

Keir Hardie: Marx, the Man and His Message

By

Keir Hardie

On Keir Hardie's birthday, we republish an excerpt from his 1910 pamphlet 'Marx, the Man and his Message' explaining why Marx's work remains a "consecrated treasure" for the working class of the world.

Marx's real title to greatness, and certainly his greatest claim upon the gratitude of the working class, rests upon his discovery, for such it practically was, of the truth that history is but the record of class struggles, and that these are always the inevitable outcome of the economic system of the time resisting a change which its own workings have made inevitable. This is what has come to be known variously as the Economic or Materialistic interpretation of history. All that that means is this: that Marx supplied the same explanation of human progress in civilisation and towards freedom which Darwin subsequently did of the evolution of animal and plant life towards the stage of perfection now attained.

The existence of a ruling class is only proof of a successful revolutionary struggle waged by that class at some former period of its history. With each succeeding class struggle the bounds of human freedom have been enlarged until, with the advent of the Capitalist system of wealth production, we have society, in the main, divided into two great antagonistic classes — the owners of property and the producers of property. Thus, with the organisation of the enfranchised working class into a definite organisation of their own, industrial and political, the final stage of the struggle for the freedom of the race has been entered upon. When the property-less working class has made all capitalistic property public property, then classes will have disappeared, since that which now divides a community into classes, the private ownership of property, will have disappeared. Differences of individuals will, of course, continue, but these will be individual distinctions, and will not divide men into separate and antagonistic classes.

That is the task which falls upon the Socialist movement. Socialism does not create the class struggle, it does not even accentuate it, it only recognises it. This is the broad generalisation of Marx which pedants have distorted out of all recognition, and elevated into a sectarian dogma under the name of the "class war."

Marx's Theory and the Working Class Movement

Accepting Marx's theory of social evolution as being correct, we are at once met with the question of how it should be applied in the working-class movement?

Here, also, Marx is clear and emphatic. There were moments, when, under the spell of some actual rising, Marx spoke and wrote as though he still clung to the old-time idea that the working class, even when possessed of the vote, would still require to seek its freedom rifle in hand behind the barricade. But his abiding thought was that freedom could only come by the gradual evolution of a properly-equipped working-class party, taught class consciousness by actual experience gained in the struggle with Capitalism, and by changes in the ownership of capitalist property forced on society by the workings of the capitalist system itself.

Mr. Spargo gives a curious illustration of this changing attitude of Marx. On April 17, 1871, when the Commune of Paris was newborn from a successful working-class rising, Marx wrote of the event as follows:

“This insurrection is a glorious deed for our party. . . And the grandeur appears the greater when we think of all the vices of the old society, of its wolves and swine and its common hounds.”

There we have a recrudescence of the old Marx of the pre-Communist Manifesto days. A year later, when the “wolves and swine and common hounds” had swept away the Commune in a tornado of leaden bullets, Marx could write of it thus:

“The Commune notably offers a proof that the working class cannot simply take possession of the State machinery and set it in motion for their own aims.”

Engels put the same truth in terser style, when he said the time for “Revolutions of small conscious minorities at the head of unconscious masses” was past, and that a revolution by violence could only set back the movement. This, by the way, applies to other methods of violence than those represented by the rifle and the barricade.

The Concrete Case

Let me give one concrete case to show the method by which Marx believed the final emancipation of the working class was likely to be most speedily attained. In section two of the Communist Manifesto, already quoted from, he winds up by giving some practical advice concerning tactics and programmes. There were impossibilists in those days even as there are now, and those, also as now, were all for “revolution.”

Here, then, is how Marx illustrates the methods to be employed for bringing Socialism into being. After showing that the first step is to raise the working class, i.e., form a Labour Party, so as to make the workers “the ruling class,” he goes on to say that this new ruling class “will use its position of supremacy to wrest, by degrees to wrest all capital from the capitalist class,” and, thus in time, “centralise all instruments of production in the hands of the State,” i.e. of the workers organised as the ruling class.

Be it noted that the first thing to be done is to get the workers in power as the “ruling class” — as has been done in Australia — and then begin to take over “by degrees” the instruments of production. In the beginning, he adds, measures which appear “insufficient and intenable” will be passed, but the very passing of these measures will lead to the demand for further measures, making still “further inroads upon the old social order,” and, however irksome this process may appear to be, it is “unavoidable” if we are ever to attain the goal.

The measures to be supported by the Communists — the “most advanced section of the working-class movement,” be it remembered — would, he said, vary in different countries, but in the “most advanced” the following will be pretty

generally applicable. I give the first three items verbatim, and in the order in which they appear:

- (1) Abolition of property in land, and the application of all rents of land to public purposes.
- (2) A heavy progressive or graduated income tax.
- (3) Abolition of all right of inheritance.

Item four is a curious one, and is only understandable on the supposition that Marx had in his mind when he wrote it a State in which Labour had already become “the ruling class.” It reads as follows: “Confiscation of the property of all emigrants and rebels.” The rebels Marx had in mind were undoubtedly those members of the deposed ruling class who were taking arms against their new masters. Imagine, the Marquis of Bute and the Duke of Westminster taking up arms against a government which insisted on their working for their own living!

The other items on the programme include such measures as National Banks and Railways, increase in factories, etc., owned by the State; liability of all to labour — which may have meant the Right to Work; the reclamation of Waste Lands; Free Education, and Abolition of Child Labour “in its present form.” Such are the main items.

Heading the first three items and remembering the Land, Inheritance, and Graduated Income Taxes of last year’s Budget, one wonders where the so-called pure Marxists got their authority for criticising the Labour Party for giving it support. Certainly not in the teaching of Marx himself; still less in his political action. It will also interest the single taxers to note that about the time Henry George was due to be born, Karl Marx was recommending that the rent of land should be taken by the State and used for public purposes.

Is Socialism a Revolutionary Movement?

But is not, it may be asked, Socialism a revolutionary movement? Yes, no such revolutionary change has been conceived since the days 2,000 years ago, when John the Baptist called upon men to repent, for the Kingdom of God was at hand!

Socialism is revolutionary; it not only revolutionises the thoughts and actions of its adherents, but also of the whole of society and the fabric of the State. Socialism is, without exception, the greatest revolutionary ideal which has ever fired the imagination, or enthused the heart of mankind. But, in the biting rebuke which Marx addressed to some of his professed followers who would “substitute revolutionary phases for revolutionary evolution,” we must be careful not to confuse the end with the means.

The Socialist-state is the end and what concerns us most at present is the means by which we are to get there. Marx only knew of one way; the organisation of a working-class movement, which would in process of time evolve the Socialist state. Socialism will abolish the landlord class, the capitalist class, and the working-class. That is revolution; that the working class by its action will one day abolish class distinctions.

And it was the inspired vision of Karl Marx, which first formulated as a cold scientific fact the inevitable coming of that glorious time. Little wonder that his memory is a consecrated treasure enshrined in the hearts of millions of the best men and women of all lands.

Keir Hardie was a Scottish trade unionist and socialist. He was a founder of the Labour Party and a member of parliament from 1892 to 1895 and 1900 to his death in 1915.