

The communist manifesto and the industrial proletariat



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Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto was most appealing to and revolutionary for the industrial workers of 1848 (and those to come after that time). The call for unification of the proletariat and abolishment of the Bourgeoisie was an urgent one during a time of rapid progress in all aspects of industrial life. This urgency of The Communist Manifesto and the desire for change of political ideologies (to match the exponential rate of progress of wealth and industry) created not only a spate of revolutions, but a long lasting change in political ideas for industrialized European nations. The Communist Manifesto created a sense of unity and class awareness throughout the proletariat, thus they were able to recognize their power politically, socially and economically. Naturally, with the sudden rise of industry (particularly in England) other sectors of the European economy were affected. Cottage industries were put out of business by competition from manufactured goods and agricultural workers migrated to the cities. Not only did the farming economy change drastically, but the urban setting where migrants came for employment expanded rapidly. These changes in labor practices and the economic landscape as a whole were most unsettling and unfair for the industrial workers of the 1840's. Conditions were often poor and a very distinct line was drawn between rich and poor, factor owner and factory laborer. " Industrial workers, increasingly tied to the pace of machinery, found it more and more difficult to control their work processes; they had to work ten or twelve (or more) hours nearly every day on schedules fixed by factory owners."(1) The oppressed industrial working classes, or proletariat in 1845, according to Fredrick Engles existed as " a piece of capital for the use of which the manufacturer pays interest under the name of wages."(2)

They worked grueling hours, endured beatings from factory managers, were
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often ill as a result of working conditions, and were paid enough for only the most meager existence. For example, in the Saddler Committee report of 1832 (which aimed to investigate factory labor practices in England) the interviewee is asked how they (the workers) managed to remain alert and attentive at their machine. The worker responded “ They strapped us many times, when we were not quite ready to be doffing the frame when it was full.”(5) In response to another question about the former worker’s destroyed appetite, he responds “ It destroyed the appetite, and I became so feeble, that I could not cross the floor unless I had a stick to go with; I was in great pain, and could find no ease in posture.” (5). This excerpt from the Saddler Committee is but one case of a worker crippled by labor, rather than a laborer benefiting from the fruits of his trade. Marx’s vision of Communist society offers the depraved with the hopeful message that “ in Communist society, accumulated labor is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the laborer.” (4). The Communist Manifesto recognized poor labor conditions and overall quality of life and suggested directly to the proletariat that they were a class capable of changing (if unified). Marx offered solutions to problems that faced industrial workers similar to the Saddler Committee worker. He offered the proletariat a message of hope through action, whether or not it was a utopian vision however, is witnessed throughout the course of history. It should be stated that reforms were attempted to assist the working class. For example, the National Workshops in France were created to alleviate unemployment in France (although the final result was disastrous). As another example, in the German states “ wages rose an average of 5. 5 percent in the 1840s-but the cost of living rose about 16 percent each decade, canceling out the wage increases.”(3)

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Male suffrage increased in many industrialized European nations, although the vote of the proletariat was not always weighted equally. During the June Days in France, for example, “ the assembly appointed a five man executive committee to run the government and pointedly excluded known supporters of worker’s rights.” (3) It would have seemed as if Marx was correct about the deliberate “ keeping down” of the proletariat by the Bourgeoisie for its own economic reasons, thus reinforcing the notion of class struggle, if not outright class warfare. The main contribution of The Communist Manifesto to industrial laborers in the mid- nineteenth century was not distinctly mere recognition and rationalization of the class struggle. Marx seems to address the Communist Manifesto directly to the industrial laborer. He creates a sense of unity, not only throughout the text itself, but in the last line...”

WORKING MEN OF ALL COUNTRIES, UNITE” (4). That last line sounds more like a call to arms rather than the closing sentence of a political pamphlet. Aside from Marx’s theories on the abolition of private property and some of the other intricacies of the communist political system, the recognition of the industrial worker’s plight alone by Marx was enough to get the emotions of the proletariat flaring and the subversive revolutionary group organized into more populous factions. The Communist Manifesto was more of a confidence-booster for the trampled proletariat than it was a political treatise. Direct and immediate reforms were desirable and it would take a unified action of the proletariat to achieve these means. Marx states...”

Society as a whole is splitting into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other. Bourgeoisie and Proletariat.”(4) The notion of two great and hostile camps carries with it connotations of warfare, as does the statement “ The first step in revolution by the working class, is to <https://assignbuster.com/the-communist-manifesto-and-the-industrial-proletariat/>

raise the proletariat to the position of the ruling class, to win the battle of democracy.”(4) These urgent words could be taken as a war cry, words for (imminent or immediate) warfare. According to Marx, the only way to overtake the Bourgeois is not through negotiation and rhetoric, but through violence and revolution. Marx makes few direct inferences for violence, but through the Communist Manifesto’s steadily rising tone, and ending with the “ battle cry” it is certainly implied. Marx’s apparent sympathy (or better yet, recognition) for the proletariat is evident when he says “ instead of rising with the progress of industry, [the proletariat] sinks deep and deeper below the conditions of his own class.”(4) Marx recognizes the plight of the individual worker by making a collective statement as he does when he says (“ All we want to do away with is the miserable character of this appropriation, under which the laborer lives merely to increase capital, and is allowed only in so far as the interests of the ruling class allows it.” (4). It is interesting that within Marx’s apparent sympathetic reaction to the worker’s plight, he does not allow them to dwell long upon their misfortunes. He offers other suggestions and solutions to the problem of the class struggle besides outright warfare and violent revolution. In his model of the communist state, there is, for example, the issue of education. When Marx speaks of the general education supplied by the Bourgeoisie, he said “ it furnishes the proletariat with weapons for fighting the bourgeoisie....” these also supply the proletariat with fresh elements of enlightenment and progress.”(4) By speaking directly to the proletariat and placing them historically (“ The history of all hitherto society is the history of class struggles.”[4]), economically, and socially Marx strove to develop unity among the proletariat, as they were the class with the ultimate power. Marx states “ All

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previous historical movements were movements of minorities. The proletarian movement is the self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interest of the immense majority.”(4) Although perhaps a utopian vision for a classless, productive, industrial society that was beneficial to all, the mere recognition of strength in numbers and class solidarity were fundamentally effective and paved the way not only for future governments but for future laborers. Works Cited1) Blackford, Mansel G. Labor in the Industrial Revolution {Introduction} derived from Exploring the European Past Thompson Learning Custom Publishing, 20022) Engels, Fredrick Conditions of the Working Class in England, ed. Eric Hobsbawin (London 1969), 39-40, 41-423) Hunt, Lyn The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures, Volume II, Bedford/ St. Martin’s 20014) Marx, Karl The Communist Manifesto translated by Samuel Moore, 18885) Saddler Committee Report exerpted from Parliamenary Papers: Reports from Committees, Vol 15, Labor of Children in Factories (London: House of Commons, 1832)