

# Engels on the American Labor Movement

By A. LANDY

[The article printed below is intended to serve as the introduction to a reprint of a pamphlet by Frederick Engels entitled "The Labor Movement in America" which has been out of print since the '90's. In the June issue of the Communist, we will reprint the Engels pamphlet in full. The readers of the Communist will be glad to learn that A. Landy will from now on again be a regular contributor to the magazine. He has contributed much valuable material on the application of the Marxian method to American problems particularly on the writings of Marx and Engels themselves dealing especially with America. Those desiring additional copies of the June issue containing the Engels pamphlet reprint should send in their orders in advance as the magazine cannot otherwise print extra copies—Editor].

IN HIS preface to the London, 1892, edition of "The Condition of the Working Class in England," Engels tells us that this book "was first issued in Germany in 1845 . . ." "It was translated into English," he continues, "in 1885, by an American lady, Mrs. F. Kelley Wischnewetzky, and published in the following year in New York. The American edition being as good as exhausted, and having never been extensively circulated on this side of the Atlantic, the present English copyright edition is brought out with the full consent of all parties interested.

"For the American edition, a new Preface and an Appendix were written in English by the author. The first had little to do with the book itself; it discussed the American Working Class Movement of the day, and is, therefore, here omitted as irrelevant, the second—the original preface—is largely made use of in the present introductory remarks."<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, irrelevant in an English edition, this preface was considered of sufficient importance in this country to be published separately as an eight-page pamphlet entitled "The Labor Movement in America."<sup>2</sup> This was done, the publishers tell us, "in

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1. The Condition of Working-Class in England in 1844. With Preface Written in 1892. By Fr. Engels. Translated by Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky. London, 1892. p. v. (Bettes known today as Florence Kelley).

2. The complete title read: The Labor Movement in America (The George Movement—The Knights of Labor—The Socialists), by Frederick Engels. (Price: One Cent). New York. Printed and Sold by Louis Weiss, 64-66 Ann Street. 1887. A German translation made by Engels himself (compare Engels to Sorge, June 4, 1887) was published simultaneously as: Die Arbeiterbewegung in Amerika. Vor-

order to make it accessible immediately, to the largest possible number of readers, since it bears directly upon the condition of the labor movement in America at the present time.”

Although Engels' book and pamphlet were published in 1887,<sup>3</sup> it was not long before they had both practically disappeared from the market. In 1892, Engels himself states that the American edition was as good as exhausted. Since then, only the English copyright edition of 1892 has been available to the general public. The American edition, together with the Preface reprinted in pamphlet form, have been completely forgotten and can now be found only in special libraries or private collections.<sup>4</sup>

In itself, the edition of 1887 is no different from that of 1892. But the preface, dealing with the labor movement in America, and the correspondence between Engels and his translator connected with the entire project, are of the utmost importance to present-day Marxists in America.<sup>5</sup>

Although Mrs. Wischnewetzky had completed the translation of Engels' book towards the end of 1884, having entered into negotiations with him by the beginning of 1885, it was not until 1887 that the book was finally published. Shortly before publication, however, in November, 1886, she wrote to Engels, requesting a special preface for the American edition. This, Engels was ready to furnish, especially since he felt that with the recent developments in the American labor movement a preface would be very much wanted. Furthermore, Edward and Eleanor Marx Aveling, together with Wilhelm Liebknecht, having been invited to make a tour through America under the auspices of the Socialist Labor Party,

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wort zur englischen Ausgabe der "Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England." Von Friedrich Engels. (Separate-Abdruck). Herausgegeben von Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky und Dr. L. Wischnewetzky. Preis ein Cent. New York, Druck und Verlag von Louis Weiss, 64 u. 66 Ann Str. Ecke William. 1887. Likewise eight pages.

3. Contrary to his erroneous assertion that the book had been published in 1886. The title of the American edition is as follows: The Condition of the Working-Class in England in 1844. With Appendix written 1886, and Preface 1887. By Frederick Engels. Translated by Florence Kelley Wischnewetzky. New York, John W. Lovell Company, 14-16 Vesey Street. 1887.
4. The text of Engels' article reprinted here is taken from a copy of the original 1887 edition in the library of the Wisconsin Historical Society at Madison. The Library possesses both the American edition of Engels' book and the eight-page pamphlet; of the latter, it has the German and English version.
5. For the purpose of this article, it would be superfluous to reproduce Engels' letters to Mrs. Wischnewetzky, Sorge and Schluter, as much as they bear upon Engels' preface. Having been utilized in the excellent little study by Heinz Neumann on the Role of American Communists in the Revolution, and having been reproduced, in part at least, in one of the numbers of the Workers Monthly, the reader can check them up without much difficulty.

Engels expected a certain amount of reliable first hand information, which he intended to use in the composition of his preface. He therefore replied to Mrs. Wischnewetzky on December 28, 1886, offering to comply with her request. A month later, the Preface was on its way to America, having been forwarded to Mrs. Wischnewetzky the 27th of January, 1887.<sup>6</sup>

This is scarcely the place to raise the question of Engels' sources of information. Nevertheless, the extent to which Engels was influenced by the Avelings in his estimation of the American situation may be touched upon briefly here. In his reply to Mrs. Wischnewetzky's request for an American preface, Engels insisted that he would have to "await the return of the Avelings to have a full report of the state of things in America" before he could write the required prefatory remarks. A comparison of Engels' preface with the articles on "The Labor Movement in America" which the Avelings published in the London Monthly *Time* and later republished in book form, shows clearly that the Avelings had been a source of information to Engels. Furthermore, Engels himself had admitted that he had learned much from the Avelings concerning the labor movement in America. Nevertheless, it must not be assumed that the Avelings were more than a source of information to Engels and that he did not have an independent view on the movement in the United States. One need only compare Engels' preface with the Avelings' book to realize who is the master and who the pupil.

Furthermore, as I have tried to show in an article on Marx, Engels and America, published in recent numbers of the *Communist*, Marx and Engels had always, from the early forties on, kept close touch with development in America, because of the latter's peculiar position in the world economy of the time, and consequently, because of its important relation to the development of the revolution in Europe. Indeed, Engels' preface and his views on the American labor movement at this time must be considered as a part of this far from accidental and fundamentally revolutionary interest in America—if their full significance is to be grasped. From first to last, Engels' interest in America was the relation it bore to the Revolution in the different stages of its development. With Marx's death, Engels had become the sole guardian of the world revolution, as it were, watching closely and carefully every new development, no matter where, registering every movement bearing upon the Revolution, whether in agrarian America or reactionary Russia.

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6. Compare Engels to Mrs. Wischnewetzky. February 9, 1887.

Already in 1882, a year before Marx's death, the old masters had recorded the momentous changes which had taken place in these two countries, expressing the opinion that a successful revolution in Russia might even become the signal for a revolutionary wave in the west.

What the Avelings brought Engels, therefore, was merely additional information which strengthened his own conviction in regard to the movement in America. Engels himself has pointed out that his interest in this country and his views on the labor movement here were continuous and independent. In reply to a fear expressed by Mrs. Wischnewetzky that he had been unduly influenced by Aveling, he stated: "Your fear as to my being unduly influenced by Aveling in my view of the American movement is groundless. As soon as there was a national American working class movement independent of the Germans, my standpoint was clearly indicated by the facts of the case. That great national movement, no matter what its form, is the real starting point of American working class development. If the Germans join it, in order to help it or to hasten its development in the right direction, they may do a deal of good and play a decisive part in it. If they stand aloof, they will dwindle down into a dogmatic sect, and will be brushed aside as people who do not understand their own principles. Mrs. Aveling who has seen her father at work, understood this quite as well from the beginning, and if Aveling saw it too, all the better. And all my letters to America, to Sorge, to yourself, to the Avelings, from the very beginning, have repeated this view over and over again. Still I was glad to see the Avelings, before writing my preface, because they gave me some new facts about the inner mysteries of the German party in New York. . . ."

More than a year before the Avelings undertook their tour through America, Engels had consented to an American edition of his youthful work because, in his estimation, conditions in America at that time corresponded "almost exactly to the English conditions of the forties." "To what an extent this is the case," he said in a note to the German translation of his American Preface, "is testified to by the articles on 'The Labor Movement in America' by Edward and Eleanor Marx Aveling, in the London Monthly *Time*, for March, April, May and June."

That the report of the Avelings merely strengthened Engels' own conviction in regard to the American labor movement, is therefore made clear by the Avelings themselves when they write: ". . . . He that will compare the picture drawn by F. Engels of the English Working Class in 1844 will see how absolutely paral-

1844 and the American in 1887. With this difference. The American has the forty years' experience of his European brethren to teach him, and as Engel says, in America it takes ten months to do what in Europe takes ten years to achieve. Every word of Engels' Introduction, chapter after chapter, page after page of his book, by the simple substitution of 'America' for 'England,' and 'American' for 'English,' apply to the United States of to-day, and thanks to these forty years' experience, thanks to the higher development of the capitalist system, the concluding words of Engels' work are especially true of the America of our time. "The classes are divided more and more sharply, the spirit of resistance penetrates the workers, the bitterness intensifies, the guerilla skirmishes become concentrated in more important battles, and soon a slight impulse will suffice to set the avalanche in motion." 7

To Engels, the most important fact about the labor movement in America at that time was the circumstance that vast masses of working people, moving spontaneously and instinctively over a vast extent of the country, as he said, had become "conscious of the fact, that they formed a new and distinct class of American society; a class of—practically speaking—more or less hereditary wage-workers, proletarians. And with true American instinct this consciousness led them at once to take the next step towards their deliverance: the formation of a political workingmen's party, with a platform of its own, and with the conquest of the Capitol and the White House for its goal."

This is the recurrent theme of Engels' letters to Mrs. Wischnewetzky, to Sorge, to Herman Schluter, and, as he says, to the Avelings during their American tour. A great national movement, no matter what its first form, class consciousness and a national labor party are the first conditions for the achievement of the proletarian dictatorship. In this movement the Communists may participate and play a decisive part, or they may stand aloof, and dwindle down into a dogmatic sect, only to be brushed aside as people who do not understand their own theory. It is forty years since Engels first gave this advice to American Marxists; it might just as well have been given to us today.

There are "Marxists" in America who will see in Engels' preface a complete renunciation of armed insurrection and "the dictatorship of the proletariat." What has a labor party, whose goal is

7. Edward and Eleanor Marx Aveling: *The Working Class Movement in America*. Second Edition. London, 1891. p. 25-26. So far, I have had no time to locate the original articles in the London monthly, *Time*.

the conquest of the Capitol and the White House, to do with dictatorship? Has not Engels made it plain that the American revolution will be achieved, not by armed insurrection, but by means of the voting power of the American working class? It is unnecessary to point out the unmarxian, undialectic approach to the question involved in this formulation. Nevertheless, it will not be out of place to repeat that at no time did Engels degrade his revolutionary Marxism to a social-democratic parliamentarism. In raising the slogan of a labor party for America, he was merely insisting upon a principle which he and Marx had followed consistently for more than forty years. An independent party of workers was definitely a Communist slogan and the 'abc' of Communist practice; it existed side by side with the principle of armed insurrection, leading to the dictatorship of the proletariat, and not in opposition to it. This, only the traitorous reformism of a Social Democracy could question.

In the same year that Engels raised the slogan of a labor party in America, he published the second edition of his "Housing Question" in which he unequivocally states: "*Every* real proletarian party, from the English Chartists on, has always set up class politics, the organization of the proletariat as an independent political party as its first condition, and the dictatorship of the proletariat as the immediate goal of the struggle."<sup>8</sup>

We see that Engels makes a clear and definite distinction between the first *condition* and the immediate *goal* of the struggle. Unless the condition is fulfilled, the goal cannot be achieved. It is a fundamental Marxian principle that the immediate goal of the class struggle is the dictatorship of the proletariat, but the first condition for the achievement of this goal is the organization of the proletariat into an independent political party. Not only is there no opposition here between the immediate goal and the first condition of the struggle; but Engels states expressly that the organization of a labor party is only the *first* condition of the struggle, not the exclusive means or the sole condition of the revolution. We are thus dealing, not with a reformist parliamentarism or even a diluted Marxism, but with a clear-cut policy as to the actual conditions for the achievement of the dictatorship of the proletariat.

The organization of a labor party, however, did not, in Engels' opinion, do away with the need for a Marxist, Communist Party. American Marxists, he insisted, can play a decisive part in the

8. Zur Wohnungsfrage. Separatabdruck aus dem "Volksstaat" von 1872. Zweite, durchgesehene Auflage. Hottingen-Zurich 1887. p. 57.

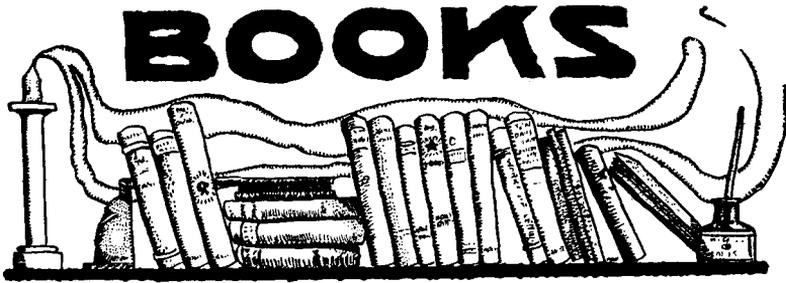
formation and leadership of the labor party—if they understand their own theory; if they realize that their theory “is not a dogma but the exposition of a process of evolution, and that process involves successive phases. To expect that the Americans will start with the full consciousness of the theory worked out in older industrial countries is to expect the impossible. What the Germans ought to do is to act up to their own theory—if they understand it, as we did in 1845 and 1848—to go in for any real general working class movement, accept its actual starting point as such and work it gradually up to the theoretical level by pointing out, how every mistake made, every reverse suffered, was a necessary consequence of mistaken theoretical orders in the original programme: they ought, in the words of the Communist Manifesto “represent, in the present of the movement, the future of the movement.”<sup>9</sup>

“I think all our practice has shown that it is impossible to work along with the general movement of the working class at every one of its stages without giving up or hiding our own distinct position and even organization, and I am afraid that if the German Americans choose a different line they will commit a great mistake . . . .”<sup>10</sup>

The national extent, the large influence, and the “democratic and even rebellious spirit” of the Knights of Labor, representing the movement of a “fermenting mass” within the working class, made it appear as if, in a very short time, the American workers were going to achieve the first steps towards their emancipation. To Engels, this was a mighty and glorious movement, full of promise for the future and the proletarian revolution, “the raw material out of which the future of the American working class movement, and along with it, the future of American society at large, has to be shaped.” He could not know, as we know today, that it was the newly organized American Federation of Labor and not the fermenting Knights with a membership running far beyond half a million, that was to become the main stream of the American labor movement. Engels did not live to see the vast, spontaneous movement of the eighties directed into the narrow, petrifying channel of present-day trade union politics. He did not know that, to a certain extent, the movement then would be in advance of the movement today; that today, we would still have the first two elementary steps towards proletarian emancipation to achieve—to be sure, on a more advanced technical plane and on a higher stage of capitalist development.

9. Engels in a letter to Mrs. Wischnewetzky. December 28, 1886.

10 Engels to Mrs. Wischnewetzky. January 27, 1887.



*"WHAT IS CO-OPERATION?"* By James Peter Warbasse; Vanguard Press, 170 pp. 50 cents.

Reviewed by GEORGE HALONEN

This new book on co-operation by Dr. Warbasse explains Co-operation from an unadulterated capitalistic view-point. The fundamental principle of Dr. Warbasse's co-operation is: "The basic idea of co-operation is that the consumers are everybody, and that all of the machinery of industry and the organization of society should be for them."

This is the prevalent idea of most of the leading bourgeois co-operators. The Central organization of the Finnish progressive co-operatives, the K.K., has published a book on co-operation by *Herman Fleissner*, translated into Finnish by *W. Tanner*, the *present president of the International Co-operative Alliance*. He finds, that "In the leading co-operative circles there is a tendency to deny and to deprive the co-operative stores of their *class character*. As consumers all people supposedly have the *same interest to protect* and therefore, as co-operators are without class distinction" (Emphasis in the original text). After explaining how the German movement is composed of about 85 per cent of workers, the writer continues: "Rich members in the German co-operative certainly are rare. The character of the co-operatives make them class organizations. Therefore, the meaningless phrase that 'all people as consumers have the same interest' cannot mislead. This is being crushed by the political interest and political power of the capitalist class."

Thus we see that the idea propagated by Dr. Warbasse is not a new one. It is a capitalist idea which is dangerous to the working class. Dr. Warbasse does not give a damn for the working class, as can be seen on page 157 of his book, where he states: "Most of the people in the world are workers; therefore most of the fools are workers. . . ."

Dr. Warbasse does not understand the working class. He is rich himself. No wonder that in a time like the present, when the farmers are facing bankruptcy, the workers are facing increasing speed-up systems, a lower standard of living, unemployment, when the workers in Colorado, Pennsylvania and in other coal fields are striking for a decent living and are being shot down in cold blood by the capitalist armed hirelings, Dr. Warbasse who is supposed to know something about sociology and economics naively states that "This class struggle consists in the struggle of the workers to get out of the working class and into the capitalist class, and the struggle of the capitalists to keep out of the working class."