

Chartism college essay



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In Britain, the tough times of the late 1830s and 1840s, sometimes called the “hungry forties”, and the underwhelming increase in voters in the Reform Bill of 1832 gave birth to a political movement named Chartism. Chartism was a movement based on improving the political, social, and economic conditions of the working class and is considered the first mass working class movement in the world. The main points of the Chartist movement are defined in the People’s Charter, a document calling for six changes: universal manhood suffrage, the end of the property requirement for Parliament members, annual elections, equal electoral districts, and an income for Parliament members (Doc. 1). During the years of the Chartist movement there was much debate over how extreme and revolutionary they truly were. While many from the higher classes considered Chartism revolutionary and some individuals within the movement were willing to use violence, most Chartists were people who were only willing to try and pass the People’s Charter through the current system. Almost all of the people in any class above the workers would believe the Chartist movement to be revolutionary based on how radical it was at the time. The middle class, who had successfully achieved their goal of suffrage with the Reform Bill of 1832, turned into a more moderate to conservative and satisfied class that would perceive any other movements as an attack on what power and wealth they had accumulated. In turn, they would try to protect it. One middle class merchant in April 1848 would express his fears of revolution to his wife, erroneously predicting a revolution within the next 2 years, if not within days (Doc. 9).

The upper class of landed gentry would have also been very against such movements as Chartism so as to prevent any further loss in power. They had already lost significant political power to the middle class and were now sharing it with them through the Victorian Compromise. Only small amounts of people within the Chartist movement would be considered revolutionary. The leader of such people, or “ physical force” Chartists, was named Feargus O’Connor . In his newspaper, the Northern Star, he spread and argued his beliefs including the use of force to implement the People’s Charter if nonviolence failed.

One such edition published after the 1848 revolutions in France, Italy, and Germany stated that the British were the only people in Europe to not yet revolt. Remarks such as this would eventually leave him in prison for 18 months (Doc. 5 & 8). While there was in fact a violent faction of Chartists — O’Connor’s newspaper at its apex would circulate to 50, 000 people—, a general lack of interest, especially in London, caused the minority group to never grow. They were almost only found in the cities of Northern England (Doc. 4).

While there never was a revolution, strikes did occur. One consisted of pulling the plugs on steam boilers that powered industries to prevent their use. More than a thousand were arrested including O’Connor. The most violent conflict happened in Wales in 1839 when John Frost led an attack on a hotel in Newport, though dozens of troops were stationed there at the time and the attack failed miserably with 20 or so Chartists dying. The majority of Chartists fell under the category of “ moral force” Chartists who wanted to campaign peacefully for the passing of the People’s Charter. Many workers

saw their campaign to be similar to what the middle class had done before they had obtained the right to vote.

Many workers, including Chartist women, who all lived in terrible living conditions, also only pushed the gain of rights because they saw it as the key to improving their standard of living (Doc. 2 & 7). According to an article in the Leeds Mercury, Chartists put together social gatherings including balls and tea parties - which are not very revolutionary-like at all - possibly to mimic the middle class and to try and get rid of their perceived revolutionary beliefs (Doc. 6).

An article in the Chartist, the newspaper directed towards the "moral force" Chartists, on the Chartists who wanted to use violence said that while the British do in fact have the right to rebel, it is not necessary for this movement (Doc. 3). A letter from Lord John Russell, the Prime Minister, to Queen Victoria in 1848 described the deliverance of a petition by the Chartists. There was no violence, and even O'Connor was more than grateful towards the Commissioner of Police for allowing the march to happen (Doc. 10). Chartists usually either tried using petitions, some of over 3 million signatures, or strikes, which were usually very peaceful, to try and get what they wanted. The Chartists ultimately failed to pass the People's Charter through Parliament. After 1848, many people began losing interest in the movement, so it began to rapidly decline. Men began to now look towards labor unions as a way to achieve economic change. One place where the Chartists did get some headway in early on was Australia when, in 1854, miners in Victoria put forth Chartist demands.

Within a year after the revolt, which was successfully suppressed, Australia would have all of the demands met except for annual elections. While the Chartist movement would fail in Britain, like Australia, all would be eventually granted except for annual elections, though at a slower pace. As much as the upper classes feared it, the Chartists never revolted. The Chartists never revolted because, overall, they were not revolutionary; revolutionaries within the movement were not a huge number as the upper class pictured.

Most Chartists wanted to see the People's Charter passed through Parliament. Luckily, their peacefulness and patience would pay off.