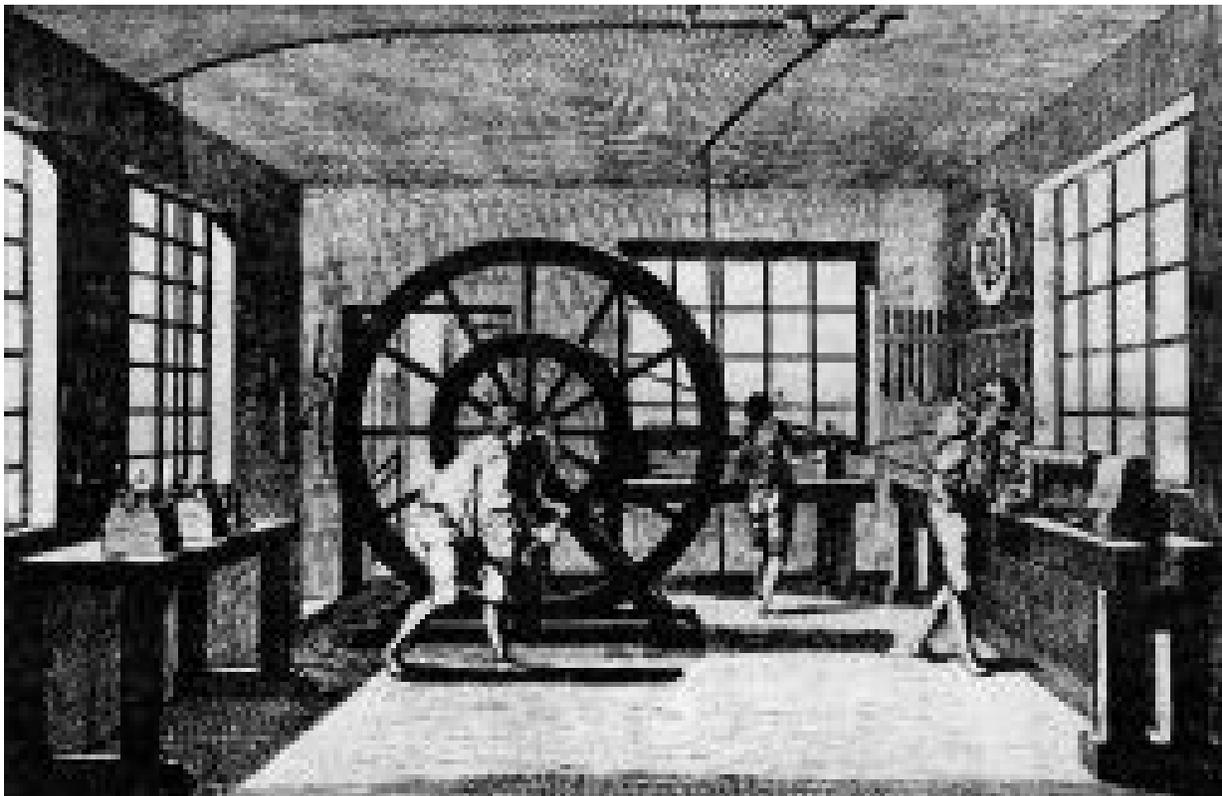


Who Killed Ned Ludd?

A History of Machine Breaking at the Dawn of Capitalism

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The argument that the advent of capitalism brought a rise in the standard of living for workers has been refuted before, but is shown graphically in these two prints. Prior to the dominance of the capitalist economy and the establishment of the first factories in England, manufacturing was done in small shops and cottages overseen by a working master craftsman employing several apprentices and helpers. At left is a typical 18th Century establishment (1740) using foot and crank powered lathes. Large windows were the only source of light and regulated working time.

In the last century and a half, modern industrial capitalism has progressively debased the worker's autonomy and authenticity at the point of production, hence impoverishing the quality of living. But before this ever more alien arrangement could really get rolling, it was deeply challenged by the 'machine breakers, or Luddites, in the early 19th century. What follows is the 'secret history,' suppressed by both the 'left' and right, of this mortal struggle and its legacy.

* * *

In England, the first industrial nation, and beginning in textiles, capital's first and foremost enterprise there, arose the widespread revolutionary movement (between 1810 and 1820) known as Luddism. The challenge of the Luddite risings—and their defeat—was of very great importance to the subsequent course of modern society.

Machine-wrecking, a principal weapon, pre-dates this period to be sure; historian Frank Darvall accurately termed it "perennial" throughout the 18th century, in good times and bad. And it was certainly not confined to either textile workers or England. Farm workers, miners, millers, and many others joined in destroying machinery, often against what would generally be termed their own "economic interests."

Similarly, there were the workers of Eurpen and Aix-la-Chapelle who destroyed the important Cocker-ill Works, the spinners of Schmollen and Crimmitschau who razed the mills of those towns, and countless others at the dawn of the Industrial Revolution.

Nevertheless, it was the English cloth workers knitters, weavers, spinners, croppers, shearmen, and the like—who initiated a movement, which "in sheer insurrectionary fury has rarely been more widespread in English history," as E.P. Thompson wrote, in what is probably an understatement. Though generally characterized as a blind, unorganized, reactionary, limited and ineffective upheaval, this 'instinctive' revolt against the new economic order was very successful for a time and had revolutionary aims.

Strongest in the more developed areas, the central and northern parts of the country especially, The Times of February 11, 1812 described it as "the appearance of open warfare" in England. Vice-Lieutenant Wood wrote to Fitzwilliam in the government on June 17, 1812 that "except for the very spots which were occupied by soldiers, the country was virtually in the possession of the lawless."

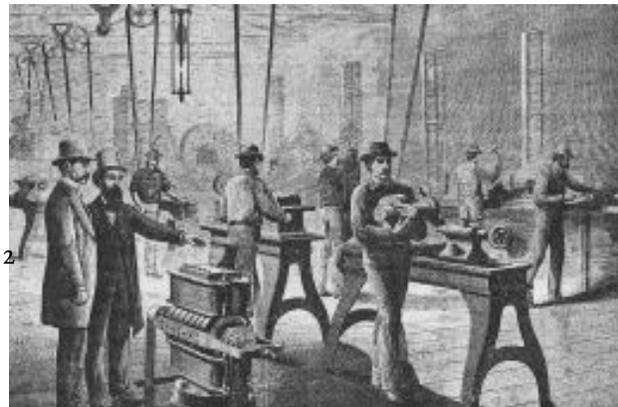
The Luddites indeed were irresistible at several moments in the second decade of the century and developed a very high morale and self-consciousness. As Cole and Postgate put it, "Certainly there was no stopping the Luddites. Troops ran up and down helplessly, baffled by the silence and connivance of the workers."

Further, an examination of newspaper accounts, letters, and leaflets reveals insurrection as the stated intent; for example, "all Nobles and tyrants must be brought down," read part of a leaflet distributed in Leeds. Evidence of explicit general revolutionary preparations was widely available in both Yorkshire and Lancashire, for instance, as early as 1812.

Shoddy work

An immense amount of property was destroyed, including vast amounts of textile frames which had been re-designed for the production of inferior goods. In fact, the movement took its name from young Ned Ludd, who, rather than do the prescribed shoddy work, took a sledge-hammer to the frames at hand, This insistence on either the control of the productive processes or the annihilation of them fired the popular imagination and brought the Luddites virtually unanimous support.

Hobsbawm declared that there existed an "overwhelming sympathy for machine-wreckers in all parts of the population," a condition which by 1813, according to Churchill, "had exposed the complete absence of means of preserving public order." Frame-breaking had been made a capital offense in 1812 and increasing



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The print above is of an American machine shop over a hundred years of capitalist "progress" (1872) showing the first use of a carbon arc lamp to allow night work (with bosses watching workers produce). Carbon arcs are

numbers of troops had to be dispatched, to a point exceeding the total Wellington had under his command against Napoleon.

The army, however, was not only spread very thin, but was often found unreliable due to its own sympathies and the presence of many conscripted Luddites in the ranks. Likewise, the local magistrates and constabulary could not be counted upon, and a massive spy system proved ineffective against the real solidarity of the populace.

As might be guessed, the volunteer militia, as detailed under the Watch and Ward Act, served only to “arm the most powerfully disaffected,” according to the Hammonds, and thus the modern professional police system had to be instituted.

Intervention of this nature could hardly have been basically sufficient, though, especially given the way Luddism seemed to grow more revolutionary from event to event. Cole and Postgate, described the post-1815 Luddites as more radical than those previous and from this point imputes to them that they “set themselves against the factory system as a whole.” Also, Thompson observed that as late as 1819 the way was still open for a successful general insurrection.

Union Absorbing Autonomy

Required against what Mathias termed “the attempt to destroy the new society,” was a weapon much closer to the point of production, namely the furtherance of an acceptance of the fundamental order in the form of trade unionism. Though it is clear that the promotion of trade unionism was a consequence of Luddism as much as the creation of the modern police was, it must also be realized that there had existed a long-tolerated tradition of unionism among the textile workers and others prior to the Luddite risings.

Hence, as Morton and Tate almost alone point out, the machine-wrecking of this period cannot be viewed as the despairing outburst of workers having no-other outlet.

Despite the Combination Acts, which were an unenforced ban on unions between 1799 and 1824, Luddism did not move into a vacuum but was successful for a time in opposition to the refusal of the extensive union apparatus to compromise capital. In fact, the choice between the two was available and the unions were thrown aside in favor of the direct organization of the workers and their radical aims.

During the period in question it is quite clear that unionism was seen as basically distinct from Luddism and promoted as such, in the hope of absorbing the Luddite autonomy. Contrary to the fact of the Combination Acts, unions were often held to be legal in the courts, for example, and when unionists were prosecuted they generally received light punishment or none whatever, whereas the Luddites were usually hanged.

Some members of Parliament openly blamed the owners for the social distress, for not making full use of the trade union path of escape. This is not to say that union objectives and control were as clear or pronounced as they are to all today, but the indispensable role of unions vis-a-vis capital was becoming clear, illumined by the crisis at hand and the felt necessity for allies in the pacification of the workers.

Members of Parliament in the Midlands counties urged Gravenor Henson, head of the Framework Knitters Union, to combat Luddism—as if this were needed. His method of promoting restraint was of course his tireless advocacy of the extension of union strength. The Framework Knitters Committee of the union, according to Church’s

study of Nottingham, “issued specific instructions to workmen not to damage frames.” And the Nottingham Union, the major attempt at a general industrial union, likewise set itself against Luddism and never employed violence.

If unions were hardly the allies of the Luddites, it can only be said that they were the next stage after Luddism in the sense that unionism played the critical role in its defeat through the divisions, confusion, and deflection of energies the unions engineered. It “replaced” Luddism in the same way that it rescued the manufacturers from the taunts of the children in the streets, from the direct power of the producers.

Thus the full recognition of unions in the repeal in 1824 and 1825 of the Combination Acts “had a moderating effect upon popular discontent,” in Darvall’s words. The repeal efforts, led by Place and Hume easily passed an unreformed Parliament, by the way, with much pro-repeal testimony from employers as well as from unionists, with only a few reactionaries opposed.

In fact, while the conservative arguments of Place and Hume included a prediction of fewer strikes post-repeal, many employers understood the cathartic, pacific role of strikes and were not much dismayed by the rash of strikes which attended repeal. The repeal Acts of course officially delimited unionism to its traditional marginal wages and hours concern, a legacy of which is the universal presence of “management’s rights” clauses in collective bargaining contracts to this day.

The mid-1830’s campaign against unions by some employers only underlined in its way the central role of unions: the campaign was possible only because the unions succeeded so well as against the radicality of the unmediated workers in the previous period. Hence Lecky was completely accurate later in the century when he judged that “there can be little doubt that the largest, wealthiest and best-organized Trade-Unions have done much to diminish labor conflicts,” just as the Webbs also conceded in the 19th century that there existed much more labor revolt before unionism became the rule.

But to return to the Luddites, we find very few first-person accounts and a virtually secret tradition, mainly because they projected themselves through their acts, not ideology. And what was it really all about? Stearns, perhaps as close as the commentators come, wrote “The Luddites developed a doctrine based on the presumed virtues of manual methods.” He all but calls them ‘backward-looking wretches’ in his condescension, yet there is a grain of truth here certainly.

Actions Over Ideology

The attack of the Luddites was not occasioned by the introduction of new machinery, however, as is commonly thought, for there is no evidence of such in 1811 and 1812 when Luddism proper began. Rather, the destruction was leveled at the new slip-shod methods which were ordered into effect on the extant machinery.

Not an attack against production on economic grounds, it was above all the violent response of the textile workers (and soon joined by others) to their attempted degradation in the form of inferior work; shoddy goods—the hastily-assembled “cut-ups,” primarily—was the root issue at hand.

While Luddite offensives generally corresponded to periods of economic downturn, it was because employers often took advantage of these periods to introduce new production methods. But it was also true that not all periods of privation produced Luddism, as it was that Luddism appeared in areas not particularly depressed. Leicestershire, for instance, was the least hit by hard times and it was an area producing the finest quality woolen goods; Leicestershire was a strong center of Luddism.

To wonder what was so radical about a movement which seemed to demand “only” the cessation of fraudulent work, is to fail to perceive the inner truth of the valid assumption, made on every side at the time, of the connection between frame-breaking and sedition. As if the fight by the producer for the integrity of his work-life can be made without calling the whole of capitalism into question. The demand for the cessation of fraudulent work necessarily becomes a cataclysm, an all-or-nothing battle insofar as it is pursued; it leads directly to the heart of the capitalist relationship and its dynamic.

Luddite Organization

Another element of the Luddite phenomenon generally treated with condescension, by the method of ignoring it altogether, is the organizational aspect. Luddites, as we all know, struck out wildly and blindly, while the unions provide the only organized form to the workers.

But in fact, the Luddites organized themselves locally and even federally, including workers from all trades, with an amazing coordination. Eschewing an alienating structure, their organization was without a center and existed largely as an “unspoken code;” theirs was a non-manipulative, community organization which trusted itself.

All this, of course, was essential to the depth of Luddism, to the appeal at its roots. In practice, “no degree of activity by the magistrates or by large reinforcements of military deterred the Luddites. Every attack revealed planning and method,” stated Thompson, who also gave credit to their “superb security and communications.”

An army officer in Yorkshire understood their possession of “a most extraordinary degree of concert and organization.” William Cobbett wrote, concerning a report to the government in 1812: “And this is the circumstance that will most puzzle the ministry. They can find no agitators. It is a movement of the people’s own.”

Coming to the rescue of the authorities, however, despite Cobbett’s frustrated comments, was the leadership of the Luddites. Theirs was not a completely egalitarian movement, though this element may have been closer to the mark than was their appreciation of how much was within their grasp and how narrowly it eluded them. Of course, it was from among the leaders that “political sophistication” issued most effectively in time, just as it was from them that union cadres developed in some cases.

In the “pre-political” days of the Luddites—now developing in our “post-political” days, also—the people openly hated their rulers. They cheered Pitt’s death in 1806 and, more so, Perceval’s assassination in 1812. These celebrations at the demise of prime ministers bespoke the weakness of mediations between rulers and ruled, the lack of integration between the two.

The political enfranchisement of the workers was certainly less important than their industrial enfranchisement or integration, via unions; it proceeded more slowly for this reason. Nevertheless, it is true that a strong weapon of pacification was the strenuous effort made to interest the population in legal activities, namely the drive to widen the electoral basis of Parliament.

Cobbett, described by many as the most powerful pamphleteer in English history, induced many to join Hampden Clubs in pursuit of voting reform, and was also noted, in the words of Davis, for his “outspoken condemnation of the Luddites.”

The pernicious effects of this divisive reform campaign can be partially measured by comparing such robust earlier demonstrations of anti-government wrath as the Gordon Riots (1780) and the mobbing of the King in London (1795) with such massacres and fiascoes as the Pentridge and Peterloo “risings.”

Work and Unionism

But to return, in conclusion, to more fundamental mechanisms, we again confront the problem of work and unionism. The latter; it must be agreed, was made permanent upon the effective divorce of the worker from control of the instruments of production—and of course, unionism itself contributed most critically to this divorce, as we have seen.

Some, certainly including the marxists, see this defeat and its form, the victory of the factory system, as both an inevitable and desirable outcome, though even they must admit that in work execution resides a significant part of the direction of industrial operations even now. A century after Marx, Galbraith located the guarantee of the system of productivity over creativity in the unions’ basic renunciation of any claims regarding work itself.

But work, as all ideologists sense, is an area closed off to falsification. Work activities are the kernel, impervious to the intrusion of ideology and its forms, such as mediation and representation. Thus ideologists ignore the unceasing universal luddite contest over control of the productive processes. Thus class struggle is something quite different to the producer than to the ideologue.

In the early trade union movement there exists a good deal of democracy. Widespread, for example, was the practice of designating delegates by rotation or by lot. But what cannot be legitimately democratized is the real defeat at the root of the unions' victory, which makes them the organization of complicity, a mockery of community. Form on this level cannot disguise unionism, the agent of acceptance and maintenance of a grotesque world.

The marxian quantification elevates output-per-hour over creation as the highest good, as leftists likewise ignore the real story of the Luddites (the ending of the direct power of the producers) and so manage, incredibly, to espouse unions as all that "untutored" workers can have.

The opportunism and elitism of all the Internationals, indeed the history of leftism, sees its product finally in fascism when accumulated ideological confines bring their result. When fascism can successfully appeal to workers as the removal of inhibitions, as the "Socialism of Action," etc.—as revolutionary—it should be made clear how much was buried with the Luddites and what a terrible anti-history was begun.

There are those who again fix the label of "age of transition" on today's growing crisis—hoping all will turn out nicely in another defeat for the luddites. We see today the same need to enforce work discipline as in the earlier period, and simultaneously the same awareness by the population of the meaning of "progress."

But quite possibly we now can recognize all our enemies the more clearly, so that this time the transition can be in the hands of the creators.

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