities were particularly concerned about the mass meetings of London workers and progressive people – they contained elements of much mischief to the peace and security of the inhabitants of the metropolis if they fell into the hands of 'unprincipled leaders'.¹¹ So disturbed were the authorities at the possible spread of the strike to London that a week after the Grenadier Guards had gone to Manchester to suppress 'riot and disorder' there, the Duke of Wellington, who was Commander-in-Chief, found it necessary to press for the return of the Guards to London.¹²

On Wednesday 17 August, that is the day following the Stepney Green meeting, a large meeting took place on Clerkenwell Green. The following day another meeting was held on Islington Green. Sir James Graham, the Home Secretary, on Friday 19 August, reported to the Queen that 'There was a meeting last night of a violent character near London. A mob assembled in Lincoln's Inn Fields about eleven o'clock and moved through the City to Bethnal Green. Sir James had the troops on the alert but the multitude dispersed without any sign of disturbance.'¹³ On Saturday 20 August, the regular meeting places such as Islington Green, Clerkenwell Green, Lincoln's Inn Fields, saw large crowds of people congregate. That evening another gathering 'of as formidable a character took place in the wide open space at the ends of Monmouth Street and Moor Street'. Despite the fact that there was no public announcement of these meetings (presumably not to alert the authorities) the '... commissioners of the metropolitan police were in hourly communication with the authorities at the Home Office during the day'. The military were kept under arms and

the police were kept in reserve after six in the evening at each police station.

Two meetings were to take place on Monday 22 August. One on Kennington Common and the other at Paddington. For the Kennington Common meeting 1,800 police were mobilized and dispersed in the vicinity of the common, at an early hour in the day ' . . . as privately as possible'; under the command of four police superintendents. A company of artillery was stationed nearby. The various bridges of the metropolis were placed under the command of Superintendent Murray, who had a body of forty constables stationed on each. It was 'judiciously arranged' that as few officers as possible should be on duty near the common during the day. The meeting was due to commence at six o'clock in the evening by which time some 6,000 people had assembled. One of the speakers got up and proposed the adjournment of the meeting to Wednesday mid-day, but another speaker proposed they carry on as arranged. By this time 'the four superintendents, fully equipped and mounted, accompanied by twelve of the mounted patrol of the P. Division and backed by a squadron of about 500 police constables were seen advancing towards the crowd. . . . As the police neared the crowd the pace was quickened and orders were issued by Superintendent Maclean to clear the common instantly. . . . The whole body of officers moved simultaneously against the crowd.' They had little difficulty in clearing the common. Seven Chartists were arrested.

The experience at Paddington was similar to that at Kennington Common. By the time the meeting was due to start at half past six o'clock some 2,000 to 3,000 people had assembled, near to the terminus of the Great Western Railway. Soon there 'could not have been less than 10,000 present'. No speeches were made, but some seventeen arrests were effected. The crowd was dispersed in the same summary fashion. The conduct of the police came in for some severe criticism. Some newspapers talked of the 'unnecessary violence' of the police. The *Sun* in its report on Kennington Common said:

In another moment the horse patrol galloped into the assemblage knocking down several persons, some of whom were severely injured. The vast multitude was then seen flying in all directions,

pursued by the horse patrol and the other police. . . . From all parts of the common, men were seen coming away with blood streaming from their heads. . . . If any poor fellow happened to make the slightest resistance he was knocked down and then beaten severely about the head. Our reporter saw at least a dozen instances of this sort.¹⁴

Sir James Graham was very worried as to whether the military could hold down the situation in the turn-out areas, but he was equally worried about the situation in London, the great meetings, the overwhelming police and military force needed to disperse them and the reception given to the soldiers (the *Northern Star* reported on 20 August that 'thirty soldiers very heavily ironed were last evening [Wednesday 17 August] conveyed to the Tower; their reported crime being a refusal to fire on the people'): all indicated the mood and temper of the London working class. It was certainly a real cause for worry for Sir James Graham and Sir Robert Peel.

The response of the employers

Still more immediately preoccupied were the local employers themselves. In the industrial counties of the North and Midlands, where the strike assumed a general character, the local employing class found themselves facing the biggest challenge they had ever encountered. Military and police protection was limited and in some cases lacking altogether. The momentum of the strike was submerging all the institutions on which they had previously relied for the informal control of their communities. In some areas the reaction was one of panic and in a few cases of outright flight. However, the acknowledged leaders of Lancashire's manufacturers stood relatively firm, and appear to have seen their main priority as that of riding out the storm without surrendering any major points of principal. Wages, they argued, had to come down if employment was to improve. John Bright issued an address 'To the working men of Rochdale', which stated the classic position of the cotton employers. It began: 'A deep sympathy with you in your present circumstances induces me to address you.' He told them, 'Many of you know full well that neither Act of Parliament nor act of a multitude can keep up wages . . . trade must yield a profit, or it

PROCLAMATION

WHEREAS, the present disturbed state of this Town and District calls for the adoption of the strongest measures for the restoration of Peace and Order. We, the undersigned, respectively **MAGISTRATES** of the County Palatine of Lancaster, and the Borough of Manchester, deem it our duty publicly to make known that all assemblages of persons in considerable numbers, having under present circumstances a manifest tendency to endanger the Public Peace, and to excite the fears of Her Majesty's peaceable subjects, are illegal, whatever may be their avowed object and wherever held, and notwithstanding they may not at the time be attended with acts of open Violence. And we hereby declare our full determination to use all the means in our power to prevent and repress, and if necessary, forcibly to put down the same. And we further **Caution** all well-disposed persons against joining in, or being present at, any Meetings or Processions of this character, as they will thereby bring themselves into peril, and incur the consequences of the measures which may be adopted for the **Preservation of the Public Peace.**

*County Magistrates acting within
the Division of Manchester.*

J. Frederick Foster
John Bentley
William Garnett
Robert J. J. Norreys
S. Phillips
George William Wood
Samuel Fletcher
D. Maude
P. M. James
Joseph Leese
J. B. Wanklyn
John Bradshaw
George Clarke
Elias Chadwick
Robert Gardner

Magistrates for the Borough of Manchester.

William Neild, *Mayor*
Thomas Potter
A. Watkin
W. R. Callender
James Kershaw
Daniel Lee
John Brooks
Robert Stuart
James Burt
Richard Roberts
C. J. S. Walker
John Leeming
David Price
Fereday Smith
E. Armitage
Alexander Bannerman
Henry Tootal
Thomas Cooke

Town Hall, Manchester,
Sunday, 14th August, 1842.

Proclamation from magistrates of Manchester, 14 August

will not long be carried on; and an advance in wages now would destroy profit . . . if you are resolved to compel an advance in wages, you cannot compel manufacturers to give you employment . . . your attempt to raise wages cannot succeed . . . to diminish hours of labour at this time is equally impossible, it is in effect a rise in wages and must also fail.'

About the Charter he said: 'Against the obtaining the Charter the laws of nature offer no impediment, as they do against a forcible advance of wages; but to obtain the Charter *now* is just as impossible as to raise wages by force. . . . The working classes can never gain it themselves.' If nothing can be done about the laws of nature, what about the laws of man? He told them that whilst the inhuman Corn Law exists ' . . . your wages must decline . . . no power on earth can maintain your wages at their present rate if the Corn Law be not repealed'. If all this was not a strong enough case for lower wages, the workers had to realize that they were being misled by their own leaders. 'Your speakers talk loudly . . . they deceive you . . . they have done their utmost to perpetuate your seven or eight shillings per week and by their labours in that cause *they* have enjoyed an income of three or four times that amount.' What should they do? 'Your first step to entire freedom must be *commercial* freedom – freedom of industry. . . . *Return to your employment* . . . a brighter day will come.' To help them with this pie in the sky, this smug hypocrite said to them, 'I would willingly become poor if that would make you comfortable and happy.' He signed himself, 'I am, with all sincerity, your friend, *John Bright*.'¹⁵

John Bright was not the only brass-faced, pious 'friend' of the workers. There was Mr Greg, lately MP for Manchester, proprietor of mills in Wilmslow and Styal. Greg had a reputation as a benevolent employer, though the business had been built up over the years on the employment of three types of workers. First, there were apprentices taken from the workhouse who were housed, clothed and fed, but received no wages; second, apprentices who were engaged by contract made direct with their parents who were housed and fed (but not clothed), and paid a small weekly wage ranging from 9d to 1s 6d; and third, free labour, much of which was obtained through Cheshire overseer and taken from Buckinghamshire and Berkshire through Poor Law Commissioners.

One typical indenture contract made by a father, stated that his two children, Esther and Anne, each 'shall serve the said Saml Greg in his cotton mills in Styal as a just and honest servant, thirteen hours in each of the six working days and be at their own liberty at all other times . . . for the term of three years at the wages of one penny per week.'¹⁶ At the Stockport trades conference held on Monday 15 August, John Weatherhead, the chairman, stated that 'at Styal Mr Greg only paid 6d for what other masters in this town were paying 8½d and 9d.'¹⁷

Three days before, on Friday 12 August, a large body of weavers had made their way to Mr Greg's mill. The *Macclesfield Courier* reported that 'a provision shop belonging to Mr Greg, kept by a man of the name of Henshall, was completely gutted. The house set apart for the reception of the female apprentices to the works shared the same fate.' Mr Greg had addressed the crowd and pointed out 'the absurdity and futility of the proceedings; that many of the hardships of which they complained were to be attributed to the loose morals of the working classes tipping in pot houses'. The speaker waxed to his subject and went on to try and prove that the general distress then prevailing was mainly due to the influence of the Corn Laws. The consequence of not having a free trade in corn was that the export manufacturer sustained immense losses which meant that there must either be a complete stop to manufacture or a lower rate of wages.¹⁸

The main objective of statements like this and of the earlier one from John Bright, all given wide publicity in the employer-financed press, was to split the strikers, and influence those sections least committed to the Charter (and most concerned with the immediate problem of starvation wages) to see the solution in terms of the anti-Corn Law League programme.

There were, however, some differences of opinion within the ranks of the employers and of the civic authorities. The police and military differed among themselves, as described earlier, on the question of the entry into Manchester by the Ashton and Stalybridge procession. Some employers did prove willing to raise the rates of pay. A meeting of millowners in Stockport during the second week of the strike discussed the 'reasonableness or otherwise of the present advance required by the workpeople.'¹⁹ At the end of the second week the

Manchester power loom weavers reported 'already some of our masters have consented to grant our just demands' (10s per two looms per week).²⁰ At Rochdale a meeting of magistrates and the principal millowners was held at the Flying Horse on Friday 12 August 'to devise some plan to put a stop to the proceedings of the workmen, but such was the bitterness of the party spirit displayed that at one time it seemed likely to end in a breach of the peace'.²¹

For the leaders of the manufacturers, and in particular for the paper most closely associated with them, the *Manchester Guardian*, it was this spectre of division and retreat within the ranks of the employers themselves that proved most worrying. The *Guardian's* editorials seem mainly to have been designed to maintain the morale of the manufacturers (reasonably enough since very few workers would have read the paper), and to convince all employers that concessions would only aggravate the situation. The following editorial appeared on the sixth day of the strike.

The widespread and extensively-combined system of outrage and intimidation . . . is proceeding with rapid strides . . . this district . . . will exhibit the unusual spectacle of empty workshops, unproductive machinery and bodies of workmen roaming about the streets in listless idleness . . . thousands of mothers must tonight send their children to bed without knowing whence the food is to come which must sustain life till Monday morning.

Such is the fiat of a gang of desperate and unprincipled agitators who care nothing for the misery they cause and who have been enabled to carry their remorseless plans into effect by practising on the credulity of their victims.

Would any advance of wages satisfy these men? Oh! No. If any such advance was conceded, it would only be made the stepping-stone for further demands.²²

As the strike reached its height on 24 August, the *Guardian* again warned of the dangers of compromise. 'But we believe the general impression is, that the concession of it [a wage advance] at the present time would be fraught with danger of the most serious kind, and if workmen find that they are enabled to extort higher wages from their employers by tumult and disorder, we shall have little peace hereafter.'²³ Even when the strike was beginning to draw to a close, on 14 September, the same hard

line was maintained: ‘. . . any man who should make or recommend concessions, that would appear to the working classes as having been wrung from their employers by intimidation and a display of physical force, would be one of the greatest enemies they could possibly have’.²⁴

The *Guardian* consistently denied that this was a genuine strike of workers with a genuine and acute problem of preventing a further lowering of their starvation wages and to secure a return of the cuts in wages made over the previous two years. It consistently denied – with one slight lapse towards the end of the strike – that wages was the issue. Six weeks after the commencement of the strike its editorial stated that the strike ‘. . . had a purely political origin; that the trifling dispute respecting the wages of a few power loom weavers in which many parties suppose it to have commenced, was merely used as a pretext for the advancement of their [the Chartists’] own designs’.²⁵ Earlier in the editorial of 20 August the workers were reminded of, ‘The great number of instances in which they had forfeited the good opinions of their masters and consequently incurred the loss of their employment.’

Only when attacking the Tory *Times* and defending the manufacturing class did the *Guardian* permit itself to refer to the ‘starving operatives’. When describing the striking workers it is ‘Chartist idlers’ or ‘a number of idlers’. When the ‘mob’ from Stockport marched into Styal and turned out the ‘hands’ at Mr Greg’s mill, ‘they appeared to be all sober’. The following day when the same, or a similar ‘mob’ turned out the ‘hands’ at the Styal Mill, ‘the men were armed with bludgeons, some of which were of rather large dimensions’. This was a large crowd of men, young women and boys.

While the strikers were ‘idlers’, or a ‘mob’, the strike leaders were looked upon as the scum of the earth. Nothing the *Guardian* said was bad enough to blacken their characters. They were looked upon as violent, unprincipled and profligate men. Above all they were shown in the news reports in the *Guardian* as men of extreme cowardice. There was a crowd at Wanklyn’s silk mill in Ashton on the morning of Wednesday 24 August. The scene was described ‘. . . the yard was filled with people, the ringleaders standing at the gate, ready to skulk off on the first appearance of danger . . . the wharfs on the side of

the canal, and the whole length of Park Parade, were crowded by a mass of people . . . presently one of the horse artillery crossed the bridge; and the cowardly rascals who had hitherto directed the proceedings of the mob, fled in all directions.'²⁶ Midway through September the *Guardian* described a mass picket going to Stalybridge as follows: 'The men attempted to encourage the females to go forward (knowing that the females were exposed to the greatest danger).'²⁷

At an evening meeting at Ashton on Monday 15 August, the *Guardian* reported: '. . . whilst some speechifier was holding forth a report was sent forth that the military and special constables were coming. The report had a wonderful effect in cooling down the valourous inclinations of the mob and mob orators. Each vied with his neighbour in his exertions to make his escape. Helter skelter they ran down the back street, tumbling over one another in the most ludicrous manner; some being much bruised.'²⁸

The class character of its editorials oozed out of every line. To crush the strike and push the workers back to where they belonged was the clarion call of its twice weekly editorials during the strike. It was only seven weeks after the beginning of the strike and when its fate was already sealed, that an editorial expressed any sympathy for the workers and even then it was limited to the weavers: 'We do not say that these wages are as much as the weavers ought to receive. We wish with all our hearts that they were larger.'²⁹

The shopkeepers and small tradesmen

In addition to the directly hostile class forces who joined the battle against the workers, there were other sections of society that took a hand. The lower middle class, shopkeepers, publicans and other tradesmen and some religious authorities, were one way or another drawn into the raging struggle. There is no doubt the overwhelming majority of these people felt for the workers and were sympathetic to them, but in a purely humanitarian sense, and there probably was some self-interest involved. This sympathy sometimes took the form of some material help, such as the Macclesfield grocer who donated

flour to the value of £20, which the Macclesfield strikers decided to share with the strikers of Stockport, or the shopkeeper who gave the crowd 'two cheeses, a flich of bacon and a great quantity of loaves'. Even better were the very considerable subscriptions received by the Power Loom Weavers' Association which enabled 7,000 of its members to receive donations from its strike fund. There were officials of chapels who threw open their doors to the turn-outs.

Where the aid took the form of offers of mediation then the position was not so clear cut, nor can one avoid the feeling that such aid was not entirely politically disinterested. In Ashton in the first three days of the strike the shopkeepers and publicans held three meetings – one indoors with over 300 present. They declared they would assist the operatives to obtain a fair day's wage for a fair day's work. They agreed to raise a subscription, and appointed a deputation of eleven 'gentlemen' to wait on the employers. They met some thirty of the principal employers on Friday 12 August. They put the operatives demands – a uniform price list and the ten-hour day. There was a long discussion and in a statement issued by the Shopkeepers' Committee it was stated that the masters agreed to the uniform price list but wished the men to return to work and endeavour to bring other towns up to their prices. They had no disposition to reduce prices and would rather raise them. By Monday, that is three days later, the shopkeepers issued a statement which said, 'We are most determinedly resolved to withdraw our assistance, should the question turn to one of politics – our motive being entirely for the protection of labour.'

A similar development took place at Stalybridge. On Saturday 13 August, the Stalybridge shopkeepers issued a statement, that should the operatives turn to political objects, then they will be 'frustrating themselves and become disunited'. In Stockport the Special Constable called a delegate conference for Tuesday, 23 August, of representatives of the trades, who were to bring with them the 1840 price lists, and those of 1842 (lists which, incidentally, revealed a 25 per cent fall in the prices paid).³⁰

Wherever such political intervention took place – nominally in the interests of the strikers – its ultimate intent was to fix a limit on the aims of the strike. For, by placing emphasis on

TO THE
SHOP-KEEPERS
OF MANCHESTER AND ITS IMMEDIATE NEIGHBOURHOOD.

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN, THAT

**PUBLIC
MEETING**

OF THE
SHOP-KEEPERS

Of Manchester and its Vicinity, will be held in the

Carpenters' Hall
ON FRIDAY, AUG. 19,
AT TWO O'CLOCK,

To ascertain how far they are prepared to assist the Working Classes in carrying out the Resolution of the Delegates elected by the Trades of Manchester and the Surrounding Districts.

By Order of the Delegates to Public Meeting Assembled.

ALEXANDER HUTCHISON, Chairman.

ROBERT WILK, Secretary.

Jacques, Printer, Oldham Road Library, Manchester.

Trade delegates call to the shopkeepers

wages, such intervention effectively challenged the Chartist argument that only political power could achieve any permanent advance in the condition of the working class.

The 'terrible tide of thought and energy'

However, it is also important to remember that such intervention, whether by the shopkeepers or the big employers, was basically defensive. It took place in the context of a strike that had already developed a momentum of its own, and the sharp conflict between the positions of the shopkeepers and the larger employers is eloquent testimony to the pressure under which they found themselves. By the second week of the strike, that 'terrible tide of thought and energy', described in the Chartist Address, was no longer an aspiration but a living political reality.

We have already indicated the stormy and wide-ranging discussions that took place at public meetings. In the overwhelming majority of these the resolutions and votes were for both wages and the Charter, and this was confirmed by the Great Delegate Conference on 15–16 August. There were a few towns where longer discussions developed around the aims of the strike. In Oldham the Chartist leadership (following the O'Connor line) was originally opposed to a political strike. In Ashton and Stalybridge shopkeepers attempted to intervene. In Stockport the managers and foremen made efforts to hold back the strikers from support for the Charter. In all cases, however, the popular expression and vote was for the Charter, no matter what was advocated from the platform.

Once the Delegate Conference and the National Charter Association executive had declared themselves in favour of a strike for the the Charter, local Chartist leaders and workers became the driving force within the strike. The solidarity movement in London has already been described. In the North the leaders constantly restated the causes and aims of the strike. 'The reduction of wages arose not from the pressure of the times, but from the grinding and grasping avarice of the mill owners' (Bernard McCartney, silk weaver of Liverpool, speaking at Granby Row).³¹ 'Everything here was protected by law, except the labour of the working man' (Patrick Murphy Brophy,

Chartist lecturer, speaking at Middleton).³² These leaders were also clear as to where they were going. One delegate sent out to address the crowd outside the Carpenters' Hall, during the Great Delegate Conference on Monday 15 August, said 'They might rest assured that the delegates who considered themselves a committee of public safety at the present crisis, would lose no time in bringing their deliberations to a close.'³³

There were clear ideas as to the leadership of the strike. William Aitkin, the Ashton Chartist schoolmaster, speaking at a meeting in Ashton where wages versus the Charter was being discussed, stated 'the question must ultimately be decided by the delegates sent from the various towns'.³⁴ Also, at the Great Delegate Conference on Tuesday 16 August, Bernard McCartney in the course of a speech '... recommended national delegate meetings'.

The second week of the strike also made clear the revolutionary demands the working class was making and fighting for. There were not only the demands which would bring immediate relief to their starvation and misery. They also called for wage rates which meant restoring the hefty wage cuts of the previous two years; payment of wages weekly, ending the payment for gas light; reduced rents; ending the system of company shops; a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, increased employment of men; and for the ten-hour day. These demands made at mass meetings, in resolutions at local trades conferences and in speeches everywhere amounted to radical social change, a change that could only be brought about by making the Charter the law of the land.

However, the most effective test of how far working people were *in the mass* beginning to see themselves in a new way, as a class with a historical mission, is the degree to which the strike threw up and sustained organs for the specific purpose of wider class organization and the exercise of class power. The most important feature of this development was the creation of local strike committees which granted permission for the use of machinery and the continuation of work and which organized the sending of delegates from one town to another to extend the strike.

The report of the Feargus O'Connor trial describes a number of incidents where the committees of the operatives or public

meetings gave employers permission to finish work which had been caught in mid-process by the strike, where valuable materials were likely to be ruined and also work which was urgently necessary on humanitarian grounds. At Marple Bridge, on Thursday 15 August, a public meeting with about 1,000 present agreed that Mr Robinson a print master 'be allowed to run his machinery and finish some pieces that were damaging; and that all sours and liquids should be saved.' A similar application was made to the Operatives Committee at the Moulders Arms, Stalybridge, on behalf of Messrs Potter, print works. After some slight delay, the following licence to work was issued. 'This is to certify that the Stalybridge Committee of operatives, have upon the representation of Messrs Potter & Co., of Dinting Vale Print Works that a quantity of cloth is in process, we, the committee, give leave to finish the present cloth, but no fresh to be entered up. [signed] *The Committee* – August 11 1842.' A similar licence was issued on Wednesday 10 August to Messrs Neild and Co. Bleach works, Dukinfield, by the Stalybridge Operatives Committee at the Moulders Arms. The permission paper read: 'We, the Committee of Stalybridge think it our duty to allow you every protection in our power, to finish the pieces already in danger, but we will not go beyond that point. On behalf of the Committee, to the Dukinfield Bleach Works.' When the pieces were finished, the work ceased.

Another case was that of Peter Jamieson, master tailor of Stalybridge who went to the Moulders Arms on Wednesday 10 August and had to go again on Thursday and was given permission to finish a mourning order. His work was inspected. Another application to continue work concerned one individual, Henry Rhodes in Dukinfield. He was responsible for the water wheel that both helped turn the machinery at the mill he worked at – Robinsons – and also pumped water for the inhabitants of Dukinfield. On Thursday 11 August, he started up the pump for the purpose of supplying water to the inhabitants, but the turn-outs insisted on it being stopped, hence the application for permission to the Operatives Committee at Hall Green, Dukinfield. There were about a dozen men in the room. As the judge at O'Connor's trial stopped further evidence being given at this point, because none of the defendants were present, the report does not state

whether permission was granted or not. The Attorney-General also referred to a case where a licence was granted to get enough coal to supply the engine which kept the coal pit free from water.

James Rothwell, on Thursday 11 August, made application on behalf of his employers, Messrs Hollingworth of Dalton, to a meeting of operatives at Whinberry Hill, Glossop, for permission to finish some work that was spoiling. John Lewis, chairman of the Glossop committee and a defendant at the trial, put the request to the meeting, where it was carried. They worked for two days and then ceased. A Heaton Mersey bleach works was given permission to finish the chemical process that a number of pieces of calico were going through. The calico printing works of Mr Andrews of Dean Water was also given permission to work, for the same reason, both on Friday 12 August. On Tuesday 16 August, Mr Jackson of Heaton Mersey, Stockport, applied to finish some work, a number of pieces of calico which were in a wet state and likely to rot. He was at risk to the tune of £500–600. The report in the press did not state whether permission was granted.

A deposition by Mr Charles Poppleton, coal merchant, was sent to the Rt Hon. Sir James Graham, Bart. He complained that a number of Stockport factories had been given permission by the strikers to resume work. 'I have been informed by some of the parties or by persons connected with them that they had received permission to carry on their works from the Chartist Committee', and that, 'in most cases the permission was in writing signed by a man named Wright, the Chariman of the Chartists at Stockport and the written licence had a large seal appended. . . .'

A news item in the *Stockport Advertiser* told, presumably on the same subject that some of the bleachers had obtained permission to finish certain work which would otherwise have been totally spoiled and would be a serious loss to the proprietors.

The granting of permission to finish work by the operatives' committees was not a completely one way affair, occasionally it worked the other way. The *Guardian* reported the operatives' activities in Rochdale on Thursday 11 August, when between 5,000 and 6,000 turn-outs visited the factories and where necessary pulled the plugs out, and let the water out. In the course of the report they state that the 'mob' then went to Mr

Hoyles' corn mill and informed the men that they must keep at work as they should want some corn before the next week. That the workers were not riotous or blindly destructive, and that on the contrary they were concerned to prevent the destruction of machinery and property is shown by an incident arising out of the same Rochdale 'mob' paying a visit to a sawmill. As high-pressure was used there, it was deemed not safe to pull the plug, the fire was put out, and the steam let off by opening the valve.³⁵

Evidence of the existence of strike committees can be found in the report of the trial and in the *Guardian*. Mr John Robinson Scott, policeman of Royton, giving evidence at the trial, was asked by Mr Hillyard (for the prosecution) 'Upon that, was the account of the funds of the committee read to the meeting?' Witness, 'Yes, Sir'. A collection had been taken at the meeting to send a delegate to the Manchester trades conference that day (Tuesday 16 August) and 5s od had been raised. Mr Hillyard, 'What was done with the money received in the hat?' Witness, 'It was handed over to Booth the Secretary.' The *Guardian* of 31 August reported from Stockport that the subscription made by the operatives' committee on Friday and Saturday, among shopkeepers and others of the middle class, had enabled them to purchase near 100 loads of potatoes which were distributed among the turn-outs. A few days earlier, the *Guardian* (27 August), reported that the Bury operatives had issued a statement addressed to the employers, stating their terms for a return to work. They asked the employers, if they agreed to the above, then to please address the committee of factory operatives, Stanley Arms, Bury.

At Ashton a party of colliers met in an old mill which was used for meetings. When the authorities came to clear the mill they found '... that the colliers were holding a sort of committee meeting in the factory'.³⁶ Three days later there was a delegate meeting of the cotton trade operatives at Manchester. Arising from this meeting the Ashton operatives' committee, being perhaps apprehensive that a number of workers might possibly be induced from sheer necessity to accept work if offered to them, published a placard which called for continued resistance to the employers.³⁷

Long before this call was made, delegates were being sent from town to town. As early as the third day of the strike,

Wednesday 10 August, two delegates from Ashton convened a meeting at the Working Men's Hall in Bury. On the same day delegates from Stalybridge, Ashton and Oldham came to Rochdale. On that same Wednesday, a mass meeting at Ashton passed the following resolution: 'It was determined that delegates should be sent to several of the large towns in Lancashire and Cheshire for the purpose of arousing public sympathy in favour of the operatives.'

The *Advertiser*, 13 August, reported that the agitation was commenced at Bolton on Wednesday evening 10 August, by the arrival of a number of delegates from Manchester, Ashton, Stockport and other places. The *Guardian*, 17 August, reported that several persons calling themselves delegates from the Failsworth silk weavers, arrived at Middleton and called a public meeting which was accordingly held in the Market Place on Wednesday evening, 10 August. Two days later, Friday 12 August, a mass meeting of Middleton turn-outs agreed to send a number of delegates to Leigh to request the silk weavers there to join them in the General Strike.

From Preston the *Northern Star*, 20 August reported a hastily convened meeting for Thursday 11 August to hear two delegates from Ashton, Challenger and Aitkin. One of them stated that he came from Ashton-under-Lyne; that the whole of the workmen in Manchester, Ashton, Stalybridge, etc., etc., had struck work for an advance in wages, and that he and his companion had been deputed to Preston and other places to endeavour to get the working men to follow their example. (Challenger had been elected secretary to the Ashton weavers early in the strike.) Samuel Bannister, chief constable of Preston, in giving evidence at the Trial stated 'It was announced that there would be a meeting on the 12th August and that Aitkin and Challenger would be there . . . Aitkin and Challenger came forward and spoke.'

At the Manchester trades delegate conference on Friday 19 August, Richard Pilling reported that £20 had been collected among the shopkeepers of Ashton, which the operatives there had expended in sending delegates to Halifax and other towns to raise the people. At the Stockport trades delegate conference on Monday 15 August, the Hyde delegate explained that money given by shopkeepers was used to send delegates to solicit the

cooperation of the other operatives in the manufacturing districts.³⁸

Were these committees and all this activity of any relevance to the ultimate character of the strike? We have to note that both the judge and the Attorney-General treated them with the utmost seriousness and the judge considered the participation of the issuing of licences as evidence of the highest order in proving the charges – other than conspiracy – against the defendants. The Attorney-General in his opening address stated, ‘Gentlemen, all labour of every kind had been stopped – not merely, gentlemen, at the large manufactories where they were spinning by steam engines, but there was a general turn-out of all hands employed in all trades except of those who assisted in the production of the most ordinary necessities of life.’ He told of the existence of committees whose object was to receive applications for remission of the strict rule of abstaining from labour and to give licence to persons to carry on, to a limited extent, their labours for the purposes specified in the licence. ‘Gentlemen, I stated to you, and I did so most unequivocally, that I have ever considered the existence of those committees as one of the most formidable evidences of the extent to which the “strike” as it is called, pervaded all classes of operatives.’ He went on to tell the court that these committees ‘. . . at first styled themselves committees of public safety’, but he believed, ‘they afterwards called themselves the committee of operatives’.

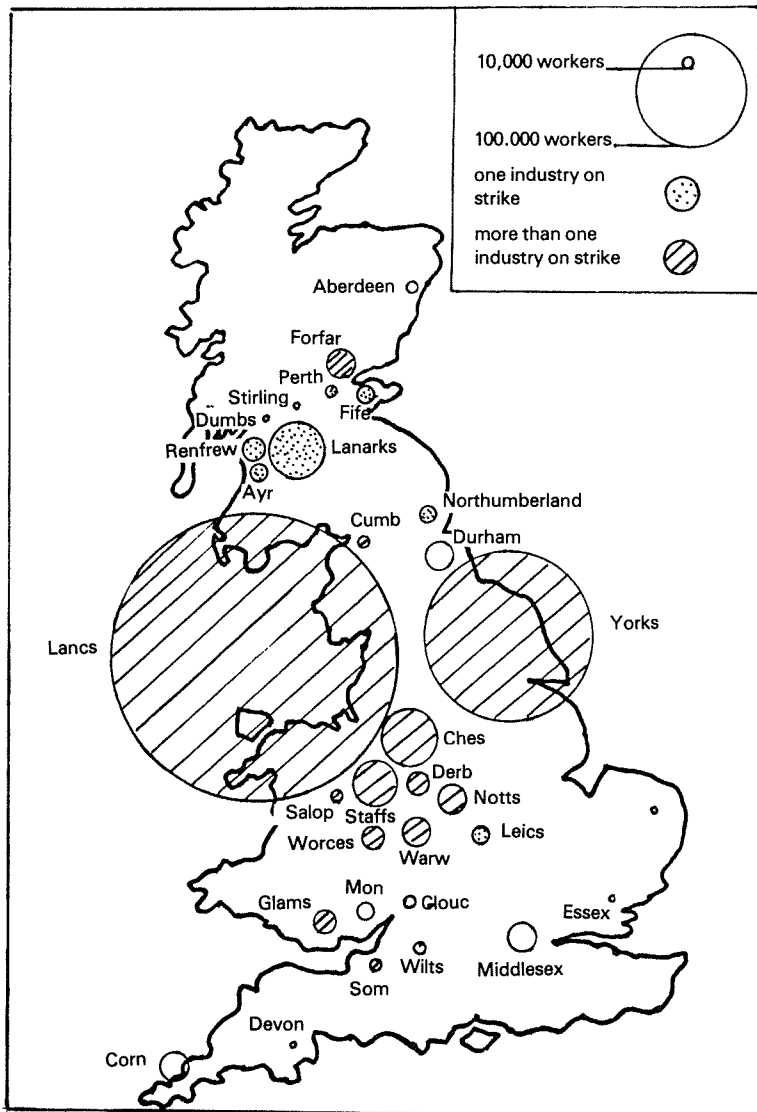
The Attorney-General had no illusions as to what the power to issue permits to work meant. In his summing up speech at the trial, he returned to this question: ‘Why, gentlemen, could there be a stronger proof of the intimidation that was used than the evidence adduced respecting those licences which were given for the carrying on of labour? . . . This was one of the most alarming indications of the effects of this conspiracy.’ The judge, in his summing up to the jury, confirmed the Attorney-General’s statement. He said, ‘Parties took on themselves not merely to stop the works, but to give licence to work. That is important, not as establishing the charge of conspiracy, but I think that the granting of licences to persons to work is the strongest possible evidence that, but for this licence, they would not be permitted to do so.’

These statements of the judge and the Attorney-General not

only confirmed the universality of the General Strike, but also its effectiveness. The reports in the newspapers of the day and the report of the trial gave a picture not of riotous mobs on the loose but of organization, confidence and militancy with its committees, its delegates, its power to permit work, in addition to a great deal of detailed organizational work being done. A glimpse of this is given in the incident where George Brooks, bookkeeper to Messrs Potters Print Works, went to the Stalybridge operatives' committee room at the Moulders Arms to seek permission to finish some work. He was told he would have to wait because some of the committee were attending a mass meeting in Stalybridge. Not all were attending the mass meeting but those remaining had detailed practical tasks connected with the running of the strike to perform, and so a division of labour took place, which made it more important for some of the committee to remain in the committee room and at their particular tasks, than attend the public meeting. When you consider the mass of detailed work that was reported – the bills of credit, the collecting of money and its accountability, the writing of resolutions, drafting of addresses and placards, the printing and distribution, etc., the organization of public meetings and processions – then not hundreds but thousands must have been drawn into the day to day work and leadership of the General Strike.³⁹

A comment by the authors of the book on the 1926 general strike – *A Workers' History of the Great Strike* – applies with even greater force to 1842. 'The experience of granting permits to employers and hearing their pleas was extraordinarily effective in instilling confidence and class consciousness into the workers.'⁴⁰

Figure 8 The industrial labour force in the 1842 strike by county⁴¹



NOTES

1. R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement*, London, 1854, p. 228. *Trial*, p. 370 (E.C. Address) and p. 381 (Conference Address).
2. Address from the Chartist Conference to the Chartist Public.
3. Address from the executive of the National Charter Association to the People.
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*
6. H. Jordan, 'The Chartist Strike of 1842 in South Wales' (BA Dissertation, History Department, Swansea, 1976); F. C. Mather, 'General Strike of 1842', *Provincial Labour History* (ed. J. H. Porter), Exeter, 1972, p. 22.
7. *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1842.
8. *ibid.*
9. *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842.
10. *ibid.*; *Manchester Guardian*, 20 August 1842.
11. *Manchester Guardian*, 24 August 1842.
12. F. Mather, *Public Order in the Age of the Chartists*, Manchester, 1966, p. 164.
13. C. S. Parker, *Life and Letters of Sir James Graham*, London, 1907, p. 322.
14. *Manchester Guardian*, 24 August 1842; *Manchester Advertiser*, 27 August 1842.
15. Archibald Prentice, *History of the Anti-Corn Law League*, I, London, 1953, pp. 376-9.
16. Frances Collier, *The Family Economy and the Working Classes in the Cotton Industry 1784-1833*, Manchester, 1964, pp. 39-55.
17. *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1842.
18. Reported in the *Stockport Advertiser*, 19 August 1842.
19. *ibid.*
20. *Manchester Guardian*, 24 August 1842.
21. *ibid.*, 17 August 1842.
22. *ibid.*, 13 August 1842.
23. *ibid.*, 24 August 1842.
24. *ibid.*, 25 August 1842.
25. *ibid.*, 26 September 1842.
26. *ibid.*, 27 August 1842.
27. *ibid.*, 14 September 1842.
28. *ibid.*, 17 August 1842.
29. *ibid.*, 28 September 1842.
30. *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842, 10 and 24 September 1842; *Manchester Guardian*, 13 and 17 August 1842; *Stockport Advertiser*, 19 August 1842; *Trial*, p. 25.
31. *Manchester Guardian*, 10 August 1842.
32. *ibid.*, 27 August 1842.
33. *ibid.*, 17 August 1842.
34. *ibid.*

35. *Trial*, pp. 11, 51, 52, 175-9; PRO HO 45/242; *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1842; *Stockport Advertiser*, 19 August 1842.
36. *Manchester Guardian*, 3 September 1842.
37. *ibid.*, 7 September 1842.
38. *Trial*, pp. 62, 74, 76, 149, 169; *Manchester Guardian*, 13, 17, 24, 27, 31 August and 3 and 7 September 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842; *Manchester Advertiser*, 13 August 1842; *Bolton Free Press*, 20 August 1842; *Stockport Advertiser*, 19 August 1842.
39. *Trial*, pp. 11, 178-9, 348-9, 367.
40. R. Postgate, *A Workers' History of the General Strike*, London, 1927, p. 34.
41. The industrial labour force is shown for those counties where the total working in the following industries exceeds 5,000: textiles of all kinds, mining of all kinds, metal working of all kinds. The figures are based on the 1841 census.

The State Prepares to Crush the Strike

Manchester. 8 September 1842

Lieut. General Arbuthnot to Military Secretary Horse Guards:
Ashton, Stalybridge, Glossop, Dukinfield, Hyde, Stockport:

At these towns and their neighbourhood all appears quiet, but there is little or no disposition on the part of the operatives to resume work, tho' it was expected that some would have done so on Monday last. They now avow their determination to hold out till their wages are increased. . . .

The main enemy: solidarity

Lieutenant-General Sir Thomas Arbuthnot, KCB, Colonel of the 52nd Light Infantry, had arrived in Manchester on Tuesday 23 August, the fifteenth day of the turn-out, having been appointed by the Home Office to come to Manchester to crush 'the mad insurrection'. He was to take charge of the whole disturbed areas, the Midlands as well as the North, and was to work with Major-General Sir William Warre, Army Commander for the Northern District. The above message to the Military Secretary of the Horse Guards was sent on the thirty-first day of the strike, after he had been in the Manchester-Lancashire district for sixteen days.¹ It portrayed the stubborn and indomitable stand of the workers. It also indicated the inability of the civil and military forces to break the strike in spite of the steps they had already taken – which included the smashing of the Manchester trades conference and the arrest of many of the leaders of the strike.

As early as the first day of the second week of the strike, the employers were forced to acknowledge, at least in Manchester and the area around, that the strike had gripped the masses and that for the moment they could do very little about it. On Monday 15 August, the committee of the master-spinners, manufacturers, machine-makers, millwrights, mechanics, printers, dyers and others had issued the statement: 'That the

mills and other public works of Manchester and Salford be not opened for work until the workpeople therein employed signify their desire to resume labour.' On 10 September, towards the end of the fifth week of the strike, the *Guardian* in an editorial stated: 'There is little change in the state of affairs in Manchester with reference to the turn-out.' Four days later in the same column it opened the piece with a repeat of the above sentence, and a further three days later it reported that the only new feature in the state of affairs was that Stockport was returning to work. Mr Richard Beswick, chief superintendent, Manchester police, in answer to the court at the trial stated: 'I don't believe that any of the mills were opened for three weeks. . . . It was about seven weeks before all the hands went in.'

The second week of the strike saw the class confrontation intensified. The two resolutions of the central trades conference in Manchester made clear the class character of the struggle as seen by the trade unions and trade delegates to those conferences. There can be little doubt that the support of the Chartist leadership, the decisions of the Chartist conference, the issuing of the placards and addresses as well as the support of the *Northern Star*, strengthened the class consciousness of the workers and their determination to fight to the death. In spite of the repression and persecution, there was waged a stubborn and unyielding fight. Even when the objective of the Charter was becoming obviously unobtainable, the turn-outs tenaciously clung to the demand for the wage rates of 1840. Arbuthnot's message testifies to 'their determination to hold out till their wages are increased'.²

Preparing the instruments of suppression

Arbuthnot's estimation of the situation was not unique. Nearly two weeks earlier, the Home Secretary, Sir James Graham, had stated, 'The state of affairs is somewhat improved: at least the insurrection is overawed; but the rebellious spirit is unbroken.' Graham was the principal architect of the suppression of the strike. A descendant of a long line of landowners, he represented the interests of the ruling class, and while not ignorant of the widespread suffering of the masses, the low wages and the unemployment, he was ruthless in suppressing

any revolt against these conditions, and this attitude was relentlessly applied during the strike of 1842.³

The Home Secretary maintained an intimate contact with Queen Victoria throughout the strike. He wrote full and regular reports to her and she wrote to him. In these exchanges they each revealed their own private reactions to the strike. The Queen, in writing to the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Peel, on 17 August 1842, repeated what she had just written to Sir James Graham; that she was surprised at the little (or no) opposition to the dreadful riots in the Potteries . . . and at the passiveness of the troops. It was all very well to send troops down in numbers and to publish proclamations forbidding these meetings, but then they ought to have acted, and these meetings should have been prevented. The Queen thought everything should have been done to apprehend Cooper and all the delegates at Manchester. The magistrates in many places seemed to act very laxly.

Graham's correspondence with the Queen and with other members of the government and their supporters clearly demonstrated not only their class attitudes and policies but also the extreme difficulty they were having in suppressing the strike. Graham, in a series of letters to the Queen, referred to the events at Preston on 16 August where the good effect of vigorous measures had been demonstrated by the return of the work-people to their employment. (Troops had fired on an unarmed crowd and four died.) 17 August: 'The mobs are somewhat overawed by the vigour with which the troops have acted at Preston, at Blackburn and at Bolton. Several prisoners have been taken; the troops in self-defence have been compelled to fire, and several persons among the rioters have been killed and wounded.' 18 August: 'In Lancashire a disposition to resume work has been partially evinced, and at Preston there has hardly been a cessation of employment.' August 19: 'At Preston, Sir James Graham is sorry to say, the workers have marked their sympathy with the insurgents by again leaving their employment.'

Preston was not the only town difficult to subdue. On 17 August, Graham wrote to the Queen that a tumultuous mob was charged and fired on and some lives were lost the previous day near Newcastle-under-Lyme. The ringleaders were taken

prisoner. He added that London continued quiet. The following day he told her that troops had charged and fired with effect at Halifax and Skipton. On 22 August he informed her that great exertions would be necessary for some time in the manufacturing districts, and that the military force in that quarter must not be suddenly or greatly reduced.

Graham was deeply worried about the trades conference at Manchester. On 15 August he had written to Major General Warre, Commander of the military forces in the North, telling him to arrest the delegates and the following day he told the Queen that at Manchester a body of delegates had been assembled, which obviously directed the whole operation from a common centre. Sir James Graham had ordered these delegates to be apprehended, and two days later, he told her that decisive measures would be adopted for the immediate apprehension of the delegates, not only in Manchester but in every other quarter where legal evidence could be obtained to justify their arrest. On 17 August he again wrote to Warre saying that he attached great importance to the capture of the delegates, which would produce the most extensive effect, far beyond the circle of the immediate neighbourhoods of Manchester. On 19 August he reported to the Queen that five delegates had been arrested and that a very important seizure of papers had been made which disclosed a conspiracy extensive in its ramifications going back as far as July 1841, and that he hoped that the papers which were still in Manchester would lead to fresh discoveries.⁴

The widespread character of the strike and the large-scale active participation of the industrial population in it, created problems for the government which were not easy to overcome. Graham showed great concern at the lack of decisiveness on the part of some of the magistrates in dealing with 'riotous mobs' and with the slowness of the arrest of the 'ringleaders' and their trial. He was concerned with the fact that the 'gentlemen and millowners' were content to leave it to the military and to the police to break the strike, to force the recommencement of work in individual mills and factories. Many of the magistrates and manufacturers were Whigs and associated with the Anti-Corn Law League and at first did not mind embarrassing the government in order to force it to repeal the Corn Laws. They

were also faced with the masses of turn-outs on their factory doorsteps with a determination to win, and that could only mean head-on clashes. Preston, Halifax, Blackburn and other towns showed what could happen if magistrates followed to the letter the Home Office advice and directives.

Graham knew how high the stakes were if others of his class did not. He did not spare himself, nor had he any illusions as to the task he had undertaken. In a letter to Lord Brougham on 21 August he wrote: 'I have not had a spare moment since the close of the session. My time has been occupied with odious business arising from the mad insurrection of the working classes.' Three days later he wrote to Mr Townley Parker: 'it is impossible even if you had a standing army ten times greater than the British to provide troops for every town and village throughout the manufacturing districts'.

On 18 August Graham wrote to the Queen that a firmer spirit was arising among all classes possessing property in defence of their rights, '... against these bands of plunderers, who are the enemies both of law and order and of property. The prisoners taken in the commission of treasonable felonies are numerous.' Graham was determined to defend law and property, and moreover to mobilize both the land-owning and mill-owning classes to join with him in this task. To this end he was prepared to give the ruling classes *carte blanche* in suppressing the strike, even to the point of murder being passed off as 'justifiable homicide'. In the letter to Mr Townley Parker he wrote, 'Gentlemen and mill-owners by local arrangement may form watch and ward, may arm their servants and retainers, may patrol on horseback, and command the strong arm of the law, which is on their side. . . . The Government will do what they can, but they cannot be everywhere and do everything.' This advice he formulated into formal directives, which were sent to the Earl of Derby, the Lord Lieutenant of Lancashire, and published in the press.

At the same time concern was shown at the hesitations and weaknesses of the magistrates. As early as 15 August, the Duke of Wellington had written to Graham saying that the affair at Preston ought to produce good consequences. He went on to say 'I would recommend you to send a stipendiary magistrate to each town threatened by disturbance . . . with this in view I

would recommend that a Special Commission should be sent into those counties to try all prisoners under charge of having committed these outrages, and that the sentences, whatever these may be, should be immediately carried into execution.' A few days later, Lord Brougham wrote a letter to Sir James Graham in similar strain. On 20 August, Sir James wrote to the Queen 'It will be necessary to issue a Special Commission for the trial of criminals and it will be the duty of Sir James Graham narrowly to investigate the conduct of the magistrates, who in many cases appear to have acted with a degree of feebleness and indecision quite unworthy of their station.'

It seems clear that Graham was taking no chances. He was convinced that the normal civil arrangements for keeping law and order could not cope. Furthermore, he was convinced that Major General Sir William Warre, military commander of the Northern District, was not strong enough to handle the situation, and was not showing enough vigour. This was despite a fairly manifest and full use of military force by Warre. On the third day of the strike in Manchester, that is on Thursday 11 August, upwards of 10,000 people had gathered at Granby Row Fields at 6.30 in the morning. Daniel Donovan was chairman of the meeting; Bernard McCartney, William Dixon and Christopher Doyle spoke. The meeting was quite peaceful but the mayor and magistrates arrived and declared the meeting illegal. Meantime, General Warre, Captain Panshawe, Colonel Martin, Colonel Wemyss and Captain Shuttleworth appeared on the ground followed by three troops of dragoons, each of thirty men, with their officers, a company of the 60th Rifles, also two field pieces (six pounders) with ammunition wagons and 50 artillery men. Strong bodies of police and special constables were also in attendance, under the command of Superintendents Beswick and Sawley. The field was soon cleared.

This heavy-handed conduct went on right through the strike. On Monday 15 August, two troops of the First Dragoons, two companies of the Grenadier Guards, a company of the 60th Rifles and a company of the 58th Regiment were used to disperse the crowd which gathered outside the Carpenters' Hall waiting to hear the decisions of the Great Delegate Conference. What really seems to have upset Graham was Warre's advice to

magistrates on 11 August to temporize with the strikers until greater military forces were available. To Graham such advice could only give confidence to the strikers and demoralize local employers. On 17 August, seven days after Warre's arrival in Manchester, he was superseded by Sir Thomas Arbuthnot who was instructed to take charge of the whole of the 'disturbed' areas in the Northern and Midland military districts.

This class war policy of Sir James Graham was not just the hamfistedness of a man who got some things out of balance. Like most men of his class he would rather make a few relatively inexpensive concessions to the working class to keep them quiet, than impose his class rule by brute force, but like them he would not hesitate to use brute force – if that was necessary – to meet any serious challenge to the dominant position of his class. His position was shared by Peel, Wellington and the Queen. What they estimated as the greatest danger was not the strike itself but the aims and methods it embodied: the demand for profound social change and the assertion of working-class solidarity to achieve it.⁵

Parts of the state machine break down

Concern was intensified by the knowledge that at least parts of the state machine previously relied upon to maintain order were beginning to crumble under the impact of the strike. This was particularly so in the case of those sections closest to the people: the civil police, special constables and Chelsea pensioners.

The Manchester police force was stretched to its absolute limits. In the first week of the strike they had engaged in 'almost unremitting duty'. The magistrates agreed to allow them a full night's rest. Their appeal to a number of warehousemen and others to act as special constables and undertake duty during the night, 'was not answered to such an extent as to give security for the efficient performance of duties'.

The first response to the inadequacy of the police force in relation to the problem they faced was to enrol special constables. Within a few days thousands of specials were enrolled in Manchester. A. G. Rose, in his study of the strike, tells us that a total of 8,830 specials were enrolled. Of these 4,389 were sworn in for duty in the neighbourhood of their homes,

2,018 for general purposes, and 2,423 for the protection of the works in which they were employed. Some workers objected to serving as special constables outside their workplaces, and consequently were not used in the streets.

The special constables in the 1842 strike were not a particularly strong arm of the forces of law and order. Events at Crowther's Bleach Works at Blackley, Manchester showed this weakness. The works had stopped and the workers were collecting for a meeting. At this moment about 100 workers, who had been sworn in as special constables, decided to go home 'as there was no immediate demand for their services'. The *Guardian* of 17 August comments, 'Had they remained on duty, and fulfilled their duty, in all probability the bleach works would not have been stopped.' This was a case where the calculations of Graham and company misfired. They never intended the works' special constables to have to defend the works against 'rioters' and 'mobs'. The second grouping of special constables – the gentlemen, manufacturers, masters, merchants, their retainers and hangers-on – would have been quite willing and ready to club the striking workers. The works' special constables were obviously intended to intimidate the workers, by the fact of there being special constables present among them who had sworn allegiance to the Queen. Chelsea Pensioners living in the 'disturbed' areas were blackmailed into becoming special constables, by being threatened with their pensions being stopped. They were even more demonstrative than the works' special constables in their refusal to come into conflict with the workers. Here, too, Graham's plans misfired. He had calculated that military control, plus a small payment, would counter the influence of the workers among whom the Chelsea Pensioners lived and so they could be used as a supplementary force against the turn-outs.

About one o'clock on Thursday 11 August, Sergeant Dale was sent with a few policemen and a number of Chelsea Pensioners – who had been sworn in as special constables – as a reinforcement to police stationed near Charles Street, Oxford Road. They passed through a crowd of people, '... a stone or two was thrown at them', the pensioners fell back, 'and though called upon by Sergeant Dale to come forward, and take out

their staves, they not only refused to do so, but actually ran off'. An enrolment of Chelsea Pensioners took place, however, and 200 attended and enrolled. The *Guardian* commented, 'Nor was the conduct of some of these pensioners quite so courageous as might have been expected from old veterans, who had fought and bled on behalf of their country. The precipitate and cowardly flight of a party of them under Sergeant Dale . . . showed that this is a species of force by no means to be implicitly relied on, in such an emergency as the present.' That was perfectly true, so much so that by Tuesday evening, 23 August, the pensioners were disbanded.

It was not only the Chelsea Pensioners who would not fight the turn-outs. There were sections of the middle class who declared – openly and by their conduct – that they would not fight the striking workers. At Ashton, meetings of shopkeepers, publicans and others declared they would 'offer their services to the magistrates to act as special constables but that they would protect the interests of the operatives to the utmost of their power'. At Oldham, 'The special constables did not support the police with spirit.' In many areas individuals and groups were hauled before magistrates either for refusing to take the oath of allegiance or for failing to carry out their duties. Others complained that they had to leave their homes and businesses too frequently.

At Bolton, when registered electors were served with summonses to attend at the police office to be sworn in as special constables, 'There was a very great reluctance evinced by the majority of the electors to take any part in the matter, the more ardent declared that they would not risk their lives, and incur popular odium, perhaps for life, to support a Government and continue a state of things which had brought the people of these districts to their impoverished, alarming and desperate condition.'⁶

It was probably also to combat such feelings of fear and uncertainty among the middle class that before the end of the strike the Lancashire yeomanry was amalgamated with that from a whole bloc of counties from Worcestershire to the Scots border and placed under the direct command of Arbuthnot.

The state resorts to harassment and intimidation

At the same time, however, the government utilized every opportunity to harass and intimidate the strikers, and above all to indicate to all concerned that the strike was regarded not as an industrial dispute but a treasonable conspiracy which could expect no quarter.

Correspondence was intercepted. Individuals throughout the country, but mainly in the North, had their letters opened and read. Late delivery raised some suspicions. The arrangement was that three confidential clerks were sent to local post offices and there copied the letters of suspect parties and the originals were despatched to their addresses.

There were also the official proclamations. The Queen issued one on Saturday 13 August. It referred to the 'wicked and illegal' practices of the turn-outs, and said that for every one of these offenders who was discovered, apprehended and brought to justice and who should so be convicted, there would be a reward of £50 for the person laying the information, who would be pardoned if he was implicated in the crime he exposed. The *Guardian*, with full apprehension of the meaning and effects of the proclamation, commented that, 'The reward of £50 offered had a very powerful effect; as anyone bent on mischief had no certainty that he would not be betrayed by those who took part with him' – to say nothing of the possibilities opened up for creating spies and provocateurs.

The county and borough magistrates at Manchester also issued a proclamation. It declared illegal all assemblages of considerable number. At Oldham the magistrates went the whole hog. Their 'Notice and Caution' read:

The Riot Act has this morning been read, and all persons are required to disperse immediately, under pain of being apprehended and punished under the provisions of the Riot Act, namely, by transportation for life or not less than fifteen years, or by imprisonment, with hard labour, for three years. The constables have orders to clear the streets immediately, and to apprehend all rioters and disorderly persons. By order of the magistrates. 9 o'clock, Wednesday morning, August 24 1842.



BY THE QUEEN. A Proclamation.

VICTORIA R.



WHEREAS,

In divers parts of Great Britain great Multitudes of lawless and disorderly Persons have lately assembled themselves together in a riotous and tumultuous manner, and have, with Force and Violence, entered into certain Mines, Mills, Manufactories, and other Places, and have, by Threats and Intimidation, prevented our good Subjects therein employed from following their usual occupations and earning their Livelihood; We, therefore, being duly sensible of the **MISCHEVOUS CONSEQUENCES** which must inevitably ensue, as well to the Peace of the Kingdom as to the Lives and Properties of our Subjects, from such wicked and illegal practices if they go unpunished, and being firmly resolved to cause the laws to be put in execution for the **PUNISHMENT OF SUCH OFFENDERS**, have thought fit by the advice of our Privy Council, to issue this proclamation, hereby strictly commanding all Justices of the Peace, Sheriffs, Under Sheriffs and all other Civil Officers whatsoever within the said Kingdom, that they do use their utmost endeavours to discover, apprehend, and bring to Justice, the Persons concerned in the riotous proceedings above mentioned: And, as a further inducement to discover the said offenders, We do hereby promise and declare, that any person or persons who shall **DISCOVER AND APPREHEND**, or cause to be discovered and apprehended, the authors abettors, Or perpetrators, of any of the outrages above mentioned, so that they or any Of them may be duly convicted thereof, shall be entitled to the Sum of **FIFTY POUNDS**, for each and every person who shall be so convicted, and shall also receive Our most gracious pardon for the said offence in case the person making such discovery as aforesaid shall be liable to be prosecuted for the same.

Given at our Court at Windsor, this Thirteenth Day of August, in the Year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and forty-two, and in the sixth year of our reign.

GOD SAVE THE QUEEN.

ROBERTS, PRINTER, ST. JAMES'S CHAMBERS, BACK KING-STREET, MANCHESTER

Royal Proclamation

Oldham magistrates were not alone in using the threat of transportation for attending meetings or for refusing to clear the streets.

A widespread method of intimidation throughout the strike was arrest and imprisonment. At Dudley on Tuesday 9 August, forty colliers were hauled before the magistrates; fifteen were given a choice – gaol or go back to work. The fifteen chose gaol. The *Northern Star* reported continuous arrests of colliers in the Staffordshire coalfield. The *Bolton Free Press* (27 August) reported from York, ‘Bodies of Chartist rioters continue to be brought in here, escorted by military and police . . . handcuffed and chained together and marched through the streets. . . .’ Thirteen cotton spinners at Ainsworth’s mill at Preston stopped work demanding an increase in wages. They were brought before the magistrates and sentenced to one month’s imprisonment for breaking their contract (*Guardian*, 27 August).⁷

At the beginning of October the *Manchester Advertiser* commented: ‘Seizures of papers and persons, illegal interruption of public meetings, hired evidence, plots against the life of the sovereign, reports and rumours of “treason, stratagems and spoils” in all directions possible and impossible, are convincing indications of the return to the “good old times” of Tory rule.’⁸

Graham laboured hard and incessantly, and his labours did not go unrewarded. By the end of the second week of the strike he had established a political policy and forced its acceptance on the military and their auxiliaries, forced it upon the civil authorities, and on the police. He did much more. He welded together all the military and civil forces and authorities into a functioning machine under central control and leadership, to enforce his policy – a policy which amounted to civil war.

NOTES

1. Arbuthnot to Military Secretary, 8 September 1842, HO 45/268.
2. *Manchester Guardian*, 17, 24 August and 10, 14, 17 September 1842.
3. F. Mather, *Public Order in the Age of the Chartists*, Manchester, 1966, p. 156; *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842.

PROCLAMATION.



WHEREAS,

Many classes of Workpeople in this Town and immediate Neighbourhood have resumed labour within the last few days, and it having been made known to us that others have signified their intention to

BEGIN WORK

On **MONDAY MORNING** next,
We, the undersigned

MAGISTRATES

Do hereby call upon the well disposed of every class to hasten, by their influence and example the resumption of Labour, and do hereby declare our determination to protect by all the means in our power, all persons who shall return to their work, and to

PUT DOWN AND PUNISH

with all the rigour of the Law every attempt to overawe and intimidate Her Majesty's Subjects in the pursuit of their lawful callings.

County Magistrates acting within the Division
of Manchester.

J. Frederick Foster
John Bentley
William Garnett
M. Phillips
Daniel Broadhurst
George William Wood
Samuel Fletcher
D. Maude

P. M. James
Joseph Leese
J. H. Wanklyn
John Bradshaw
George Clarke
Elias Chadwick
Robert Gardner

Magistrates for the Borough of Manchester.

William Neild, *Mayor*
Thomas Potter
A. Wainin
W. R. Callender
James Kershaw
Daniel Lee
John Brooks
Robert Stuart
James Hart
Richard Roberts

C. J. S. Walker
John Leeming
David Price
George Fereday Smith
E. Armitage
Alexander Bannerman
Henry Tootal
Thomas Cooke
John Hyde

Town Hall, Manchester, August 20th, 1843.

DAVID ROBERTS, PRINTER, 81 JAMES'S CHAMBERS, BACK KING-STREET, MANCHESTER.

Proclamation from magistrates of Manchester, 20 August

4. C. S. Parker, *Life and Letters of Sir James Graham*, London, 1907, pp. 314, 320-2, 324; Mather, op. cit., pp. 33-4, 43; Graham papers, microfilm, spool 32, Cambridge University Library.
5. *Manchester Guardian*, 13, 17, 24 August 1842; Warre to Home Office, 18 August 1842 and Graham to Warre, 12 August 1842, HO 45/268; Mather, op. cit., p. 155-6.
6. Mather, op. cit., pp. 63, 98; *Manchester Guardian*; 13, 17, 24, 27 August 1842; A. G. Rose, 'Manchester during the Plug Plot Riots', pp. 297-300 (Pamphlet, 3 pp and map) extract from periodical *Police Methods of Control*, p. 300; *Bolton Free Press*, 20 August 1842.
7. Mather, op. cit., pp. 143, 221-3, *Manchester Guardian*, 17, 27 August 1842; *British Statesman*, 13, 27 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 6, 13 August 1842; *Bolton Free Press*, 27 August 1842; *Trial*, p. 32.
8. *Manchester Advertiser*, 8 October 1842.

‘Unconquerable Courage’: The Strike Continues into September

The central leadership is removed

Graham did not find it easy to wage this war against the turn-outs. While his display and use of force disrupted organization and leadership – the central trades conference had to cease functioning because of the arrest of its leaders – yet it did not intimidate the turn-outs. During the second and third week, the numbers increased, as did the intensity of the struggle. More and more, it became a line-up of the government, the masters and many of the middle classes against the workers. Delegates to the Manchester trades conference, anxious to report to their members, and to take part in local leadership and activities, returned to their localities. This, coupled with the arrests, made it virtually impossible for the trades conference to continue, but it did have the effect of strengthening local morale and mass action, and extending the turn-out.

The Chartist leadership itself, having passed the resolution of support for the turn-outs, did little centrally to implement it, and the delegates – like the trades conference delegates – dispersed to their home towns to report to their members.

These four factors, the success of Graham’s unifying of the ruling-class forces into an effective machine under his and his nominees’ leadership; the arrest of the turn-out leaders; the disbanding of the trades conference; and the ending and disbanding of the Chartist conference, were bound to have a profound effect on the turn-out and in great measure determined its outcome. Although the two main demands – for wage increases and for the Charter – remained the main demands, nevertheless it was inevitable with the failure to maintain a central leadership that the issue of wages would begin to dominate. While the demand for the Charter was linked with the wage demand even before the turn-out started (as evidenced by the resolution of the Mottram Moor meeting

on Sunday 7 August), it was the decisions of the trades conferences, and in particular the Great Delegate Conference of the 15–16 August which put the stamp of the Charter upon the whole character of the turn-out.

Local Chartist leaders and speakers at mass meetings and in processions pledged undying loyalty to the Charter, called for three cheers and so maintained the demand for the Charter. Yet these four factors, combining as they did in the latter part of August, led to a weakening and then a complete abrogation of central leadership. The Charter was never repudiated, but the local turn-out committees and leaderships became more and more preoccupied with wages. It was easier to deal with the wages question, which could be fought out locally and handled by the local turn-out leaders. The Charter was a national question, needing central organization and leadership.

The battle for a living wage

As August drew to a close, so the lack of central leadership made itself felt. This, coupled with exhaustion, made the outcome of the struggle inevitable and only a matter of time. That is not to say that the workers allowed the masters and the government to walk over them. On the contrary, their militancy and fighting spirit rose to heroic proportions.

The turn-out spread to new areas: Dundee, Lancaster, Norwich, Carlisle and other towns.

Dundee entered the struggle in the third week of the turn-out. On Tuesday 16 August, a public meeting in Dundee decided to hold a procession the following day. Four thousand took part. They 'filled the breadth of the street for a great distance and presented a very imposing and formidable appearance'. The following day, a public meeting was held in Magdalen Yard. The platform claimed there were no less than 14,000 present. The *Dundee Warder* suggested 8,000 as the number present. The meeting unanimously passed a resolution that they would 'strike on Monday . . . and not resume work until the People's Charter be the law of the land'. The meeting and the resolution created 'considerable alarm in the town. . . . During the entire Sabbath great excitement and enthusiasm pervaded the town.' On Friday 19 August a trades conference was held, with about

100 delegates representing fifty-three different mills and factories. The *Dundee Warder* stated that each delegate reported on the state of things at his place of work. They carried a resolution with single dissentient, 'That a majority of their constituents were in favour of a strike for the Charter. A committee was appointed to carry this into effect. By Monday 22 August the *Dundee Warder* had to report that most of the factories in the town were stopped.¹

At Lancaster, the workers employed at T. Higgins, Moor Lane, walked out of the mill on Wednesday 17 August, without assigning any reason to their employers.² On Monday 22 August 'All the mills, except those mentioned above [two mills] were stopped', and on 27 August the *Guardian* reported, 'The turn-out of factory hands in this town still continues.'³

From Dewsbury, the *Northern Star* said: 'The town is completely in the hands of the turn-outs – all peaceable.' It reported that on Wednesday 17 August some 20,000 turn-outs returned to town – all sober, steady, straightforward men – from visiting Ossett, Horbury, Healey, Middletown and Thornhill, where they stopped all hands without the least interruption.⁴ At Carlisle workers turned out on Monday 22 August. The turn-out spread to some of the smaller towns around, and on Wednesday, the curriers, tanners, hatters and stone masons turned out, 'greatly increasing the number of people in the streets'. In the coalfields of Leicestershire and Shropshire, the colliers showed great determination to continue the turn-out until their demands were met. On Monday 29 August, the Jacquard weavers of Norwich struck work, and the same week it was reported that seven more pits in Nottinghamshire had joined the turn-out.⁵

In Bolton, where the figures for autumn 1841 showed that half the labour force was either laid off or on short time, the strike was particularly protracted and from the beginning assumed a mass character. On Monday 15 August, some 4–5,000 turn-outs paraded through the streets of Bolton and took the road to Wigan. As they went, their numbers increased, and when they reached Westhoughton they were joined by large numbers of local turn-outs. It was estimated that 30,000 entered Wigan. The *Guardian* reported that the Bolton spinners were to go back to work – they were to give the masters a fortnight's notice

for an advance of wages.⁶ Four days later the paper reported that the return and fortnight's notice were to comply with the law, and that if the advance was not forthcoming the turn-out would be resumed. On 17 September, the *Guardian* reported that the Bolton spinners' notices terminated that day, and four days later, 21 September – that is six weeks after the turn-out had commenced – the Bolton Spinners resumed the turn-out, pledging not to go back until they obtained a 10 per cent increase in wages.

The stubborn unyielding fight put up by the turn-outs generally is typified by the stand of the Stockport workers. The diary of the last three weeks of their struggle, was provided by the *Guardian*:

24 August. Monday morning 22 August, nineteen mills open, by 6.30 a.m. some engines stopped; by noon all are stopped. Workers treat employers with contempt.

27 August. None of the mills in this town commenced work on Tuesday . . . there does not appear any prospect of the dispute being brought to a speedy termination.

31 August. On the whole there does not appear any disposition on the part of the operatives to resume. All remains quiet.

3 September. None of the mills are yet at work.

7 September. There is no prospect of the turn-out in this town being terminated.

14 September. Meeting of turn-outs, Saturday 10 September: they would not return till employers sent for them and offered to pay the prices of 1840. Judging from the expression of feeling at the turn-outs' meetings, it is not likely to be yet terminated.

17 September. Numerous meetings of turn-outs continue to be held every day, at which resolutions are passed not to resume work till the prices of January 1840 be given.⁷

The tenacity of the Stockport turn-outs was not unique; this quality pervaded all the areas involved in the General Strike. This was particularly true of the cotton operatives of Manchester and the Ashton–Stalybridge area. The experience in Ashton-under-Lyne and Stalybridge is similar to Stockport. The tidal wave stopped industry on the first day. There were desperate attempts by some employers to reopen their mills or factories and vigorous resistance where this took place.

On Monday 29 August, that is at the end of the third week of

the strike, some mills were opened, but so few were the operatives who presented themselves for work, that it was considered uneconomical to start the engines. At Platt's mill in Stalybridge, 300 specials, together with a body of cavalry, guarded the mill all day and into the night to help reopen it. The *Guardian* on 3 September declared emphatically that there did not appear to be the slightest probability, for the present, of the operatives in Ashton resuming their employment. Fourteen days later the *Guardian* wrote in its news column: 'We regret to state that the favourable appearances of a speedy and complete termination of the strike in this neighbourhood, to which we averted on Wednesday have not been realised.' The editorial in the same issue repeated this gloomy perspective.

In the most difficult days of the strike, in the second week of September, the operatives of Ashton issued the following address to the 'manufacturers, tradesmen and shopkeepers and others whom it may concern':

Every individual of our own class who was possessed of sufficient intelligence to advise or direct at this momentous crisis, has been dragged to prison like so many felons, or compelled to leave their families a prey to tyranny and starvation and seek that security from persecution in a strange place, they could not enjoy at home, although they are guilty of no crime.

Why we left work

Why we stayed out

Why we will stay out

First, then, we came out because we were overworked and starving. Second – we did not go to work when required because our just and moderate desires were not complied with. And, lastly, we dare not go to work now, unless our desires are granted, lest we should be starved as before or enslaved for ever.

We wish and expect when we commence work again to receive, in return for our labour, the means of procuring the necessities of life, with a portion of its luxuries, as we, the operatives, collectively produce them all. We wish to enjoy the fruits of our industry in Peace, having time for recreation and to be treated by you like human beings.⁸

In the middle of the seventh week the *Guardian* was able to report that in Ashton and Stalybridge there had been a return to work – with three exceptions – and this decision was taken by the 'Executive Committee'.



CAUTION

THE MAYOR AND MAGISTRATES WARN ALL PERSONS AGAINST JOINING IN ANY PROCESSIONS

OR Assembling in the Streets or Roads, for any purpose whatsoever, as such practices are, under present circumstances, illegal, and will not be allowed.

Town Hall, Manchester,
September 15th, 1849.

WM. NEILD, Mayor.
SIMPSON & GILLET, PRINTERS, 78, MARKET STREET, MANCHESTER.

Caution against processions - 10 September

The Manchester cotton spinners at a meeting on Monday 22 August, with 150 present from 19 mills declared that if they held out for another week they might command their own terms. More than three weeks after the *Guardian* reported a meeting of spinners held the previous day. The resolutions, carried unanimously, read, 'That the meeting declares before God and their country, that they are, and have been for a length of time suffering to an extent almost beyond endurance.' Another resolution read, 'That the meeting declares, that one man is now performing as much work as four did eight years ago, in consequence of the improvement of machinery.' The card room operatives had also met on the morning of 22 August and decided to hold out until their prices were paid. On Tuesday 23 August, there was posted on the walls of Manchester a placard issued by the dyers and dressers which declared that a general meeting agreed to the demand of 1s per week on the old lists and 2s on the regular list. 'We therefore pledge ourselves not to resume work until the above is complied with.' On 3 September, the *Guardian* reported that a few dyers and bleachers had resumed work but most of the men were still out.

The Manchester weavers held out to the last. It was the end of September before they went back to work. They were out seven weeks – with strike pay as low as 4d and 3d for a week. On 22 August an attempt was made to reopen the mills but very few went in, so they remained closed. On the following day a meeting was held and it was resolved to remain out for another fortnight, 'even if they lived on three potatoes a meal and three meals a day'. They presented the masters with a price list which would have given the weavers an average wage of 10s per two looms and they called on the operatives to stand out for this. *The Times*, in its regular column on the State of Trade, stated on 26 August, 'This morning fewer hands went into work than has been the case for several days, although the number of mills which have got up steam and commenced operations has increased. This, unfortunately, shows that there is no nearer approach to a settlement between the masters and the men than previously . . . [the] . . . weavers held a large meeting at six o'clock this morning . . . and a resolution was come to that they would not resume work until an advance took place.'

The *Guardian* seemed to think at this stage that the weavers

could only hold out for another few days. In its issue the following day, 27 August, it stated, 'With respect to the weavers, . . . we believe there is not a single instance in Manchester of their actually having resumed work. It is known that a considerable number of them are reduced to very great distress; and it is not very likely that they will be able to remain without employment longer than to the end of the present week.' Seven days later, it wrote, 'As regards the power loom weavers, no change has taken place since our last publications, with the exception of those belonging to one or two establishments in Salford; the whole of the hands amounting, we believe, to seven or eight thousand are still out; nor do we hear that there is any prospect of a speedy settlement of their differences with their employers.'

A further four days later on 7 September it reported, 'Generally speaking the numbers of weavers who have gone to work anywhere in this town has been actually small, probably four or five different concerns have small numbers, say 12 to 20 to 30 each, working; but these are the only exceptions to the general practice of this class of the mill hands, who still as a body remain out. Meetings of trades, and especially of weavers continue to be held, at which language is used of an exciting and violent character.'⁹

At the trial of Feargus O'Connor in 1843, Beswick, the Manchester police superintendent, stated that it was about seven weeks before all hands went in. He also stated that he provided police protection for those who returned to work. He did not state that many mills and factories he helped to get started up were closed down again by mass picketing. Many protesting workers were arrested and charged with intimidation, etc., and this battle raged to the very end. In the last stages of the turnout, in the sixth week, Tuesday 13 September, some 8–9,000 power loom weavers collected in Brown Street, Ancoats, to receive their strike relief pay, the princely sum of fourpence each. While waiting peaceably and in an orderly manner, a strong force of policemen and specials descended on them and arrested fifty. (The *British Statesman's* report of this incident stated that the police and specials 'bludgeoned and beat the unoffending crowd in the most brutal manner'. Forty-four appeared in court the following morning. The *Guardian*

reported that Mr Taylor, solicitor on behalf of the defendants could not get a straight answer to some of his questions about the disturbance. Finally, he asked Mr Sawley, the chief constable of Manchester, 'Was there any disturbance at all until you came into the crowd?' Mr Sawley: 'None.' Mr Taylor: 'Was there any afterwards of any moment?' 'None whatever.'

The *Guardian* of 17 September 1842 contained a number of reports of mills opening and workers fighting to close them. Many mills opened their doors to the workers who went back on the basis of the wage demands they had put forward, worked for a few days or a fortnight, and then came out on strike again.¹⁰

Still, after being on strike for seven weeks, the bulk of Lancashire's cotton workers maintained their local cohesion and unity. When they returned to work they did so in relatively good order and by general agreement. In some cases this was without having gained any *increase* in wages – although the attempted wage cuts, which originally provoked the strike, do seem to have been defeated. Elsewhere, however, limited victories were won, and there are reports of wage rises being secured in Rochdale, Bury, Ashton, Oldham (a number of cotton mills and all silk spinners) and in a few Bolton factories.

This outcome is some indication of the high calibre and experience of the strike's local leadership and also bears witness to the wisdom of its original architects like Richard Pilling. In the same way as it had proved possible to raise the level of the strike, in a series of stages, from that of a simple wage demand to the People's Charter, so also the joint slogan of the Charter *and* the wages of 1840 made it possible to end the strike in a way which did not involve complete defeat and, more important still, left workers confident in their strength and trade union organization.

Women take up the struggle

One further test of how far the strike was able to draw on the full strength of the working-class community is the role played by women. Among the demands for social change was one which, while not precisely formulated, nevertheless impressed itself on the whole atmosphere of the strike. This was the need for change in the position of women workers. It expressed itself particularly

in the equal part they played in the course of the strike. From the very commencement, they displayed the same tenacity and courage as the men.

On the second day of the strike in Manchester, that is Wednesday 10 August, a crowd of women assembled in Great Ancoats Street at half past five in the morning, and proceeded through the main streets, their numbers increasing as they went. They were taking part in the stopping of mills. At the first mill they came to in Mill Street, the workpeople responded and came out. They then made their way to Kennedy's mill; they asked for the mill to be closed. This was refused. They then poured a volley of stones into the windows, broke open the outer door and were about to rush into the factory when Sir C. Shaw with a posse of police arrived. The *Northern Star* described what happened: 'A scene hereupon took place which baffles all description. The police charged the people, sparing neither age nor sex, but laying about them right and left with their bludgeons and cutlasses; many were knocked down and beaten till they were unable to rise from the ground.' The women responded with volleys of stones and the police, who had separated in fours and fives to use their bludgeons and cutlasses, took off in all directions 'amidst the curses and execrations of the immense assemblage'. Only with the arrival of a detachment of Dragoons and another of the Rifle Brigade did the crowd disperse.¹¹

The following morning, at half past six, a meeting took place on Granby Row Fields. The *Guardian* opened its report with, 'Notwithstanding the wetness of the weather, probably upwards of ten thousand persons of both sexes (the number of women was large) congregated there.'¹² While there are hardly any indications of women playing a part in the leadership of the strike, there is running through the press reports news of the equal participation of women alongside the men in all the mass actions that took place. The *Guardian* reported the march of the Rochdale turn-outs to Bacup, Todmorden and back to Rochdale, closing down mills which were working. 'Girls, not more than twelve or fourteen years of age, wearing heavy clogs, went along with this party – a distance of at least twenty-one miles, without the least refreshment. It was distressing to see them come down Yorkshire Street haggard, tired and lame, after

having walked from Rochdale to Bacup, from Bacup to Todmorden and from Todmorden to Rochdale.'

When the Stockport workers marched on Mr Greg's mill at Styal, the procession included young women who burned down the house set apart for the reception of female 'apprentices' to the works. In the Potteries, at Hanley and Shelton, women attacked the pawnshops (they would not listen to pleas not to do so) and got their clothes and pledges back (taking others, where they could not find their own). Thomas Cooper, the Chartist leader who was in the area at the time – on the way to Manchester for the Chartist conference – remarked the following morning that he had 'witnessed a spring cart full of females, guarded by both horse and foot, taken to Newcastle under Lyme . . . no doubt most of them will be committed for trial at the next sessions.' Many were the newspaper reports of the arrest of women alongside the men.

The *Guardian* reported thirty-nine arrested turn-outs brought to Stafford (thirty males and nine females) 'all young and all assuming a sort of dare-devil manner'.¹³ The women were mostly youthful, 'several of delicate and decent appearance'. Among the forty-four brought to trial arising from the unprovoked attack of the police on the crowd of operatives in Ancoats (waiting to collect their fourpence strike relief money) was Alice Kershaw, 'a young woman of rather interesting appearance', charged with hooting after the arrests were made. She was heard 'calling the police all sorts of ill names'. She said she was a weaver and worked for Mr Thompson. She lived at home with her parents. Another who appeared in court was Elizabeth Taylor, who called Ellen Gowan a 'knobstick'. Ellen Gowan could not be found to give evidence. Elizabeth McQuin, a thirteen-year-old weaver, who was on strike and took part in the mass picket at Birley's mill, had been hit by a piece of tile and at first it was thought she had been killed. The *Guardian* in printing a correction, referred to the girl as being wounded 'by the fall of a piece of tile from the roof of Messrs Birley's factory'. Members of the Birley management were hurling missiles from the roof on to the massed pickets below.

Half-way through September, on Thursday 15, mass picketing took place in response to the opening of a small

number of mills in the Oxford Road area of Manchester. At the mills belonging to Messrs George Wooley, Marsland and James Fernley, a great number of windows were broken. The *Guardian* reported, 'The most active assailants being women, with their aprons full of stones.'¹⁴ At Marsland's mill, 'about twenty females had filled their aprons with stones and broken windows'; 'There were many hundreds in the mob . . . were mostly women and children.' At Mr George Woolley's mill 'about thirty women were throwing stones'. 'Bridget Gatley, Sarah Massie, Esther Anderson, Jane Fletcher, Jane Hannahn, Diana Yates and Ann Scott were charged with forming part of a riotous assembly in Stretford Road on Tuesday afternoon, 13 September. They were all weavers.'

There were many individual acts of heroism on the part of women. Halifax was in 'a state of alarm' on Monday 15 August, with confrontations taking place. The *Guardian* reported: 'Perhaps the women were at this encounter the more valiant of the two; approaching to the very necks of the horses they declared they would rather die than starve.' Three days later, on Thursday 18 August, at Rochdale, the turn-outs were engaged in making the turn-out 100 per cent, and here too confrontations were taking place. The Riot Act was read. 'The soldiers cleared the streets with the point of the bayonet, and the special constables and police began to strike right and left, many women opened their breasts and cried, "Strike or shoot, we may as well be killed as starved to death".'¹⁵

The female turn-outs helped to maintain organization, and meetings of women were frequent. Mr Beswick, the Manchester police superintendent, was checking up on meetings being held by weavers around Birley's mill. The *Guardian* reported that at one of the meetings, Mr Beswick found 'none but girls and women who stated that it was their pay day'.¹⁶ The same issue of the paper indicated that many meetings were being held on the same day for operatives from different mills, and in some cases the same room was used for different meetings, at different times of the day.¹⁷

Pictorial records published at the time portray women playing their part in the strike. One plate depicts the scene where the soldiers are firing on the turn-outs at Preston, with women falling to the ground and policemen using their batons. Another

plate shows the turn-outs at the Stockport workhouse, with the women receiving loaves of bread that had been taken from the workhouse and handing them on to children. As with the turn-outs, so with the solidarity movement in the metropolis – women played an equal part with their men. The *Illustrated London News* in 1842, published representations of the scenes of the departure of troops for the North and the protest movement that developed. One is of the arrival of troops at one of the railway stations. Protesting Londoners were there to meet them. This plate shows the troops with rifles and fixed bayonets marching into the station, police using their batons and fists to hold back the crowd, and two military officers on horseback with drawn swords assisting the police. Among the crowd were women. A policeman with one hand on a woman's face was pushing her back, while he held a baton in his other hand, ready for use.¹⁸

Even as the strike was completing its fourth week and running into difficulties, the women maintained a militant and fighting attitude. The *Guardian* contained the following paragraph: 'In the course of the afternoon (Friday 2 September 1842) a meeting of female operatives was held in Ashton, when a resolution was passed to the effect that they neither go to work themselves, nor allow their husbands to do so, until they get their price as agreed upon.' The 'ladies also had a procession in the evening; but fortunately they did nothing except talk very largely'.¹⁹

Frederick Engels, in his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, paid tribute to the 1842 turn-outs and to the English working men of the period. 'The English workingmen are second to none in courage . . . this obstinate, unconquerable courage of men who surrender to force only when all resistance would be aimless and unmeaning.'²⁰

NOTES

1. Reprinted in *Manchester Guardian*, 27 August 1842.
2. *Lancaster Guardian*, reprinted in *Manchester Guardian*, 20 August 1842.
3. *Manchester Guardian*, 27 August 1842.
4. *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842.
5. *Manchester Guardian*, 17, 20, 24, 27, 31 August and 3 September 1842.
6. *ibid.*, 27 August 1842.

7. *ibid.*, 24, 27, 31 August and 3, 7, 14, 17, 21 September 1842.
8. *British Statesman*, 10 September 1842.
9. *Manchester Guardian*, 24 and 27 August, and 3, 7 and 14 September 1842; *The Times*, 26 August 1842; *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842.
10. *Manchester Guardian*, 17 and 28 September; *British Statesman*, 17 September 1842; *Trial*, p. 110.
11. *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842.
12. *Manchester Guardian*, 13 August 1842.
13. *ibid.*, 24 August 1842.
14. *ibid.*, 17 September 1842.
15. *ibid.*, 20 August 1842.
16. *ibid.*, 14 September 1842.
17. *ibid.*
18. *Manchester Guardian*, 13, 20, 24 August and 14, 17 September 1842; *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842; *Manchester Advertiser*, 13, 20 August 1842; *Trial*, pp. 334-5; F. C. Mather, *Public Order in the Age of the Chartists*, Manchester, 1966, pp. 162, 174; *Illustrated London News*, 1842.
19. *Manchester Guardian*, 3 September 1842.
20. F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class in England in 1844*, London, 1926, p. 5.

Class Justice and the State

If it be political partiality in a judge to avow his preference of our present government by a king, lords and commons to the dominion of a democratic assembly framed upon the principle of universal suffrage, I must confess myself a very partial judge.

Lord Abinger to Sir James Graham, 12 February 1843.¹

The scale of repression which followed the strike was probably unmatched in the nineteenth century, and in terms of the numbers arrested and imprisoned has no equal until the next general strike of 1926. In the North-West alone over 1,500 strikers were brought to trial, and nowhere is the class character of the state and its system of justice more vividly expressed than in the conduct of these trials. It revealed, if indeed it needed to be revealed, that the judiciary in Britain unashamedly saw itself part and parcel of the ruling class and fought for its dominance openly and without regard to mercy.

However, at the same time, there is another and perhaps still more important lesson to be learnt from the operation of the legal system in the aftermath of the strike, and that is the *flexibility* of the law as a weapon of class rule. It was used to persuade as well as intimidate, enabling the ruling class to mould ideas as well as repress them. In the chapter on Richard Pilling we noted the strange reversal of policy which took place just prior to the trial of the fifty-nine in March 1843. Originally intended as a show trial that would prove the depth of Chartist involvement it was eventually used to demonstrate exactly the opposite. Both judge and prosecution presented the strike as basically economic in origin, largely spontaneous, at least partly provoked by anti-Corn Law employers, and ultimately the product of extreme economic distress. This judgement surprisingly quickly became the judgement of history, and here we will be mainly concerned with attempting to understand this bewildering switch of assessment.

Prosecution tactics

In the period September–October 1842 the government's legal officers were touring the Northern counties preparing the prosecution case at the special commissions then being held in Carlisle, York, Chester, Lancaster, Liverpool and Stafford. Their correspondence with the government in London provides an important insight into their assumptions and the political objectives being sought from legal action. On 10 October Sir Frederick Pollock, the Attorney-General, wrote to the Home Secretary: '. . . it may be satisfactory to you that I should further explain our tactics. . . . We have determined after much consideration to have one indictment including the original movers of the insurrection (Candelet, the chairman on 1 August, Pilling and others who agreed to meet at Stalybridge on 8 August and begin the turn-out), we shall add to these Lee (called General Lee from his heading the mob that marched into Manchester) and some of the more active leaders in other directions (as at Preston where blood was shed and other places). We shall include some of the trades delegates and *all the Chartist delegates* who met on 16 and 17 August and passed the resolution.'²

Earlier letters from both Pollock and Follett, the Solicitor-General, make it clear that the crown wished, in so far as it was legally practicable, to separate the leadership, who were to be tried later, from the rank and file who were to be dealt with immediately at the Special Commissions. On 6 October Pollock wrote from Chester that it was 'not advisable to go into more of the case than affects *those on trial*.'³ The full evidence of conspiracy, and if possible of treason, was to be held back. Although Pollock expressed concern about the problem of getting a jury to convict on what was a capital offence – and even suggested legislation to modify the sentence for treason – he was principally preoccupied with being able to charge O'Connor as a 'general conspirator'. As he put it in a letter on 9 October he intended 'to blend in one accusation the Head and the Hands – the bludgeon and the pen and let the jury and the public see in one case the whole crime'.⁴ By 17 October this plan had crystallized into a firm proposal to transfer the proceedings to London for a trial at bar in the court of Queen's Bench.⁵ This

device had previously been used for the trial of Watson in 1817 and the Bristol magistrates in 1832. 'The pomp and circumstance of such a trial would add greatly to the moral effect of our success if we obtained a verdict.' He wrote further on 19 October:

This trial will unfold the extent and danger of the Trades Union and the alarming combination called 'The Chartist Association', and certainly it is not a fit case to be tried before a single judge. . . . It is a matter of the deepest interest to the whole kingdom – it has nothing local about it – even the mischief extended to eight or ten or more counties but the *conspiracy* was formulated by delegates from all parts of England – it is necessary that the public should fully understand the kind of danger and the extent of it – and there is no safety or discretion in passing it by – it is still at work, it is going on now – and it must be dealt with as a matter of deepest concern to the whole Empire – I am clearly of the opinion that treason to an alarming extent has been committed and that it is important that the most public and solemn investigation take place . . . I will guarantee a *conviction* of the conspiracy. . . .⁶

By 21 October Pollock had gained the agreement of the Prime Minister and the Lord Chancellor for this plan:

The case against those of the defendants who were actively employed in *insurrection* is clear, decisive and abundant – the case of those who sat on committees of public safety to grant licences or dispensations to work is also abundantly strong (and this part of the case forms in my judgement one of the most alarming symptoms of the conspiracy), the case against O'Connor and of the delegates in the meeting of 16 and 17 August, the address of the delegates, published in the *Northern Star*, the address of the Executive (the God-in-battle placard) which can be distinctly brought home to several – among them O'Connor – . . . will leave no doubt of the conviction of every party ultimately brought to trial.⁷

Such, then, were the plans: a monster trial in London, sixty defendants, full publicity, concluded by the final exposure and punishment of what Pollock described as 'the most formidable conspiracy that ever existed'.⁸ We will see what happened to these plans later, but for the moment we will turn to the fate of those hundreds of lesser-known Chartists and trade unionists who appeared before the courts in autumn 1842.

The operation of the law in autumn 1842

It is estimated that 1,500 were arrested and came before the courts. Some 800 were tried in magistrates' courts, some were acquitted, many imprisoned. Over 700 came before the Special Commissions. Because of the suggestion of sympathy on the part of some magistrates towards the strikers, the government decided to take no chances and sent one of their own solicitors to Manchester to strengthen magisterial benches. He attended the Salford trials, read the depositions taken against the prisoners, and stated quite openly that he would feel it his duty, in those cases that wereailable, to press for very high amounts, in order to ensure the appearance of the prisoners. In other cases, not actual felonies, but because of the possibility of further police evidence, he would feel it his duty to press for heavy bail and sufficient securities.

The courts were heavily loaded against the strikers. At the Salford Intermediate Session at the New Bailey on Monday 29 August 1842, there were thirty-one magistrates on the bench and a grand jury of twenty-three were sworn in. From the published list giving their occupations, it would seem that the jury was made up of manufacturers, merchants and gentlemen.

On Monday 29 August, with 199 prisoners committed on charges of felony and a further 159 committed on charges of misdemeanour, the chairman of the bench, J. F. Foster, in opening the proceedings, took the precaution – in case any of the prisoners had lingering hopes of justice or leniency being meted out that day – of delivering himself of a homily suitable to the occasion. He declared that: 'It is quite just therefore, that tumults and disturbances, such as were recently witnessed in this neighbourhood, should be put down with the strong hand of the law, and the parties convicted of taking part in them severely punished.' He told the court that no greater tyranny could be exercised than that of interfering with the free labour of others, but to aim to achieve by these means a total cessation of labour must be illegal and improper. This was an indictable offence of a very serious and grievous character. He offered a word to the labouring classes themselves: 'They should remember, that the protection of the property of their employers was the best way of protecting their own interests.' Foster was not the only one in

the course of these trials to declare openly from the bench hostility to the defendants, before any evidence was heard.

It would be repetitive to give a full account of the trials that took place in each of the courts. It will be sufficient to consider a few cases to convey the atmosphere of the courts, the methods used and the spirit in which 'justice' was meted out.

How heavily weighted against the strikers the courts were, can be seen in the composition of the magisterial benches and the juries. The chief judges were the same at the Cheshire and Lancashire Commissions. They were led by the Right Honourable James, Lord Abinger. The crown counsel was led by the Attorney-General, Sir Frederick Pollock. Twenty-two years earlier Lord Abinger, as Mr James Scarlett, had served the crown in the capacity of chief prosecuting counsel in the case of Hunt and his associates, charged with conspiracy to alter the law by force and threats and for convening and attending an illegal, riotous and tumultuous meeting at Manchester on Monday 16 August 1819. He led the legal team prosecuting Henry Hunt and the other speakers and leaders of the mass meeting, on behalf of the crown.

While the experience of dealing with the leaders of the Peterloo demonstration was some guarantee that Lord Abinger could be trusted to deal with the leaders of the even more serious general strike, nevertheless there must have been some uneasy feelings in ruling-class circles arising out of the wavering attitude of some of the magistrates during the course of the strike. How else can the solid, conservative, landed and county character of the Grand Jury that was sworn in at the Lancashire Special Commission on Monday 10 October 1842 be explained?⁹

The Cheshire Commission opened on Wednesday 5 October 1842 with sixty-six strikers for trial. The majority of them were young men, varying from the ages of eighteen to twenty-three. Of the sixty-six, forty were charged with riot and felony; nine with conspiracy; eleven riot only, and six with sedition. Thirty-four of the sixty-six were indicted for riotously assembling and demolishing the Stockport Union Workhouse and stealing a large quantity of bread and meal, the property of the Guardians. By Saturday 8 October, Lord Abinger had both lectured the prisoners and sentenced them. Four of them were

sentenced to transportation for life; one to fifteen years' transportation; five to ten years' transportation; three to seven years' transportation; six received two years' imprisonment; five, eighteen months; forty-seven, twelve months, and one, sixteen months. Over the four days there were sentences imposed of two years to three months, and there were twelve acquittals. The Liverpool Commission also sentenced eleven men to transportation and imprisoned one hundred and fifteen.

The savagery of these sentences should be noted. As Thomas Duncombe later protested to the House of Commons, 'We regret that acts scarcely amounting to tumultuous begging, and with no proof of violence, should in these excited times have been visited with transportation, which as robbery has been awarded.'¹⁰ The very first case at the Liverpool Commission was that in which five men, Jeremiah McCormick, William Reed, John Platt, Rowland Davies and William Cash, were charged with having on the 10 August 1842, feloniously entered the premises of Thomas Shipman, baker, Deansgate, Manchester, and stolen between forty and fifty loaves of bread. The prisoners were undefended and pleaded not guilty. The jury returned a verdict of guilty. The following day, 11 August 1842, his lordship, after addressing the prisoners, sentenced them to be transported for the term of seven years. On the same day, a group of seven men were charged with having on the 10 August 1842, entered the shop of Joseph Howarth of Princess Street, Manchester, and stolen ten loaves of bread. J. S. T. Greeme, Esq., barrister of Manchester, had witnessed the incident. He saw 'three or four loaves thrown out of the shop, which were torn in pieces by the mob and carried off'. After his Lordship had summed up, the jury retired and after half an hour returned a verdict of guilty against all the prisoners except one. Three were sentenced to one year's hard labour; two to hard labour for six months, and one to three months' imprisonment.

On the following day, Wednesday 12 August 1842, Edward Welsh, Patrick Mooney, Frederick Ferns, Thomas Tinan and John Calvert were convicted of having been engaged in riot and stolen five shillings from Thomas Snibson at Manchester. The judge said the law had pronounced against the offence of which the prisoners had been guilty, the punishment of transportation for life, or any period not less than fifteen years, or

imprisonment in England. He would not be justified in sentencing the prisoners to imprisonment in this country. He felt bound to dismiss them from this land. The sentence of the court was that they be severally transported beyond the seas, to such place as Her Majesty, by the advice of her Privy Council might direct, for the term of fifteen years. James Darbyshire, who was indicted for stealing a quantity of money, bread, flour, coals and other articles, the property of the Guardians of the Poor of the Stockport Union, was found guilty and sentenced to be transported for life beyond the seas.¹¹

An unbroken link connects the massacre of Peterloo in 1819 to the General Strike of 1842. Whilst Hugh Hornby Birley had then defended the interests of the ruling class with sword in hand, Sir James Scarlett defended the interests of the same ruling class in courts of law arising out of Peterloo. Mr Birley was defended and eulogized, became the head of the family textile manufacturing business in Manchester, and in 1842 organized the defence of their mills, with members of the management hurling slates, stones and missiles from the roofs of their mills on to the heads of the massed pickets in the street below. Mr James Scarlett was also rewarded. Between 1819 and 1842 he had been created a KC; was reputed to have earned £18,500 in one year; was made Sir James Scarlett; became a member of Parliament; was made Attorney-General and later Lord Chief Justice Baron Abinger. He had opposed the Reform Bill in 1831, and declared that if it was passed 'it would begin by destroying the House and end in destroying the other branches of the constitution'. He expressed his opinion that 'a system of national education must inevitably fail'.

In 1834 the House of Commons debated a motion calling for a committee of inquiry into the speeches from the bench by a leading judge, Baron Smith. In the course of this debate, Sir James Scarlett expressed the following sentiments, 'I conceive that a motion for a select committee to inquire into the conduct of a judge is one which no government should support.' He violently opposed all inquiry into the conduct of Baron Smith. Such was the class background of Lord Chief Justice Baron Abinger, the presiding judge at the 1842 trials.

At Chester he reminded the jury that one of the evils incidental to a high state of prosperity in manufacture and

commerce was that there should be occasional distress. 'The channels of manufacturing industry might sometimes overflow; and whenever this took place, from whatever cause, whether from increased production or adverse circumstances, a suspension of the progress which is making in supplying the market ensued; and also a diminution in the price of the produce, and in the wages of labour; and it very often happened, that the distress and misery of the manufacturing classes were the result.'

Did the working class understand this, however?

The industrious classes, who, not having competent minds or sufficient knowledge to form a judgement of their own real advantages, or of those principles on which their prosperity is founded, imagine that they can by force and violence dictate to their masters as to what shall be the wages of labour. It was necessary that efforts should be made, as far as possible to rescue them from that delusion which undoubtedly was their bane, and which had brought on them in a great degree their present privations – privations from which no government in whatever way formed, or no law, whatever might be its character, could adequately secure them.

Among the offenders were those who took part in 'assemblages of deputies' whose object was to force other workmen to turn-out and prevent them from continuing their occupations. 'That was a species of tyranny quite intolerable. What right had any man to dictate to another for what price he should labour.'

Chartism was another subject which his Lordship could not possibly ignore. 'The doctrines promulgated by the chartists were doctrines of perfect insanity, and no man but a fool or a knave could promulgate them.' 'The establishment of the charter would . . . become an odious tyranny.' On the Address of the executive committee of the National Charter Association, which he told the court at Liverpool, he had read, he said, '. . . The impression made on my mind was that it was full of danger . . . for . . . they wanted to carry the principle of the charter. That is to say, that the labouring classes who have no property are to make laws for those who have property.' He went on to say: 'A popular assembly, devoted to democratic principles, and elected by persons, a vast majority of whom have no property,

and depend on manual labour . . . the first thing such an assembly would do would be to aim at the destruction of property, and the putting down of the monarchy.' He conceded that there were among the Chartists those who possessed considerable power and talent. But they called for the adoption of their Charter 'instead of employing that intelligence to point out to the unhappy victims of the delusion under which they were acting, that all attempts to raise the wage of labour by force had terminated, must terminate, and ever will terminate in the disaster of the working men, and instead of bettering, make worse their condition.'¹²

This attitude of lofty judicial denunciation was matched administratively by procedures which paid scant regard to customary legal practice. James Leach, for instance, a member of the National Charter Association executive and present at the Chartist conference, was arrested on 17 August. He was charged with sedition and conspiracy. The basis of the charge was that there had been displayed outside his stationer's shop the placard of the executive committee of the National Charter Association with the implication that he was responsible for its contents. In a petition to the House of Commons presented by the radical MP Thomas Duncombe, Leach claimed that he was kept in prison for thirteen days without being allowed bail, on the pretext that the offence was 'so heinous that no bail could be accepted', and also that new evidence was being procured and would be produced in court. So he was remanded without being examined by the magistrates and without being allowed bail, and kept in a dark, dirty and damp cell. Duncombe charged that Leach was kept in prison deliberately (at the height of the strike) in defiance of the Habeas Corpus Act, and that the ordinary law had been virtually suspended by the magistrates, and he asked if this was not 'an illegal act on the part of the magistrates?' He contended that it was. Leach was kept in gaol for thirteen days, bail being offered from the commencement, but not accepted. He was kept in a cell with thirteen other prisoners; he and the other prisoners never undressed for thirteen days. At night Leach shared a cell with three other prisoners, with only two beds – two and a half feet each in breadth. The beds were swarming with vermin.

Neither friend nor legal adviser was he allowed to receive. He

was committed to take his trial at Liverpool. He was granted bail upon finding two sureties of £200 each, and himself in £200. That bail was immediately tendered in court, but it was only after a further ninety-six hours that he was finally released. Shortly after, he was again arrested on a second charge of conspiracy, and after seven days of confinement, was released on bail of two sureties of £200 each and himself in £400. He appeared at Liverpool on the first charge when the indictment against him was abandoned.

Another petition presented by Duncombe concerned a public meeting in the Manchester Hall of Science, arising out of which James Tinker, who chaired the meeting, and George Seddon, who was one of the speakers, were charged with 'inciting a mob to turn out the hands from the Adelphi Dye Works, Salford'. At five the following morning a march took place to the dye works, and all the 'hands' employed there turned out. Tinker and Seddon were kept in gaol for six days without a hearing or an examination. When brought before the stipendiary magistrate, they were remanded but bail was refused. A few days later they were again remanded and when brought to court found it a closed court and their friends refused admission. This time they were allowed bail after finding two sureties of £100 each. When they finally appeared for trial, Mr Beswick, the superintendent of police, informed the magistrates that there was no evidence and they were dismissed. They had spent nineteen days in prison and eleven days on bail. Both had been unemployed since their arrest – a period of seven months – and they and their families had suffered. Again, Duncombe declared that the Habeas Corpus Act had been virtually ignored.

There were others who were arrested and kept in gaol for days without being brought before the magistrates or allowed bail, and like the above, many were not proceeded against for lack of evidence, and there were other types of complaint. Mr Turner, the printer of the placard for which James Leach was arrested, was himself arrested for printing a seditious placard. Apart from suffering delay in obtaining bail, he was the victim of an outrage with respect to his two apprentices. Whilst Turner was carried off to gaol, the two apprentices were persuaded to go with the police on the pretext that they were to return to inform Mrs Turner as to what had happened. In fact they were taken to the

Isle of Man and kept there until the Special Commission sat at Liverpool. Furthermore, the apprentices were not even used by the prosecution.

Another complaint was the confinement and poor diet. Robert Wilde was one of six arrested in Hyde and charged with conspiracy and inflammatory language. He and four more were sentenced to two years imprisonment and one to eighteen months. Wilde, after serving sixteen weeks of his sentence, wrote to his cousin to say that he had lost sixteen pounds in weight in the sixteen weeks. He wrote that his physical strength was impaired and 'visible in my body'. Incidentally, he asked his cousin to send him some books. Wilde, who was twenty-six years of age and a leather dresser by trade, asked for McCulloch and Corbett's *Grammar*, Hamilton's *Geographical Key* and Walker's *Pronouncing Dictionary*, and any 'sentimental or scientific' books his library affords, 'to have a little improvement for the mind mingled with the tortures of the body. . . .'¹³

Class law accused

Such practices, as well as the speeches of Baron Abinger, became the focus of a campaign of working-class protest which gathered momentum as the date approached for the trial of the Chartist leaders fixed for March 1843. By then nearly 1,000 petitions from all parts of the country had been presented to the Commons, and these became the basis of a motion of censure on the conduct of Lord Abinger from Duncombe on 21 February. This declared that 'He discharged his duty in a manner that was partial, unconstitutional and oppressive to those who were brought before him – that he discharged it in a rancorous, malignant, political and party spirit to the prisoners who were placed at the bar of the court over which he presided.' Duncombe made a general indictment of Lord Abinger, gave quotations from his speeches and from comments in the press, and summed up with: 'English law [states] . . . that the judge is counsellor for the prisoner, . . . But . . . he had made himself an advocate of the crown, and that his conduct, throughout the whole of the proceedings, was most indecent and indecorous as applied to the character of a judge, and was most unjust and cruel as applied to the prisoners.' He

declared, ‘. . . With this prejudice created in the minds of the jury and of the public with regard to Chartism, it was impossible that the prisoners could have a fair trial.’

The extent of the disquiet in the country and the vigour of campaigning for a committee of inquiry can be gauged from the fact that a speaker in the debate that followed, asked, ‘How it should happen that almost 1,000 persons in various parts of the Kingdom have sent up petitions complaining of Lord Abinger’s conduct.’ Duncombe had made out a damning and viable case against Lord Abinger, so much so that Sir James Graham, the Home Secretary, Sir Frederick Pollock, the Attorney-General, and others felt obliged to enter the debate in his defence and for the inviolability of the whole institution of the Judge’s Bench.

The Attorney-General, after a forthright defence of Lord Abinger, declared in his speech that while he sympathized with the working class in the distress it was suffering, yet he should be wanting, ‘if he did not state that the persons brought before the court to receive punishment for the part they had taken in the insurrections, were not the class of persons who had encountered these sufferings and undergone these privations’. The Chartist agitators were misleading the simple-minded workers – it was as simple as that.

Sir James Graham, the Home Secretary, followed and unashamedly declared that Lord Abinger had faithfully and honestly discharged his duty and he would not shrink from vindicating his conduct. He went on to say, ‘. . . in my conscience I believe that his Lordship deserves not censure but the highest praise’.

For the opposition, Lord John Russell indicated that he would vote with the government, but added that he ‘could not give his vote in silence lest his silence should imply an assent to all that had been laid down by the Attorney-General and the two Honourable and learned Gentlemen who had followed him, who seemed throughout the case to consider Lord Abinger as entirely blameless in the matter. After reading the noble and learned Lord’s charge he must confess he had not come to any such conclusion.’ A judge should ‘endeavour to state the law with the greatest moderation, and especially in times of political excitement, in cases where there were questions of insurrection,

£100 REWARD.

Whereas,

A WARRANT has been issued for the APPREHENSION of PETER MURRAY Mc DOUALL, late of Ramsbottom, near Bury, Surgeon; he is better known by the name of

DR. MC DOUALL,
A
CHARTIST LECTURER.

DESCRIPTION.

He is about 27 years of age, stands about 5 ft. 6 in. high, inclined to be stout, has long dark hair, swarthy complexion, with high cheek bones, sharp black eyes, whiskers rather lighter than his hair; generally dresses in black; speaks quick, with a Scotch accent.

The above Reward will be paid by the Government to any Person who shall give such Information as will lead to the Apprehension of the said Peter Murray Mc Douall.

*Information to be given to Sir CHARLES SHAW,
Chief Commissioner of the Manchester Police.*

TOWN HALL, MANCHESTER,
September 3rd, 1842.

SIMPSON AND GILLET, PRINTERS, MARKET STREET, MANCHESTER.

Offer of reward for Peter McDouall

or treason or tumult'. Lord Abinger had referred to the Charter as though to say the Charter was an offence, and in his opinion the 'noble Lord's conduct displayed a want of due discretion . . .'.¹⁴

It is worth noting these remarks by Russell. They were no doubt to some extent motivated by political rivalry and by Russell's desire to pose as a champion of liberty. But Russell was by no means a friend of the Chartists. As Home Secretary in 1839–40 he had no hesitation in ensuring the prompt arrest of almost the entire leadership. He himself had come under fierce attack as one of the 'base and bloody whigs' responsible for the transportations which ended the first phase of Chartist agitation. That he now felt obliged to make such criticism of the legal process is some indication that a wider reassessment was under way. For Abinger's conduct, while on occasion a little ill-considered, was not out of line with general judicial behaviour. The sentences he passed were, as he privately protested to the government, previously agreed in conference with the other special commission judges.¹⁵ Nor was his practice of giving political lectures to defendants in any way out of the ordinary. As we have seen, the Manchester stipendiary magistrate, Foster, did this as a matter of course. Yet quite clearly by February 1843 this type of approach, the Peterloo touch, was being called into question by influential sections of the ruling class, and this is underlined by the fact that Duncombe's motion eventually received the support of 73 MPs – far beyond the small hard core of pro-Chartist radicals. Indeed, more than this. By the time of the March trial, the government's own approach seems to have changed dramatically.

March 1843: 'conciliation . . . the order of the day'

If it be a crime to be in favour of the Charter, then I am guilty of a crime.

Albert Wolfenden, a young tailor from Ashton.

The masters conspired to kill me, and I combined to keep myself alive.

Richard Pilling, power loom weaver.

Ten thousand prosecutions cannot alter my principles, for I am determined, while life lasts, to sound the tocsin of the Charter as the

death note of tyranny and faction. Let ten thousand convictions be obtained against me, and I will be a Chartist still.
William Beesley, chairmaker from Burnley.¹⁶

This was the spirit of class defiance and pride with which the Chartist defendants faced the charges against them – charges far more serious than those which had been met with transportation the previous autumn.

The outcome, however, was quite unexpected. Eventually held in Lancaster, the trial only lasted eight days, was conducted in a low key by both the Attorney-General, Pollock, and the judge, Baron Rolfe, and although thirty-one of the defendants were found guilty, it was ultimately agreed that the indictment had not been properly framed and no one was sentenced. So, no show trial, no exemplary punishment and, if anything, the main burden of accusation was directed against the Anti-Corn Law League.

The reasons for this change in line remain obscure and must be the subject of further research. We know that the grounds for shelving the Trial at Bar in London were purely legal when the decision was taken the previous November.¹⁷ On the other hand, it is also clear that the trial's eventual outcome and conduct was not a matter of chance or incompetence. Pollock's son, who attended the court as revising barrister, wrote in a personal letter a few days afterwards: 'The result, however, [at present at least] is satisfactory and the trial will have answered its object.' He also recounts an incident which occurred during the trial itself. 'The editor of the *Northern Star*, with whom I had exchanged neither word nor look, seeing a paper of biscuits handed to me in the middle of one of the latter days of the trial, familiarly taps me on the shoulder with, "Mr Pollock, will you share your store with a conspirator?" . . . Of course, as good humour and conciliation was the order of the day, I made no objection. . . . It was a new thing for a political trial of such length and importance to have been conducted without the slightest approach to acrimony or bad feeling.'¹⁸

So, clearly, there was some deliberation. We also know that the government was simultaneously coming under massive political pressure. The economic crisis, industrially the worst that century, groaned on through the winter of 1842–3, and the

lack of any recovery now faced the government with a two-fold threat: the combination of revived industrial unrest with the break-up of its own parliamentary base. Peel ruled by virtue of an uneasy alliance between banking, industrial and landed capital. He had moved cautiously towards freer trade, but could move no further without endangering the unity of this alliance. Now, in the parliamentary session which opened on 2 February (the first since the strike), the Anti-Corn Law League launched a new offensive. They claimed that the lack of economic recovery was the direct consequence of the government's failure to bring about a full repeal of the Corn Law and were using these arguments to pull away important areas of support in banking and commerce. For the whole month of February every major debate was dominated by arguments about the nature of the crisis and, as a prime indicator of its severity, about the 'Disturbances' of the previous autumn. Government speakers generally recognized, as did the seconder to the address, that 'the depression of trade may have had some share in producing them', but then went on to 'attribute them mainly to the spirit of agitation which prevails'.¹⁹ League speakers placed the disturbances squarely at the door of the government, and tried to impress the house with long, statistical accounts of hunger and poverty. In the vote against Lord Abinger later in the month, it was the Anti-Corn Law leaguers who led the charge.²⁰ Even Russell, who as a potential Whig Prime Minister, knew he would face problems similar to Peel in sustaining his own base if he endorsed the complete League programme, chided the government for failing to recognize legitimate grievances. 'No doubt there were people who swelled the ranks of the crowd whose intentions were evil . . . but considering that the crowd was formed by thousands of people who were the unemployed of the mills and the workshops, that there were strong inducements held out to them to join . . . in the projects for the Charter . . . all of which temptations the people of their own calm deliberation and by the operation of their own good sense rejected . . . I do think some praise is due to the sense and temper of the people.'²¹

Somehow, therefore, if it was to be able to maintain its own base, the government had to be able to find some way of turning the debate back against the League. If it was to do so safely,

however, it had to contend with the other major threat posed by the continued economic crisis: the danger of revived unrest.

This fear was still present on all sides. Many Chartist leaders may have been arrested, but the spirit of the working class had not been broken: local trade union organization was mostly intact, and in some places even victorious. The legal repression of the autumn had been met with a massive mobilization of protest which seemed to indicate a consolidation of trade union backing. Now, as the depression entered a new winter, local military commanders were asked to make regular reports on wage levels and unemployment in order to give early warning of any new outbreak.²² On its side, much of the Anti-Corn Law League's propaganda campaign would seem to have been motivated by the fear of a fresh outburst of working-class anger. The demand for Corn Law repeal provided an ideal basis for ideologically reorientating the working population away from the Chartists, and in December 1842, League supporters were once more attempting to establish an organization which could campaign for a limited extension of the suffrage under their own leadership.

The government, therefore, had to find some way of replying that would enable it also to regain the initiative on the broader social front: to present itself as the real champion of the legitimate aspirations of the working people. Its initial solution was a piece of black propaganda: to accuse the Leaguers themselves of being instigators of the strike and the deliberate authors of economic hardship. As early as the end of August, Peel had requested Graham to commission a pamphleteer to work up the necessary materials. During November, in a correspondence marked 'secret', they cut out the less credible accusations and patched up the rest as an anonymous article for the *Quarterly Review*.²³ In more measured terms the same points were made in Parliament.

However, something beyond mere partisan propaganda was needed. After the trauma of the summer it was necessary to carry through a fundamental reappraisal of class relations. The 'Peterloo touch' of Abinger, the harsh refusal to countenance changes of any sort, was plainly leading to a consolidation of opposition. Some approach had to be found that would give recognition to at least part of the new social forces which

had emerged but at the same time do so, firmly and unambiguously, on the terms of the capitalist state. The significance of the trial of March 1843 is that it marks the beginning of this process. It shows the law not just coercing, but *persuading* – helping to create a framework for transforming ideas about the position of organized labour within society.

In attempting this re-education, the government was able to take advantage of the weakness and division of the Chartist leadership. Most had not wanted the strike. O'Connor, in particular, had seen the strike and the wider strategy it represented as a direct threat to his own leadership. Now they faced heavy sentences for their involvement. It was natural enough that they should deny responsibility and themselves accuse the mill owners who had cut wages and laid off workers. Once released, O'Connor was only too happy to put his version into print and use the opportunity to denounce as illegitimate the methods advocated by his enemies on the executive. In his edition of the *Trial* he refers to the *Quarterly Review* article as constituting proof that the Anti-Corn Law League had attempted to instigate 'revolution' in the summer of 1842.²⁴ He then goes on to thank the 'just judge', Baron Rolfe, for defining the limits of legitimate political activity.

You have prescribed the exact limits by which agitation should be bound, and beyond these limits I will never stray; and I feel satisfied that I may include the leaders of the Chartist party in this bond and covenant. . . . Every defendant felt that . . . have been fairly treated as far as the administration of the law was concerned, they were bound in honour to use no other means than the law, as laid down by you, for the advancement of their principles. . . .²⁵

The Attorney-General was no less accommodating. He gave full play to the economic distress in the manufacturing counties and even declared himself 'proud of the talents of the defenders and of the effect of the education of the working classes'. He concluded with a perspective of partnership between capital and labour which disassociated itself from existing doctrines of political economy:

I have little to do with the speculative opinions of political economy – I dare say no man more respects the right of the poor man to his labour, which is his property. . . . It is perfectly true . . . that



Sir Frederick Pollock

without labour capital may be valueless. It is just as true that in an advanced state of civilisation labour would be quite as valueless if there were no capital to give employment. These two great elements of the high state of cultivation in which we are placed ought not to be set in hostile array against each other. The one is necessary to support the other. I trust in God, gentlemen, that the lesson of today, so far as this inquiry is capable of affording one, will go forth to the world. Let it be understood that labour and property ought to have one common protection and ought to be directed to the common end of all, the happiness of the community. . . .²⁶

There are tones here which are not dissimilar from those of Abinger, but far more significant is what was new: the intimation of possible future partnership and the recognition of labour as an organized force which was justified some place within the system. Combined with O'Connor's repudiation of unconstitutional action, this summing up posed a threat to the integrity of the working class far more dangerous and subtle than the crude coercion of previous months. However, the very fact that such a new approach was adopted is eloquent testimony to the degree to which the strike of 1842 did indeed challenge and expose the class basis of the existing order.

NOTES

1. Abinger to Graham, 12 February 1843. Graham papers (spool 34).
2. Pollock to Graham, 10 October 1842, *ibid.* (spool 33). The 'General Lee' referred to is in fact Robert Lees.
3. *ibid.*, 6 October 1842.
4. *ibid.*, 9 October 1842.
5. *ibid.*, 17 October 1842.
6. *ibid.*, 19 October 1842.
7. *ibid.*, 21 October 1842.
8. *ibid.*
9. The Liverpool Grand Jury of 10 October was composed of the following: Thomas Greene of Wittington Hall, Esq., MP, Foreman; Sir Thomas Whitehead, Knight, of Uplands; Montague Clinslie, of Grisedale, Esq.; Richard Edward Allison, of Charnock, Esq.; William Assheton, of Downham Hall, Esq.; William Gillison Bell, of Melling Hall, Esq.; William Blundell, of Crosby Hall, Esq.; Cornelius Bourney, of Holmine

- Hall, Esq.; Clarence Bradyll, of Conishead Priory, Esq.; Chisenhale Chisenhale, of Arley Hall, Esq.; William Clayton, of Lostock Hall, Esq.; William Assheton Cross, of Red Scott, Esq.; Pudsey Dawson, of Hornby Castle, Esq.; Richard Earle, of Eden Hurst, Esq.; James Newell Farrington, of Norden Hall, Esq.; William Gate, of Lighburne House, Esq.; George Marton, Capernwray Hall, Esq., MP; John Penny Machell, of Hetlow Oak, Esq.; John Master, of Croston, Esq.; William Moore, of Grimshill, Esq.; Robert Townley Parker, of Guerdon Hall, Esq.; John Plumb Tempest, of Tong Hall, Esq.; Robert Henry Welds, of Leck, Esq.
10. Thomas Duncombe, MP, on 21 February 1842, when moving the motion calling for a parliamentary commission of inquiry into the conduct of Lord Chief Justice Baron Abinger as chairman of the special commissions at Chester and Liverpool in October 1842. *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, Vol. LXVI, col. 1042.
 11. The main sources for this account of the trials are: Max Beer, *A History of British Socialism*, London, 1940, p. 151; *Manchester Guardian*, 31 August, 8 October 1842; *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 3 September, 15 October 1842; T. A. Jackson, *Trials of British Freedom*, London, 1945, pp. 95–6; Samuel Bamford, *Life of a Radical*, Manchester, 1844, p. 270; Joyce Marlow, *The Peterloo Massacre*, London, 1969, p. 293; *Parliamentary Debates*, op. cit.
 12. *Dictionary of National Biography* (Scarlett); *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, Vol. 66, cols. 1045/46, 21 February 1843; *Manchester Advertiser*, 15 October 1842; *Manchester Guardian*, 8 October 1842.
 13. *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, Vol. 68, March 1843, cols 42, 43, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 57, 58, 67, 125, 127; Vol. 66, February 1843, col. 1066.
 14. *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd Series, Vol. 66, cols 1038, 1054, 1063, 1084, 1085, 1122, 1125–8, 1133; *The Trial of Feergus O'Connor and the 58 Others*, pp. 328–9; Max Beer, op. cit., p. 93.
 15. Abinger to Graham, 12 February 1843, Graham Papers (spool 34).
 16. *Trial*, pp. 277, 255, 266.
 17. Pollock to Graham, 7 November, Graham Papers (spool 33).
 18. Sir Frederick Pollock, *Personal Reminiscences*, London, 1887, Vol. I, pp. 204–5.
 19. *Parliamentary Debates*, LXVI, col. 1100, 2 February 1843, W. P. S. Miles, MP, seconding the address.
 20. *ibid.*, col. 1141. The Ayes included Bowering, Brotherton, Cobden, Hume, Ewart, Roebuck and Villiers.
 21. *ibid.*, cols 111–12.
 22. Arbuthnot to Home Office, 2 October 1842, 8 November 1843, HO 45/268.
 23. Peel to Graham, 27 August 1842 (Graham papers, spool 32) and Peel to Graham, 20 November 1842 (spool 33). The article, 'Anti-Corn Law Agitation' was published in *Quarterly Review*, December 1842, Vol. LXXI, pp. 244–314.
 24. *The Trial*, Introduction by Feergus O'Connor.
 25. *ibid.*, Preface.
 26. *ibid.*, pp. 349–50.

Working-class Consciousness Asserts Itself

The evidence offered so far should have established the main characteristics of the General Strike of 1842. We have seen that it was a *general* strike and extended beyond a single trade to many occupations and counties. At its peak it involved over 500,000 workers – perhaps half the entire industrial workforce. It stretched from Dundee to Somerset and South Wales, and acknowledged a joint leadership which decisively linked the Chartist movement and organized labour in the Manchester trades conference. We have also shown that it did not originate from any momentary anger, a ‘plug riot’, but on the contrary, developed as part of a coherent strategy for political advance and around specific democratic demands. What we still need to examine is the relationship between this strategy, the strike and the exercise of the class power which went with it, and the wider emergence of working-class consciousness. We will look next, therefore, at the original local leadership of the strike, at how far it was based in the working class and was able to draw upon established traditions of class experience, at the discipline and organization of the strikers themselves as strikers of a new type, political and not simply industrial, and finally at the wider response of the capitalist state – for the working class was never able to organize itself in a vacuum, but had to do so in active conflict with the existing order and its state machine.

‘Political cobblers and hatters’: the men who launched the strike

The judge at the trial of Feargus O’Connor and the fifty-eight others, in his summing up, stated ‘that in the manufacturing districts . . . perhaps beginning in June, but generally beginning about the 5th or 6th of August, there were a great number of meetings . . . the object of those meetings was to excite the workmen to quit their employment, and undoubtedly, not only to quit their employment, but to force others to discontinue their employment, and threaten with violence those who

resisted it.²¹ The learned judge based his summing up on the evidence presented to the court. A detailed analysis of the evidence shows not only a great number of meetings to excite workmen to quit their employment, but also that these meetings were part of a strategy and tactics that resulted in launching the strike. In an examination of the meetings and speakers, in the run up to the start of the General Strike, one can see the concentrated effort that was made by the Chartist leadership in the Ashton–Stalybridge–Hyde area to initiate the strike. Table 1 indicates the role of this leadership and makes clear what their plan was to bring about the General Strike. The plan had four distinct stages.

The first was the period from July to 6 August. This involved the prior winning of mass understanding and commitment for strike action in a comparatively small area of south-east Lancashire. It can be seen as the period of consolidating the *base* of the strike. In Chapter 3 we examined in some detail how the Stalybridge–Ashton leaders worked to eliminate the hesitations among workers at some individual mills threatened with heavy wage reductions. This they achieved. They managed to unite these workers behind the more militant Bayley workers, and we noted that Richard Pilling spoke at three of the meetings involved. This succession of mass meetings and marches all contributed to building up a sense of mutual confidence and solidarity, and the economic demand of a fair day's wage was at this stage placed alongside the political slogan of the People's Charter. It was to be the workers from these factories who were to be the driving force for the wider turn-out east of Manchester.

The second stage comprised just one day, Sunday 7 August. On this day the now highly mobilized workers from Ashton and Stalybridge met in two great mass meetings on Mottram Moor. In the debate and discussion of resolutions passed there they were fully won for the detailed project of the 'Great National Turn-out' which was to begin next day, and which they themselves were to carry across east Lancashire. The People's Charter was formally included in the resolution that was passed.

The third stage began the following day, Monday 8 August, when the turn-out commenced and drew into the struggle thousands more workers from the towns and industrial villages east of Manchester. So far the tactical plans of the local Chartist

TABLE 1²
Local Chartist speakers in Stalybridge-Ashton-Hyde, 26 July-7 August

Meetings			Speakers			Chartists		
Date	Place	Name	Town	Occupation	Chartist	Del. to Chartist conf.	One of 59	Del. to trades conf.
26 July	Thacker's	Woodruffe	Ashton	Cordwainer	x		x	x
	Foundry,	Aitken	Ashton	Schoolmaster	x	x	x	
	Ashton	Pilling	Ashton	Weaver	x		x	
29 July	Haigh,	Fenton	Stalybridge	Shoemaker	x		x	
	Stalybridge	Challenger	Ashton	Weaver	x		x	
		Brophy	Ashton	Chartist lecturer	x		x	
1 August		Storah	Ashton	Weaver	x		x	
		Stephenson	Stalybridge		x		x	
		Candelet	Hyde	Fact. operative	x		x	x
		Muirhouse	Hyde	Bellman	x		x	
		Wilde (Robt.)	Hyde					
		Leach (John)	Hyde	Tailor	x		x	
		Pilling	Ashton	Weaver	x		x	
2 or 3 August	Hall Green,	Challenger	Ashton	Weaver	x		x	
	Dukinfield	Stephenson	Stalybridge		x		x	
		Storah	Ashton	Weaver	x		x	
		Wilde (R)						

leaders had worked out. The strategic objective, that of winning the Manchester working class for the turn-out, and for Manchester to become the base for extending the turn-out to the Lancashire and Cheshire towns and into Yorkshire, became a practical possibility. Four or five meetings, even if addressed by such able agitators as Pilling and the Ashton–Stalybridge Chartist leaders, could not have accomplished such a task. It needed a more massive, politically convincing demonstration of the unity, power and strength of the workers to bring the Manchester working class into the turn-out.

The fourth stage was the actual winning of Manchester. The march on Manchester on Tuesday 9 August, opened the flood gates. Not only in Manchester itself, but north, south, east and west of Manchester the turn-out movement swiftly grew. To the north, Preston, Blackburn, Burnley, Chorley, Todmorden, Bacup, with the townships and manufacturing villages around; to the south, Stockport, Macclesfield, Leek, Congleton; to the east, Stalybridge, Ashton, Hyde, Oldham, Glossop, Dukinfield; to the north-west, Wigan, Bolton, St Helens, Westhoughton and the mining villages.

The strategy and tactics so successfully employed in the period leading up to the turn-out and the first two days are clearly inconsistent with any spontaneous outburst explanation. It may be argued that some measure of appeal for turn-out action, some measure of agitation and some measure of leadership was there, but the working class was in a frame of mind where they would have acted without any of these measures. In a very general sense, this is true, but would there have been the response in so universal and unanimous a manner? Would there have been the swiftness and unity that was actually achieved. All previous experience leads us to doubt that. Would the mass trades meetings and trades conferences have developed and with them the formulation of demands, the organization and leadership, virtually with the commencement of the turn-out? There is no evidence to prove that it would. The need for overcoming the hesitations at the individual mills in the first stage proves the contrary, and all the evidence from the previous period – 1834 or 1839 – shows that it was exceedingly difficult to develop widespread strike action around political demands. On this occasion the patient initial work of welding

together a local and then regional unity was indispensable.

Let us take a look then at the turn-out leaders of Stalybridge–Ashton, these ‘political cobblers and hatters’, as they were called by the establishment press. In the period 26 July to 7 August there was a total of nine meetings, which were addressed by fifteen speakers who made forty-four speeches. Of the fifteen, thirteen were defendants in the trial of Feargus O’Connor and the fifty-eight others, which means that nearly a quarter of the defendants were the original leaders, the initiators of the turn-out. (The government had no illusions!) Three were delegates to the Chartist conference of 16–17 August and three were delegates to the Great Trades Conference of 15–16 August. Were these people casual leaders thrown up by the turn-out? The argument is used that the decision of the Bayley workers to turn-out was achieved only as a result of speeches by agitators who were not employed at Bayley’s, or for that matter at any of the other five factories involved in the threatened wage cuts. This indicates that there was leadership and that there were plans and preparations for the turn-out prior to the turn-out commencing.

Who, then, were these agitators? Five of them were Stalybridge men, and five were from Ashton, three from Hyde and the other two were probably local men too. Four of the fifteen were shoemakers; three were power loom weavers; one was a tailor; one a factory operative (probably a weaver); one was the bellman of Hyde (also probably a factory worker); one was a schoolmaster; one was a Chartist lecturer (probably originally a factory worker). Of the other two there are no data. Thirteen of the fifteen were known local Chartists (the other two probably were too). Were these men outsiders, were they divorced from the people they were urging to turn-out? On the contrary, they were men enjoying the confidence of these very workers, they were part and parcel of the local workers’ movement, who felt the pulse of the workers, understood their mood and their willingness to struggle and fight back against the intolerable conditions and oppression which lay heavy upon them. It was because they were genuine local leaders, because they were tried and trusted local leaders that they had the strength and courage to give the lead they did give and to get the wholehearted response they got.

All these points may seem obvious, but they are also worth pondering upon. For we are not talking about any 'normal' form of political action or any normal area. This small corner of Lancashire combined something very special: some of the country's most advanced industry with an especially acute experience of that industry's contradictions. Ashton, for instance, possessed one of the highest levels of workers concentrated in large factories (over 90 per cent) and one of the highest levels of unemployment – with up to 50 per cent of the workforce either unemployed or on short time (Figures 4 and 6). To borrow the words used by Marx eight years later, it was here in particular that 'the *modern* productive *forces* and the *bourgeois* forms of production' came most dramatically into collision.³ More than this, it was also an area marked by advanced ideological development. It formed, not passively or by chance, but as a result of the long experience of political struggle, the principal base of those within the Chartist leadership like Peter McDouall, who argued for the consistent integration of democratic struggle with the struggles of organized labour and the trade union movement. In showing that these architects of the strike were indeed 'genuine local leaders', that they were able to carry through this qualitatively new stage of working-class action because of the prior trust and confidence they enjoyed, we are also implying a great deal about the organizational and cultural level of the local working-class population.

Strikers of a new type

We do now universally resolve never to resume Labour until Labour's grievances are destroyed, and protection secured for ourselves, our suffering wives and helpless children, by the enactment of the People's Charter. . . . We have made the cast for liberty, and we must stand, like men, the hazard of the die. . . .⁴

The words were written by Peter McDouall, but the sentiments were physically exemplified in the bearing of the strikers, extraordinarily disciplined, heroic under fire and, far more difficult, sustaining their cohesion and organization for the long weeks of hunger and harassment which followed the initial victories.

To take the most basic test, the ability to control looting. In Liverpool in 1911 and in most cities in 1926 (and almost invariably in large-scale political tumults before 1842) the looting of shops was widespread, and such a response would seem fairly inevitable wherever a breakdown of law and order presented working people with the opportunity of seizing the goods they desperately needed. In 1842 there was certainly desperate need and a longer and more profound breakdown of law and order than at any other time. Yet there was very little looting.

Let us have a look at the manner in which the 'mob' or 'rioters' got bread. The press in August 1842 carried many news items on this subject. In the second week of August a crowd was moving along Broughton Road, Salford. One or two boys went into the shop of James Faulkner, provision dealer, and asked for bread. He gave them a 4lb loaf, '... which was instantly torn to pieces in the crowd. There seemed at first an inclination among some of the younger portion of the crowd to enter the shop and see if they could not get some more bread, but the main body of the rioters forced them away, exclaiming that it would ruin their cause should they begin to plunder.'⁵

At Rochdale, on Thursday 11 August a crowd some 15,000 strong was stopping the mills; they had been to John Bright's factory and the 'hands' had turned out. Several of the provision shops in the neighbourhood handed loaves of bread to the men in the streets, 'which they devoured like hungry wolves'. Other shopkeepers collected money and gave it to the ringleaders 'who immediately went and purchased bread which they divided among their followers'.⁶ In one or two instances loaves were taken without leave by some lads; but this conduct was not tolerated by the leaders.

Bread, and occasionally drink, were the only things the turn-outs wanted or would take.⁷ Mr Beswick, the chief constable of Manchester, arrested seven men, 'who had been concerned in the plunder of provision shops. Some of the prisoners had one loaf, others had two and some even three loaves in their possession when taken.' In the trial of Feargus O'Connor, Beswick was asked by the Attorney-General if he knew of any instances of their getting anything besides bread. The question was repeated and he answered 'No'.⁸

This collective self-discipline was a menace to the government. The control of looting was not based upon any false respect for property. It sprang from an understanding of the political implications: a knowledge that the shopkeepers and small property holders constituted indispensable allies and that in the past it was the small shopkeepers who supplied credit in any industrial dispute. During the capture of Stockport Workhouse, a long-standing object of working-class hatred, the distribution of its bread was conducted under strict control. 'They would ruin their cause should they begin to plunder.'

The same *political* control also marks the way in which these mass pickets, often many thousand strong, approached their basic task of bringing others out on strike. It was achieved by example and discussion – force was only used to counteract the coercion of the employers. Once the mass power of the strike had been demonstrated, and with that the credibility of its political objectives, other workers joined almost immediately. We have already given many examples of this and just one or two will suffice now.

At the trial of Feargus O'Connor, a number of manufacturers gave evidence. One was Sir Thomas Potter, mayor of Manchester 1839–40 and 1840–1. In answer to a question by Feargus O'Connor, he stated, 'The people, when they came from Ashton and assembled in Manchester, commenced by turning-out the mills; the hands seemed quite willing; in most cases there was no force used.' He was cross-examined by the Attorney-General, who asked: 'Was not the state of the town such that you did not dare to advise parties to resist? Were you not afraid of bloodshed and tumult? . . .' 'Why the fact is, they had no difficulty; for the parties seemed quite ready to be turned-out, or to turn-out. There was no force necessary, that is very well known.' Alderman George Boyle Chappell, one of the oldest manufacturers in Manchester and an inhabitant of the town for 50 years, was examined by O'Connor who asked about the general conduct and behaviour of the people under the circumstances. 'I must confess, after being in every mob for the last fifty years in Manchester I thought a better behaved and well disposed mobility I never saw before.'

A third manufacturer, James Kershaw Esq., mayor of Manchester in 1843, a calico printer, who had lived there all his

life, was examined by O'Connor. He asked, 'Were your works stopped?' 'They were.' 'About what time?' 'I think on Thursday, 11th August . . .' 'Was there any damage done to your works?' 'None.' 'Did the hands in your employment require any very great force to induce them to cease labour?' 'I believe my partner . . . advised the hands to go out.' 'Did your hands go out willingly?' 'I believe they did.' 'And no damage whatever done?' 'No,' He was asked to speak from his own knowledge as to the state of the working class at that time. He answered, 'They were exceedingly distressed, no doubt.' He was asked, considering their distress, whether their conduct was good or bad? He answered, 'I think speaking of them generally and as a whole, as to the body of the community, I think their conduct was good. There were exceptions of course.'⁹ A. G. Rose states, 'at many places, hands were quite ready to turn-out at the first invitation to strike; some even cheered. The operation seldom lasted many minutes.' He adds: 'this made it rarely possible to bring any force to the required point in time to stop it'. To stop what? To stop the willing workers from turning-out!¹⁰ A last witness on this point is the judge himself. In his summing up at the end of the trial, Baron Rolfe stated: 'it appears from the evidence that a large portion of the workpeople were glad to be turned-out'.¹¹

So, speed, discipline, political control – these were the hallmarks of the strikers of 1842. In September, shortly after the end of the strike, the local commander wrote a military appraisal for the Home Office, and it was precisely these points which he emphasized: that the 'mobs' were highly organized and directed from secret meetings which were impenetrable to police spies.¹²

If, then, these were indeed strikers of a new type, how are we to characterize the strike itself? Its successor, the General Strike of 1926, stands in many ways in stark contrast. That strike was in essence far simpler. It called for a very specific and finite *industrial* objective, to protect miners' wage levels, and was under the control of an established central leadership, the Trades Union Congress General Council. Locally it was directed by trades councils and individual unions with long histories of organization. The strike of 1842 was originally the project of a minority of Chartist leaders and opposed by the rest. Its

objective was the most ambitious possible – state power – even though it had built into it subsidiary economic demands. If it succeeded in developing any central organization, this was either thrown up along the way or had to be captured like the Chartist executive. On these terms, and in particular comparing the disparity between the objectives and achievements of the two strikes, it is 1842 that would seem to emerge most favourably. The strike of 1926, despite its finite and negotiable objective, its massive organization and centralized leadership, totally failed in the task it set itself. The General Council's capitulation served to demoralize the trade union movement for the following decade. As such, it typified all the difficulties of using labour's organized power against the state in the period of imperialism. For with imperialism, and the additional room for concession and manoeuvre which this makes possible, the capitalist state is able to focus immense power on labour's own class organizations. By extending citizenship on its own terms and actively involving the movement in the assumptions of (capitalist) government, it is able to develop within labour's own ranks a powerful tendency committed to fight for purely sectional ends, to oppose any exercise of united power *against* the capitalist state, and hence the development of class consciousness itself. In 1926 the main struggle both before and during the strike, was between reformist and revolutionary trends *inside* the labour movement, and if the strike did see a measure of advance it was in the brief reconstitution of class unity which the Left managed to embody in councils of action and strike committees.¹³

For 1842 also one can point to major weaknesses – notably the division within the Chartist executive. Moreover, and perhaps still more obviously, there is the unresolved question of the strike's overall strategy. How did its active proponents, Leach, Pilling, McDouall, see it as achieving its objectives? At what point and in what way was universal suffrage to be won – by negotiation, by outright insurrection, or by some gradual take-over from below, the seizure of local industrial control by 'operatives' committees? Reading the proclamations issued at the height of the strike, the appeals to the 'God in Battle', one is aware of a measure of romanticism, a faith in the spontaneous forces of revolutionary enthusiasm that is oddly out of keeping with the meticulous preparations of the earlier stages and

appears to assume that at some stage, rather as in France, revolutionary processes would develop of their own accord. Certainly, given that there was some kind of insurrectionary perspective, then its architects could be accused of making totally inadequate preparations for sustaining an underground leadership for the strike once a direct challenge had been issued to the government.

Yet, even after saying all this, one is still amazed at what was achieved. A small initial group of 10,000 strikers were able to set off a political strike which drew in almost the entire factory labour force, many other workers, and sustained itself for upwards of three weeks. If the weakness of the 1926 strike was exemplified in the degree to which labour's own national organizations had been invaded by anti-working class assumptions, then the converse strength of 1842, the secret of its success, was in the responsiveness of local class organization, the degree to which its unity had already been steeled in struggle against a capitalist state which placed organized labour beyond the law. As yet modern imperialism and social democracy had not entered the stage. To this extent, the faith in revolutionary enthusiasm may not have been entirely misplaced and could indeed have derived from the experiences of the first week.

This contrast with 1926 comes out most strongly when one looks at local organization. We have already mentioned the highly disciplined and politically controlled character of the pickets. Equally noteworthy are the local strike committees. In 1926 it was necessary to conduct a prolonged struggle against the sectional authority of individual unions in order to develop united strike committees. In 1842 the local committees seem to have had this character from the beginning, and initially, before being renamed Operatives' Committees, appear to have been called Committees of Public Safety, a designation which underlines their anti-state inspiration and which may also give some clue as to the strategic plans of the strike leaders. We have specific information on the issuing of 'licences to work' for only six committees, all in the strike's south-east Lancashire base area.¹⁴ The Attorney-General, however, during his prosecution of O'Connor, makes reference to 'the extraordinary extent and intelligence with which this was carried on and the numbers that were engaged in this species of strange violation of the law'.¹⁵

If this is even half true, its significance can hardly be overestimated. Such issuing of licences was quite novel, at least for occupations in general, was highly expressive of a new positive exercise of class power and responsibility, and marked an ability to operate in practice and on a community-wide basis the sophisticated distinction, made on an agitational basis in the run-up to the strike, between socially useful and harmful applications of machinery and labour.

Our final point concerns the *speed* of the local response. At only three or four days' notice it was possible to assemble in Manchester a trades conference representing most of the North and West, and then take decisions that were locally binding. This could only have been possible if there had already existed local processes for accountable decision-making – meetings of individual trades, and more particularly the tradition of mass public meetings to elect Chartist delegates – combined with what seems to have been an atmosphere of mass political expectancy. Ben Brierley, for instance, tells how in 1842, four years after he had left the factory due to ill-health, the 'great strike' took place, an event which some of his neighbours 'had been expecting for a long time before, and were in their way prepared to meet . . . all kinds of work ceased as if from a stroke of paralysis, and in a day or two a smoking chimney was not to be seen'.¹⁶ This strength of local response may have meant that the elected delegates felt accountable to their own constituents to the point of failing to see their responsibility for sustaining a continuing central leadership, but it also ensured that even after the central leadership had been arrested, the strike continued to gain momentum in the localities.

All in all, therefore, it would seem quite legitimate to argue that the strike of 1842 did mark a qualitative leap forward in the history of the British working class. For two generations there had been a tradition of proletarian Jacobinism, of underground struggle for popular power and democratic rights. For even longer there had been a complex local network of trade union organization which had been forced to see itself as consciously opposed to the state. The two trends may not have been entirely separate, and in some cases possessed overlapping memberships, but their spheres of operation remained distinct. Apart from brief and partial experiments, in 1812 and 1818, or

1834 and 1839, there was no systematic attempt to draw upon the industrial strength of labour in the pursuit of political advance. Benbow's ideas remained on paper. Only in 1842 were the two spheres, industrial and political, fused together to produce something qualitatively new. It was finally at this point that the factory proletariat's size, concentration and exposure to crisis reached the critical level where it could quite unequivocally take the leading role. For the first time the working class acted as a class, artisans and unskilled workers joined with a disciplined and highly organized factory labour force and did so independently of middle-class leadership. This is what marks the strike of 1842 and what made it such a fearful portent for the government.

*'The assailants are united: in the defence the greatest dissension prevails'*¹⁷

'In the defence the greatest dissension prevails.' Graham's comment to Kay Shuttleworth at the end of the third week of the strike is indicative of how near the situation was to being fully revolutionary. It was not just that a large proportion of the working population had become mobilized in active struggle against the government. The real problem was that there was no united perspective on how to overcome the wider politico-economic crisis which had produced this situation. It was plainly no longer possible to rule in the old way. Profound conflicts within the ruling class itself, above all between agrarian and industrial capital, made it impossible to adopt any fundamental new approach. As Graham remarked fatalistically to another correspondent: 'I am afraid that no legislative remedy can be applied to the undoubted evils which prevail to an extent most dangerous to the public peace. They are inherent in the state of society at which we have arrived and which is highly artificial. It will be seen that a manufacturing people is not as happy as a rural population and this is the foretaste of becoming the "workshop of the world".'¹⁸

It is some measure of the success of Peel's ministry, of its determination to overcome these problems, as well as of the potential pressure it felt itself to be under from the working class, that within half a decade it had succeeded in reversing this

position, regrouping the forces of capital and providing a new perspective of advance. By 1847 it was possible to meet the onset of a new and even deeper economic crisis with a relatively united front and on terms which ensured that this time it was the working class which was politically confused and divided.

This is not the place to make any detailed examination of this process, but it is important to note just how much subsequent government activity was in one way or another tied to the traumatic experience of 1842. In the immediate aftermath the response is probably best described as simply defensive: an attempt to remedy the situation without any fundamental realignment of policy. If possible the government wanted to avoid the thankless task of attempting to reorganize the alliances between ruling class factions which would be needed to sustain a new initiative. In the winter of 1842-3 the prospects of imperial expansion were used to sidestep the question of Corn Law repeal. During stormy debates which began the new parliamentary session, Peel hailed the new treaty with China and the military victories in north-west India and Afghanistan as providing of themselves the basis for a speedy growth in markets and trade.¹⁹ At the same time home policy was restricted to largely negative or repressive forms: legal action against the Chartists, a reorganization of army pensioners, strengthening the regular forces and schemes for 'moral education'.²⁰ These included sub-dividing parishes and building churches in industrial towns and preparing a new scheme for factory education which the Home Secretary described to the Bishop of Chester as 'a measure of concord which, without the sacrifice of principle, may shed the light of saving faith and dispel the darkness of ignorance which overshadows the manufacturing districts and which portends a fearful storm.'²¹

However, by spring 1843, this purely defensive approach began to give way to the first intimation of a more subtle re-orientation. We have already examined the politics of the trial which took place in March 1843. This went some way to acknowledge the grievances of the working population, to elaborate a new concept of partnership between capital and organized labour and even to offer a species of legitimacy to non-insurrectionary Chartist agitation. This itself was important. Probably still more vital was its effect, as an almost

Baldwinesque plea for a new beginning, on local relations between employers and organized labour. Within eighteen months of the trial we find a degree of employer recognition for trade union organization in the cotton industry that was entirely missing in the 1830s, and which was matched by an emphasis on conciliation and arbitration by the newly founded Associated Operative Cotton Spinners of UK.²² No less symptomatic, and occurring within four days of the beginning of the March trial, was the government's attempt to persuade the Tory reformer Ashley (later Lord Shaftesbury) to give public approval to a new bill for regulating the hours of work in factories which 'will in most important particulars satisfy all your wishes'.²³ This eventually became the Factory Act of 1844.

As the economic upswing of 1843-4 moved first to a stage of speculative boom and then to renewed recession in 1846, the new alignment took firmer shape. With the Corn Law repeal of 1846 the Peel ministry finally made its historic choice between maintaining its own parliamentary base and 'carrying on the Queen's Government'. In the debate which accompanied repeal Graham, as Home Secretary, justified the government's actions by direct reference to 1842: 'we had the painful and lamentable experience of 1842 - a year of greatest distress, and now it has passed, I may say, of the utmost danger. What were the circumstances of 1842? Allow me just to glance at them. . . . What was the condition of Lancashire? . . . All machinery was stopped. . . . It was my painful duty to consult with the Horse Guards almost daily as to the precautions that were necessary for the maintenance of the public peace. For some time troops were continually called on, in different parts of the manufacturing districts, to maintain public tranquillity. . . . For three months the anxiety which I and my colleagues experienced was greater than we ever felt before with reference to public affairs. . . .'²⁴

It should not be imagined, however, that the new course simply involved a switch of orientation from agrarian to industrial capital. If anything, it meant a measured distancing from both. Although Corn Law repeal had been a cherished objective of the manufacturers, the Bank Act of 1844, passed at the height of the speculative phase of the economic cycle, materially restricted the availability of industrial credit and

subjected economic expansion to far more stringent discipline, in the interests of currency stability, to the bank rate and the Treasury. The Factory Act of 1847 went further and effectively imposed an absolute restriction on an employer's ability to extract surplus labour and to utilize his capital as he saw fit. It conceded, tacitly if not explicitly, many of the working-class criticisms of classical political economy. Therefore, while Corn Law repeal certainly meant striking off the immobilizing shackle of the landed interest, the new path chosen by following governments was not a simple endorsement of Britain's further development as the 'workshop of the world'. Indeed, on the contrary, it could be plausibly argued that the objective result of the mid-century reorientation was precisely the reverse: to stimulate the development of London as world banking centre, to retard domestic industrial investment and do so, at least in part, against a background where the government saw it as politically essential to arbitrate the social conflicts produced by the earlier uncontrolled emergence of large-scale modern industry.

This, then, is one measure of the impact of 1842. There is, however, a further test, and perhaps a more powerful one: not what was conceded but what was refused. Whatever reforms were made in factory conditions, the poor law and trade union rights, there was no concession of universal suffrage. For that working people in Britain had to wait another seventy-six years. Engels who settled in Manchester only two months after the strike, was quite clear as to the reasons why. Writing from London at the end of November 1842, he stated: '... the middle class will never renounce its occupation of the House of Commons by agreeing to universal suffrage since it would immediately be outvoted by a large number of the unpropertied as an inevitable consequence of giving way on this point. . . . In England's present condition, "legal progress" and universal suffrage would inevitably result in a revolution.'²⁵ Engels here formulated in precise terms the broad aims and aspirations of the workers. Some twelve months later he again wrote about the conditions of England and the struggle for increased democratic rights for the people. 'Democracy', he wrote, 'true enough is only a transitional stage, though not towards a new improved aristocracy, but towards real human freedom.'²⁶

It was in the sense of a popular people's uprising, striving for real freedom, that Engels saw the General Strike of 1842. He referred to it many times as an insurrection, an uprising and as a rebellion. After only a few days in England he was able to give a clue as to the strength of the working class in the strike and also a clue to its weakness. He wrote, 'by its numbers, this class had become the most powerful in England. . . . The English proletarian is only just becoming aware of his power, and the fruits of this awareness were the disturbances of last summer.'²⁷ This study has attempted to vindicate this assessment: to show that the General Strike of 1842 represented the climax of an already high level of class consciousness and that as a result a point was reached in nineteenth-century history at which working-class consciousness asserted itself, threatened a revolutionary situation and brought about a profound change in the development of British society.

NOTES

1. *Trial*, pp. 174, 365.
2. Sources for Table 1, include the *Trial*, *Northern Star*, *Manchester Guardian* and *Manchester Advertiser*.
3. Marx, 'Class Struggles in France', *Collected Works*, Moscow, 1979, p. 135.
4. The full text of the National Charter Association's Address 'To the People' is given in Appendix B.
5. *Manchester Guardian*, 13 August 1842.
6. *ibid.*, 17 August 1842.
7. *Northern Star*, 13, 20 August 1842.
8. *Trial*, p. 105.
9. *ibid.*, pp. 314-18, 369.
10. Rose, 'The Plug Riots of 1842', *Transactions Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, LXVII, 1957, p. 95.
11. *Trial*, p. 369.
12. Arbuthnot to Home Office, 17 September 1842, HO 45/268.
13. J. Skelley (ed.), *The General Strike of 1926*, London, 1976, pp. 85-6.
14. These were at Marple Bridge, Stalybridge, Dukinfield, Glossop, Stockport and Rochdale. More details are given in Chapter 7 above.
15. *Trial*, p. 22.
16. B. Brierley, *Home Memories and Recollections of a Life*, Manchester and London, n.d., pp. 23-5.
17. Graham to Shuttleworth, 30 August 1842, Graham MS., Cambridge University Library, spool 32.
18. Graham to Powis, 31 August 1842, *ibid.*

19. Hansard, LXVI, 2 and 3 February 1843.
20. Graham to Hardinge, Secretary at War, 1 September 1842, Graham Papers, *ibid.*, for proposals for strengthening the regular army and reorganizing the pensioners. On schemes for education, Shuttleworth to Graham, 22 December 1842, Graham Papers, spool 33, and Graham to Rev. G. Gleig, 6 March 1843, Graham Papers spool 34.
21. Graham to Bishop of Chester, 19 January 1843, *ibid.*, spool 33.
22. Printed reports of the Association of Operative Cotton Spinners, Twinners and Self-Acting Minders of the United Kingdom, 1844–1846 (Office of Oldham Spinners).
23. Graham to Ashley, 4 March 1843, Graham Papers, spool 34.
24. Hansard, LXXXIX, col. 719.
25. Marx and Engels, *Collected Works*, II, p. 368–9.
26. *ibid.*, III, p. 466.
27. *ibid.*, II, p. 373.

Appendices

Appendix A: Resolutions and addresses of the trades conferences

1. Resolution of the metal trades conference, Thursday 11 August 1842.
2. Address of the conference of the various trades and mill workers, Thursday 11 August 1842.
3. Address of the metal trades conference, Friday 12 August 1842.
4. Resolution of the conference of various trades and mill workers, Friday 12 August 1842.
5. Address of the trades conference, Saturday 13 August 1842.
6. Address of the Great Delegate Trades Conference, Tuesday morning, 16 August 1842.
7. Address of the Great Delegate Trades Conference, Tuesday 16 August 1842.
8. Address of the trades conference, Saturday 20 August 1842.

Appendix B: Addresses of the National Chartist Conference

1. Address of the executive committee of the National Charter Association, Wednesday 17 August 1842.
2. Address of the national conference to the Chartist public, Wednesday 17 August 1842.
3. Resolution of Chartist Conference, Wednesday 17 August 1842.

Appendix C: List of Delegates to the Great Delegate Trades Conference on 15 and 16 August 1842

Appendix A: Resolutions and addresses of the trades conferences

1. *Resolution of the metal trades conference, Thursday 11 August 1842*

On Thursday 11 August 1842, at six o'clock in the morning—the third day of the strike in Manchester, a trades meeting of mechanics, engineers, millwrights, smiths and moulders was held in the Carpenters' Hall, Manchester. The body of the hall and a considerable part of the gallery was occupied (the hall held 3,000). The following resolutions were passed:

I That this meeting pledges itself not to sanction any illegal or immoral proceedings.

II That this meeting deprecates the late and present conduct of those employers who have been reducing wages; thereby depriving the labourer of the means of subsistence, and also destroying the home trade; but at the same time we can not, nor do we sanction the conduct of those individuals who have been going about destroying property, and offering violence to the people.

III That it is the opinion of this meeting that, until class legislation is entirely destroyed, and the principle of united labour is established, the labourer will not be in a position to enjoy the fruits of his own industry.

IV That it is the opinion of this meeting the people's charter ought to become the law of the land, as it contains the elements of justice and prosperity; and we pledge ourselves never to relinquish our demands until that document becomes a legislative enactment.

V That a committee be appointed by this meeting, to wait upon the other trades, to endeavour, if possible, to secure a more general union, before entering into any practical measures for redressing any grievances.

VI That a committee be appointed to draw up an address to employers in general, showing them the evil results of reducing wages.

VII That the trades now assembled do pledge themselves not

to commence work until they have had an interview with deputations from other trades.

VIII That the foregoing resolutions be printed, and posted in different parts of the town and neighbourhood.

IX That this meeting do adjourn until tomorrow afternoon, the 12th instant, at two o'clock, to be held in the Carpenters' Hall, where men of the aforementioned trades and occupations from all other trades and professions, are particularly requested to attend.

By order of the meeting
J. Middleton, Chairman

2. Address of the conference of various trades and mill workers, Thursday 11 August 1842

On Thursday, 11 August 1842, simultaneous with the metal trades meeting, a meeting of various trades and mill workers took place. They issued the following placard:

Peace, Law and Order – To the Trades and Mill-hands of Manchester and the Vicinity – At a preliminary meeting of the members of the various trades and mill-hands held in the fustian cutters room, Tib Street, it was unanimously resolved – that this meeting recommend to the operatives of Manchester and its vicinity, the propriety of assembling in their respective localities, at seven o'clock in the morning (Friday), to consider the best means of advancing the interests of the people at the present alarming crisis; and that these various bodies elect persons to represent their views at the conference of delegates, to be held at Tib Street, opposite Green Street, at ten o'clock in the morning – William Boyd, Chairman. – N.B. Let all the meetings be public and held within doors.

3. Address of the metal trades conference, Friday 12 August 1842

On Friday, 12 August 1842, a delegate meeting of the metal trades took place in the Carpenters' Hall. The following placard was issued by the delegates:

An adjourned public meeting of the mechanics, engineers,

millwrights, moulders and smiths was held on Friday afternoon, at two o'clock pursuant to advertisement, in the Carpenters' Hall to take into consideration the best means to be adopted at the present alarming crisis. — The following resolutions were passed:

1 That we the delegates, representing the various trades of Manchester and its vicinities with delegates from various parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, do most emphatically declare that it is our solemn and conscientious conviction, that all the evils that afflict society and which have prostrated the energies of the great body of the producing classes, arise solely from class legislation; and that the only remedy for the present alarming distress and widespread destitution is the immediate and un mutilated adoption and carrying into law, the document known as the People's Charter.

2 That a trades' delegate meeting be held at the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street, on Monday, 15 August, at ten in the forenoon, to which every trade in Manchester is particularly requested to send a delegate, to represent its opinions at the present truly important crisis. And that this meeting pledges itself not to commence work again until such delegates have come to a decision; and likewise call upon all other trades who have ceased labour to remain out till that time.

3 That this meeting call upon the shopkeepers to convene a public meeting forthwith, for the purpose of electing delegates to confer with the trades' delegates as to the best means to be adopted.

4 That this meeting individually and collectively pledges itself to become the conservators of the peace, discountenance the destruction of property, and will assist to arrest any whom they find trying to create a breach of the peace.

5 That this meeting begs of the working classes not to use intoxicating drinks until the people's charter becomes the law of the land.

6 That the best thanks of this meeting be given to the five mechanical trades, who took the responsibility and expense upon themselves to convene the two meetings which have been held in this hall on Thursday and Friday.

7 That placards be printed and posted in Manchester and Salford, to give publicity to the resolutions carried at this

meeting, and that each Trade pay its part of the expenses incurred.

8 That the best thanks of this meeting be given to the chairman for the very candid and impartial manner in which he has fulfilled his duties in that capacity at both meetings.

By order of the meeting.

J. Middleton, Chairman

4. *Resolution of the conference of various trades and mill workers, Friday 12 August 1842.*

On Friday 12 August 1842, a conference of some 200 delegates representing, 'various trades and mill hands', with James Farrell, dressers and dyers delegate in the chair, was held in the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street, Manchester. The following resolutions were passed:

That we, the delegates representing the various trades of Manchester and its vicinities, with delegates from various parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, do most emphatically declare that it is our solemn and conscientious conviction that all the evils that afflict society, and which have prostrated the energies of the great body of the producing classes, arise solely from class legislation; and that the only remedy for the present alarming distress and widespread destitution is the immediate and un mutilated adoption and carrying into law (of) the document known as the people's charter.

That this meeting recommend the people of all trades and callings forthwith to cease work, until the above document becomes the *Law of the Land*.

5. *Address of the trades conference, Saturday 13 August 1842*

On Saturday 13 August 1842, the trades delegates met again, in the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street, Manchester. The following placard was issued by them, and was posted on the walls of Manchester and surrounding towns over the week-end:

JUSTICE! PEACE!! LAW!!! ORDER!!!!
To the inhabitants of Manchester, Salford and
surrounding districts.

We the delegates of all the various Trades of these important districts, having been, each and all, legally and duly elected by our various trades, have again this day met in solemn conference, empowered by our constituents to watch over and guard the interests of the people whom we represent; and we do most earnestly implore you not to be led astray by your enemies, but remain firm in your purpose to uphold your *just rights* as set forth in the resolutions agreed to by the delegates' meeting in the Carpenters' Hall, on the 11th and 12th last. We call upon you to be prompt in the election of your Delegates to the *Great Delegate Conference* which will be held in the Sherwood Inn, Tib Street, on Monday, August 15th 1842, at ten o'clock in the forenoon, and that you meet immediately for that purpose, such of you as have not already elected delegates.

We most solemnly pledge ourselves to persevere in our exertions until we achieve the complete emancipation of our brethren of the working and middling classes from the thralldom of *Monopoly and Class Legislation* by the legal establishment of the *People's Charter*.

The Trades of Britain carried the *Reform Bill*

The Trades of Britain shall carry the *Charter*

We call upon you then to act with promptitude and energy. *Do your duty! we shall do ours!!* We trust the issue to the protection of Heaven and the Justice of our cause.

John Middleton, Chairman.

The following resolution, amongst others, was agreed to unanimously.

That no person will be admitted to the delegate meeting on Monday next, unless such delegate bring his credentials duly signed by the Chairman or Secretary of the public meeting of the trade he represents.

6. *Address of the Great Delegate Trades Conference, Tuesday morning, 16 August 1842*

On Tuesday 16 August 1842, the proceedings of the second day of the Great Delegate Conference were opened by the Chairman reading an address which had been drafted on the basis of the previous day's discussion. This was agreed to:

TO THE TRADES OF MANCHESTER AND
SURROUNDING DISTRICTS

Fellow Citizens. Impressed with a profound sense of your expectancy and the importance which you attach to our proceedings as the true and *bona fide* representatives of the people of these districts, we hasten to lay before you the result of our sittings. We find, by reference to the reports of the delegates assembled from various parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, that it is the embodied opinion of the working classes, from a comparison of the past with the present, as a criterion to judge of the future, that no sufficient guarantee is afforded to the producers of wealth, but from the adoption and establishment of the people's political rights, as a safeguard for the lives, liberties and interests of the nation generally. And we are further of the opinion that any interference with the legal and recognised constitutional rights of the people, whether by placard or otherwise, is detrimental to the preservation of the public peace, and to the protection of property. We, the people's delegates, announce to our constituents that we again assemble this day at ten o'clock, supported by the indestructible bulwark of public opinion, and prepared to watch over and guard the people's interests, as a personification of the people's will. The meeting proposes appointing delegates to wait upon and confer with shopkeepers, dissenting clergymen and the middle classes generally, for the purpose of ascertaining how far they are prepared to assist and support the people in the struggle for the attainment of their political rights, as the only means to the removal of the widespread destitution and awful distress which prevails throughout these islands. We, your representatives, call most emphatically upon the people to discontinue the production or creation of wealth, until the result of our deliberations is made known to the people we represent. We have only one course of conduct to recommend, which we know you will most readily adopt, namely to watch over the safety of life and property! For ourselves, we have no other property than our labour; but in the midst of you we live and have our being; our parents, our wives and children are the hostages we present to you as our securities that we will

do nothing ourselves, or recommend anything to others inconsistent with their safety, or your interest – Alexander Hutchinson, Chairman; Charles Stuart, Secretary. – Manchester, August 16, 1842.

7. *Address of the Great Delegate Trades Conference, Tuesday 16 August 1842*

On Tuesday 16 August 1842, the second day of the Great Delegate Conference meeting in the Hall of Science, Manchester, concluded with the passing of a resolution, which was embodied in an address which was issued. The following is the address.

LIBERTY – to the Trades of Manchester and the Surrounding Districts:

Fellow Workmen, we hasten to lay before you the paramount importance of this day's proceedings. The delegates from the surrounding districts have been more numerous at this day's meeting than they were at yesterday's and the spirit and determination manifested for the people's rights have increased every hour. In consequence of the unjust and unconstitutional interference of the magistrates our proceedings were abruptly brought to a close by their dispersing the meeting, but not until in their very teeth, we passed the following resolution. 'Resolved – that the delegates in public meeting assembled, do recommend to the various constituencies we represent, to adopt all legal means to carry into effect the People's Charter; and further we recommend that delegates be sent through the whole country to endeavour to obtain the co-operation of the middle and working classes in carrying out the resolution of ceasing labour until the Charter becomes the law of the land.'

Englishmen, legally determine to maintain the peace and well being of society and show, by your strict adherence to our resolution that we are your true representatives. Do your Duty. We will do ours. We meet again tomorrow; and the result of our deliberations will be fully laid before you.

Alexander Hutchinson, Chairman

Charles Stuart, Secretary

Manchester, August 16, 1842.

8. *Address of the trades conference, Saturday 20 August 1842*

The Manchester trades conference met on Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, 17, 18, 19 and 20 August 1842. By Saturday 20 August, the conference learned that the chairman and secretary of the conference, and some other delegates had been arrested. After a private meeting in the course of the day, the following address was issued:

Concluding Address from the Trades Delegates to their constituents

Fellow-citizens, having, despite the difficulties which have surrounded us, terminated our sittings, and executed the object of our mission, we deem it our duty, previous to returning to our respective homes, to leave the result of our deliberations before you. We have carefully collected, and calmly deliberated upon, the evidence adduced by the assembled delegates, as to the state of public feeling evinced by their respective constituencies; and we find that the labourer and artisan having, for a series of years, vainly struggled to maintain the standard of wages which would enable them to obtain a supply of even the commonest necessaries of life, are of opinion, that the repeated prostrations of their efforts are to be solely attributed to their political disfranchisement. Experience having plainly proved the correctness of this opinion, we turned our attention to the best means of remedying the evil; and having maturely considered the subject in its various details, we came to the conclusion, that the only means by which the labouring and the producing classes of this country can be fairly remunerated, property protected, and themselves eventually raised from the unparalleled depths of degradation to which they are at present reduced, is by the legislative enactment of the document known as the people's charter; and we recommended the national cessation from labour until the arrival of this period. Owing to the occurrence of the late civil commotion, of which we had not the slightest anticipation, and which we exceedingly regret, we find that the carrying out of this resolution would for the present be impractical, we dissolve with the firm determination that, as soon as our organisation is sufficient for, and our resources adequate to the commencement of the national cessation from

labour until the charter becomes the law of the land, we shall do so legally, and constitutionally; and we fear not but the result will crown our cause with victory.

And relying on your intelligence, courage, moral power and perseverance, we are fellow-citizens, yours in the cause of truth and justice, the Trades Delegates. Saturday evening, August 20, 1842. — Signed, John Rawson, Chairman.

Appendix B: Addresses of the National Charter Association

1. *Address of the executive committee of the National Charter Association, Wednesday 17 August 1842*

To the People

Brother Chartists – The great political truths which have been agitated during the last half-century have *at length aroused* the degraded and insulted white slaves of England to a sense of their duty to themselves, their children, and their country. Tens of thousands have flung down their implements of labour. Your taskmasters tremble at your energy, and expecting masses eagerly watch this the great crisis of our cause. Labour must no longer be the common prey of masters and rulers. Intelligence has beamed upon the mind of the bondsman, and he has been convinced that all wealth, comfort, and produce, everything valuable, useful, and elegant, have sprung from the palms of his hands; he feels that his cottage is empty, his back thinly clad, his children breadless, himself hopeless, his mind harassed, and his body punished, that *undue riches*, luxury, and gorgeous plenty might be heaped on the palaces of the taskmasters, and flooded in the granaries of the oppressor. Nature, God, and reason, have condemned this inequality, and in the thunder of a people's voice it must perish for ever. He knows that labour, the real property of society, the sole origin of accumulated property, the first cause of all national wealth, and the only supporter, defender, and contributor to the greatness of our country, is *not possessed of the same legal protection which is given to those lifeless effects*, the houses, ships, and machinery, which labour have alone created. He knows that if labour has no protection, wages cannot be upheld nor in the slightest degree regulated, until every workman of twenty-one years of age, and of sane mind, is on the *same political level as the employer*. He knows that the Charter would remove by universal will, expressed in universal suffrage, the heavy load of taxes which now crush the existence of the labourer, and cripple the efforts of commerce;

that it would give cheap government as well as cheap food, high wages as well as low taxes, bring happiness to the hearthstone, plenty to the table, protection to the old, education to the young, permanent prosperity to the country, long-continued protective political power to labour, and peace, blessed peace, to exhausted humanity and approving nations; therefore it is that we have solemnly sworn, and one and all declared, that the golden opportunity now within our grasp shall not pass away fruitless, that the chance of centuries afforded to us by a wise and all-seeing God, shall not be lost; but that we now do universally resolve never to resume labour until labour's grievances are destroyed, and protection secured for ourselves, our suffering wives, and helpless children, by the enactment of the People's Charter.

Englishmen! the blood of your brothers reddens the streets of Preston and Blackburn, and the murderers thirst for more. Be firm, be courageous, be men. Peace, law, and order have prevailed on our side – let them be revered until your brethren in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland are informed of your resolution; and when the universal holiday prevails, which will be the case in eight days, then of what use will bayonets be against public opinion? What tyrant can then live above the terrible tide of thought and energy, which is now flowing fast, under the guidance of man's intellect, which is now destined by a Creator to elevate his people above the reach of want, the rancour of despotism, and the penalties of bondage. The trades, a noble, patriotic band, have taken the lead in declaring for the Charter, and drawing their gold from the keeping of tyrants. Follow their example. Lend no whip to rulers wherewith to scourge you.

Intelligence has reached us of the widespreading of the strike, and now, within fifty miles of Manchester, every engine is at rest, and all is still, save the miller's useful wheels and the friendly sickle in the fields.

Countrymen and brothers, centuries may roll on as they have fledted past, before such universal action may again be displayed; we have made the cast for liberty, and we must stand, like men, the hazard of the die. Let none despond. Let all be cool and watchful; and, like the bridesmaids in the parable, keep your lamps burning; and let continued resolution be like a

beacon to guide those who are now hastening far and wide to follow your memorable example.

Brethren, we rely upon your firmness; cowardice, treachery, or womanly fear would cast our cause back for half a century. Let no man, woman, or child break down the solemn pledge, and if they do, may the curse of the poor and starving pursue them – they deserve slavery who would madly court it.

Our machinery is all arranged, and your cause will, in three days, be impelled onward by all the intellect we can summon to its aid; therefore, whilst you are peaceful, be firm; whilst you are orderly, make all be so likewise; and whilst you look to the law, remember that you had no voice in making it, and are therefore the slaves to the will, the law, and the price of your masters.

All officers of the association are called upon to aid and assist in the peaceful extension of the movement, and to forward all monies for the use of the delegates who may be expressed over the country. Strengthen our hands at this crisis. Support your leaders. Rally round our sacred cause, and leave the decision to the God of justice and of battle.

Charles Turner, printer, Turner-Street, near St. Paul's Church, Manchester.

2. *Address of the national conference to the Chartist Public, Wednesday 17 August 1842*

Brother Chartists – Those who have steeped you in poverty, and accumulated vast incomes by your labour, have turned upon you even in your distress, and would plunge you yet lower in the gulph of misery. Failing to purchase your aid for the accomplishment of their own sordid ends, they have effectually put into force the doctrine that ‘man has a right to do what he likes with his own;’ and, in the hope of starving you into compliance with their will, they have paralysed the hand of labour of the old and the young. Yea, infancy and old age are alike instruments in their hands for enhancing the interests of their order. Willing still to labour for a bare pittance, and watching events peacefully, which might lead to the attainment of your just rights, and thereby render you independent of the oppressor's will, you were cast upon the wide world for support.

Thanks – eternal thanks to the brave and independent Trades of Manchester! They saw the evil, and nobly threw their comparative comfort into misery's scale. They have struck, not for wages, but for principle: and, regardless of consequences to themselves, they have taken the foreground in your cause. They have declared that they will cease to toil till all labour shall be justly requited; which, in their opinion, cannot be effected till the Charter become law. Must not their names be handed down to posterity as patriots, sacrificing their own convenience and comfort for the attainment of that of their fellow-men? Who can withhold praise from such men? You have not struck, you have been stricken; but let the stroke recoil upon the tyrants who have so cruelly arrayed themselves against the interests of labour.

Brothers, these are not times to hesitate! The corn has a golden hue while your visages are pale, but hope for a change and better times. We are fortunate in having an accredited executive, bearing the confidence of all, at our head.

They, too, have called upon you. You will read their address; it breathes a bold and manly spirit.

We could not, in times like the present, withhold from them, your servants, our cordial support, as in union alone is security to be found, and from unanimity alone can success be expected. This is not a voluntary 'holiday'. It is the forced 'strike' of ill-requited labour against the dominion of all powerful capital. But as the tyrants have forced the alternatives upon you, adopt it – and out of the oppressor's threat let freedom spring.

While we have not been the originators of, we are yet bold enough to say to those who adopt the oppressor's remedy, stick to it rather than become tools of your own destruction; and may he who has a bit to spare, and would refuse it to men struggling for their rights, feel the gripe of hunger, and the still more stinging grief of a crying offspring!

Brothers – If we are worthy of your confidence, we must prove that we merit your esteem. Hear us, then, and mark well our admonition. Let no act of yours take the odium from those who have goaded you into resistance, and who would now torture you, because you do resist. Be not deceived; for although the discomfited Whigs have attempted to rally their scattered forces under this new pretext, yet will all of their order in society, of whatever shade in politics, join with them in throwing upon you

the odium which belongs to your oppressors. But, heed them not. Our's is the battle of labour against capital – of poverty against property – of right against might – of justice against injustice – and of knowledge against bigotry and intolerance.

This is a holiday, proclaimed not by nature – most unnaturally proclaimed; and may the wicked fall into the pit which they have dug.

Let union and peace be the watchword. We counsel you against waging warfare against recognised authority, while we believe the moral strength of an united people to be sufficiently powerful, when well directed, to overcome all the physical force that tyranny can summon to its aid. The blood of your brothers has been shed while peacefully agitating for their rights; and the brave delegates of the trades of Manchester have been scattered from their place of meeting at the point of the bayonet; yet will the friends of justice ever find a refuge as long as nature's canopy stands, and so long as those for whom they struggle stand by them. As the people appear to have made the 'strike of the League' for a repeal of the Corn-laws, into a stand for principle and the Charter, we would implore every man loving justice and having a shilling at his command to advance it, upon the good understanding that free labour will ere long repay the loan.

Brothers, the trades have issued a noble address. It breathes a spirit worthy of old laws and old English liberties. This, brothers, is the time for courage, prudence, caution, watchfulness and resolution.

In conclusion, brothers, we would, above all things, counsel you against the destruction of life and property.

Remain firm to your principles, which are to be found in the document entitled the People's Charter.

Men, be wise! do not commit yourselves or your cause. Let all your acts be strictly legal and constitutional, and ere long your enemies will discover that labour is in truth the source of wealth, and should be the only source of power.

Immediately after the adoption of the address, it was resolved unanimously, 'That the thanks of the conference be given to the Executive, for their energetic labours on behalf of the people.'

3. *Resolution of Chartist Conference, Wednesday 17 August 1842*

‘That whilst the Chartist body did not originate the present cessation from labour, this conference of delegates from various parts of England, express their deep sympathy with their constituents, the working men now on strike, and that we strongly approve the extension and continuance of their present struggle till the People’s Charter becomes a legislative enactment, and decide forthwith to issue an address to that effect, and pledge ourselves, on our return to our respective localities, to give a proper direction to the people’s efforts.’

Appendix C: List of Delegates to the Great Delegate Trades Conference, 15 and 16 August 1842

SUMMARY

Total delegates	141
Trades represented	59
Towns represented	27
Defendants in trial, March 1843	10
Delegates to the National Charter Association Conference, 16 and 17 August 1842	4

*One of trial Del. to Char-
F. O'Connor tist Conf. 16
and 58 and 17 Aug.*

Comment

<i>Name</i>	<i>Trade represented</i>	<i>Town</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Abbott, Thomas	Warpers	Miles Platting, Manchester	Nominated for General Council NCA, Dec. 1841
Ainscough, William	Wheelwrights and Blacksmiths Society		
Ainsworth, Joseph	Calico printers	Middleton	
Barow, Samuel	Hammermen	Oldham	
Baker, Edward	Bootmakers		
Barker, Edward	Fustian power-loom weavers	Manchester	
Bradley, William	Plumbers and glaziers		
Bell, Robert	Boot and shoemakers	Oldham	Active Chartist, 1848
Bell, William	Fustian cutters	Heywood	
Bertenshaw, George	Hatters	Ashton	
Bennett, John	Piecer to mule spinners		
Binns			Elected to credentials committee
Blease, Isaac	Cordwainers	Leigh	
Bourne, Bernard	Labourers	Manchester	

<i>Name</i>	<i>Trade represented</i>	<i>Town</i>	<i>One of trial Del. to Char- F. O'Connor tist Conf. 16 and 58 and 17 Aug.</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Brown, William	Rope and twinemakers	Manchester		
Bury, John	Colliers	Eccles		
Buxton, Henry	Steam engine makers	Manchester		Elected to credentials committee
Candlet, George	Factory operatives	Hyde	x	
Cavanagh	Silkweavers	Manchester		
Clarke, James	Tailors	Manchester		
Collinson, James	Power-loom overlookers	Manchester		Elected to EC of Conf. on Wed. 17 Aug.
Cooke, Samuel	Wiredrawers and cardmakers			
Connor, John	Fustian cutters	Manchester		Elected to EC of conf. on Wed. 17 Aug.
Crabtree, Thomas	Dressers and dyers			
Davies, Robert	Moulders	Manchester		
Davies, Thomas	Grinders and strippers	Glossop		
Davies, Thomas	Bricklayers	Manchester		
Dempsey, James	Hand-loom weavers	Eccles		
Denny, Abraham	Trades of Bury	Bury		

Dixon, William	Ashton	Delegate to Chartist conf; Dec. 1845. Delegate to Nat. Assembly, May 1848 Delegate to Nat. Chartist Convention, April 1848. Nominated for Gen. Council, 1841
Donavon, Daniel	Manchester	
Douglas, Daniel		
Doyle, Thomas	Power-loom overlookers	
Doyle, William	Joiners Painters Fustian power-loom weavers	Manchester
Duffy, William	Tailors	Manchester
Easthope, Samuel	Sawyers	
Evans, Thomas	Colliers	Oldham
Farrar, Joseph	Wiredrawers and cardmakers	Oldham
Farrill, James	Dressers and dyers	
Fielding	Winders	Lees
Fletcher, Luke	Silk dyers	Middleton
Frazer, Peter	Steam engine makers	Manchester
Gant, William	Silk weavers	Middleton
Gardner, Robert	Engravers and printers	Manchester
		Elected to EC of conf., 17 Aug.
		Elected to EC of conf., 17 Aug.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Trade represented</i>	<i>Town</i>	<i>One of trial Del. to Char- F. O'Connor list Conf. 16 and 58 and 17 Aug.</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Graham, William	Rope and twine-makers	Manchester		
Greaves, John	The public of	Crompton		
Greenwood, James	Power-loom weavers	Heywood		
Gregory, Richard	Colliers	Hopwood		
Hadfield, George	Spinners and stretchers	Manchester		
Hayes, Henry	Mechanics			Elected to EC of conf., 17 Aug.
Hayes, Robert	Silk weavers	Astley		
Higginbottom, John	Skinnners			
Hilbert, Julian	Hatters	Ashton		
Hilton, Thomas	Roller makers	Oldham		
Holt, Henry	Mule spindle makers	Manchester		
Hutchinson, Alexander	Wiredrawers and smiths and cardmakers	Manchester		Standing chairman of trades conf.
Isherwood, Isaac	Trades of Radcliffe Bridge	Radcliffe Bridge		
Jenkinson, Joshua	Mill hands			
Johnson, Thomas	Sizers	Leeds		

Keighley, John	Metal planers				
Kelshaw, John	Boilermakers	Manchester			
Kirby, James	Course carding				
Knight, James	Power-loom overlookers	Manchester			
Knight, John	Warpers				
Leach, John	Factory operatives	Hyde	x		Elected to EC of conf., 17 Aug.
Lewis, John	Grinder and strippers	Glossop	x		
Linsey, Robert	Machine makers	Heywood			
Loughlin, Patrick	Labourers	Manchester			
Manary, Joseph	Bricklayers	Manchester			
Marshall, William	Spindle and flymakers	Manchester			
Martin, John	Dressers and dyers				
M'Cartney, Bernard	Silk weavers of Leigh	Liverpool	x		Moved main resolution at trades conf., 16 Aug.
Melrose, Thomas	Mechanics				Address of trades conf., 12 Aug., drawn up by him Elected to EC conf., 17 Aug.
M'Farlane, Robert	Calico printers				Elected to EC conf., 17 Aug.
Mitchell, James	Spindle and flymakers	Manchester			
Mollineaux, John	Cotton spinners	Bolton			
Monks, Robert	Hydraulic packers				
Mooney, James		Colne	x		

<i>Name</i>	<i>Trade represented</i>	<i>Town</i>	<i>One of trial F. O'Connor and 5, 8 and 17 Aug.</i>	<i>Del. to Char- tist Conf. 16</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Moore, Alexander	Sawyers				
Morris, Isaac	Bootmakers				
Morris, John	Calico printers				
Morrison, David	Mechanics	Patricroft	x		
Mosley, Thomas	Spinners and stretchers	Manchester			
Neild, John	Hatters	Oldham			Nominated for Gen. Council NCA, Dec. 1841
Norris, William	Hand-loom weavers	Eccles			
Oxford, Thomas	Skinnners				
Parry, Robert	Fustian cutters	Manchester			
Patrick, A.	Trades of Bury	Bury			
Peavy, George	Cordwainers	Leigh			
Pemberton, Samuel	Ladies' shoemakers				
Peeling, James	Public meeting of trades	Stalybridge			
Pickup, David	Hydraulic packers				
Pitt, Thomas	Public meeting of trades	Ashton		x	
Pollitt, Thomas	Moulders	Manchester			

Potter, William	Twiners	
Reed, Thomas	Stonemasons	
Rushton, Robert	Stonemasons	
Roberts, John	Boilermakers	Manchester
Robinson, William	Wiredrawers, cardmakers and smiths	Manchester
Rogers, Richard	Colliers	Clayton
Rourke, Charles	Fustian cutters	Manchester
Rushton, Henry	Hand-warpers	Manchester
Riley, Richard	Plasterers	Manchester
Saunders, Thomas	Silk small ware weavers	Manchester
Schofield, Samuel	Public meeting	Mossley
Smith, Charles	Sawyers	Manchester
Smith, Charles	Sawyers	
Smith, Kinder	Weavers	Oldham
Spencer, John	Factory operatives	Brooksbottom
Steuart, Charles	Mechanics	Patricroft
Stott, Benjamin	Bookbinders	Manchester
Stott, John	Colliers	Hopwood
Stott, William	Mule spindle makers	Manchester
Sutton, James	Cotton yarn dressers	
Sutton, John	Power-loom weavers	Royton
Taylor, Augustus Frederick		

Elected to credentials committee

Active Chartist, 1848

<i>Name</i>	<i>Trade represented</i>	<i>Town</i>	<i>One of trial F. O'Connor and 58</i>	<i>Del. to Char-tist Conf. 16 and 17 Aug.</i>	<i>Comment</i>
Thompson, John	Sawyers	Manchester			
Tomkinson, David	United order of smiths				
Townsel, Thomas	Cotton spinners	Heywood			
Wainhouse, James	Silk small ware weavers	Manchester			
Walsh, Robert					Elected to EC of conf., 17 Aug.
Ward, John	Sawyers	Manchester			
Warral	Silk weavers	Failsworth			
Watson, Henry	Ladies' shoe makers				
Webb, David	Glassmakers	Manchester			
West, Alexander	Dressers	Oldham			
Whithead, Henry Hunt	Cardroom workers	Oldham			
Whittaker, Thomas	Joiners				
Widowson, John	Cotton yarn dressers				
Williamson, T.	Weavers	Oldham			
Wilmott, Thomas	Metal planers				
Winter, Patrick	Labourers	Manchester			
Winterbottom, George	Twiners	Oldham			
Wolfenden, Albert	Public meeting	Ashton			x

Wood, William
Woodruffe, William
Worthington, Henry
Worsley, Edward

Colliers
Cordwainers
Plasterers
Spinners and
stretchers
Wheelwrights and
blacksmiths

Worral, James
Wright, John

Clayton
Ashton
Eccles
Manchester

x

Stockport

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