



**THE STRIKE FOR THE PEOPLE'S CHARTER
IN 1842**

BY

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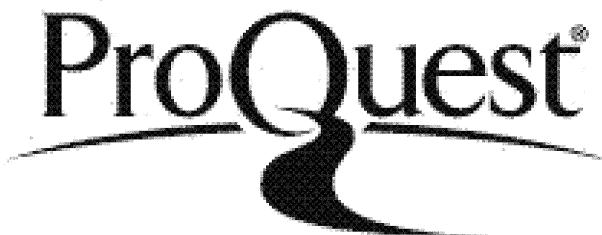


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ABSTRACT

No previous entire thesis or book has been devoted to a national study of the 1842 strike. This thesis is the first to examine the 1842 strike in all regions of Great Britain significantly affected, including the Northwest, Yorkshire, the East Midlands, the Potteries, the Black Country, parts of Scotland, the Merthyr district of South Wales, and London. Chartist activists in the Ashton district deliberately launched a general strike for the People's Charter in order to pre-empt a possible forced strike by the Anti-Corn Law League masters for repeal of the Corn Laws. The aim of the strike nationally, apart from amongst the miners, was overwhelmingly the enactment of the People's Charter. The political strike for the Charter had a coherent strategy and concept which was shared by the Chartist activists in all the strike regions. The strike was an attempt by Chartist activists in the localities, in the face of caution on the part of the national Chartist leadership, and after receiving news of the strike in the Manchester district, to implement the most important 'ulterior measure' of the Chartist constitutional mass platform agitation in order to pressure the Government and Parliament into enacting the Charter. It was to be a peaceable display of united public opinion which would break the nerve of the government without recourse to violence. The strike for the Charter was the highpoint, in terms of the threat posed to the state, of the Chartist mass platform agitation. The traditional radical critique of the corrupt aristocratic state inherited from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century radical movements was articulated in the strike and was shared by the different strike regions. A working class identity was present in the strike among other multiple identities which included those of the people and nation.

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INTRODUCTION

In August 1842, the manufacturing districts of Great Britain experienced a widespread wave of industrial and political protest in which the demand for the enactment of the People's Charter was loudly voiced. This general strike has been relatively neglected by historians and indeed no book or previous thesis has been devoted to a national study of the strike. The one book exclusively devoted to the strike, Jenkin's *The General Strike of 1842*, concentrates almost entirely on the Manchester district. This thesis is the first to examine the 1842 strike nationally and covers the strike in all regions of Great Britain significantly affected, including the Northwest, the West Riding of Yorkshire, the East Midlands, the Potteries, the Black Country, parts of Scotland, the Merthyr district of South Wales, and London.

In reaction to contemporary responses blaming the strike on the Chartists, the earliest historians of Chartism, such as Hovell and West, took an economically determinist view of the strike as a blind revolt against hunger and economic depression, discounting its political nature and instead emphasising the wage demands. Hovell and West in their early narrative studies of Chartism argued that the strike was simply the result of economic distress which was taken advantage of by the Chartists once it had broken out.¹ This remained a commonly held view with, for example, Gash in 1979 characterising the strike as 'a purely economic movement of protest, though local Chartists often tried to exploit the situation in their own neighbourhoods once it developed.'² Nevertheless since the late 1970s the general historiography of Chartism and popular movements, represented by the writings of, for example, Dorothy Thompson, Stevenson, Rule and Belchem, increasingly recognised the political nature of the strike and the involvement of Chartist activists in organising the strike.³

This shift in the general historiography was due in a large part to the influence of

¹ M. Hovell, *The Chartist Movement* (Manchester, 1920) 260-7; J. West, *Chartism* (London, 1920), 188-192

² N. Gash, *Aristocracy and People* (London, 1979), 317

³ D. Thompson, *The Chartists* (London, 1984), 271-298; J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England 1700-1870* (London, 1979), 262-6; J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England* (London, 1986), 331-6; J. Belchem, *Industrialisation and the Working Class* (Aldershot, 1990), 117-120

Mather's major reinterpretation of the strike movement. Mather divided the strike movement into four stages. Mather's first stage lasted from 8 July to 2 August during which time there was a strike for redress of economic grievances in the coalfields of North and South Staffordshire. During Mather's second stage, from 3 to 11 August, the strike was extended to new regions and occupations, especially to the Manchester district, but its aim remained redress of economic grievances. According to Mather politicisation of the strike occurred only during the third stage, and only in some districts, from 12 to 20 August, the time when the strike was at its geographically most extensive. Mather's fourth and final stage lasted from 21 August to late September when most strikers returned to work and those who remained out, principally cotton operatives in Southeast Lancashire, remained out merely for wages rather than the Charter. Nevertheless while recognising the role of the Chartists in organising and leading the strike in the Northwest in his second stage, Mather denied that a strike for the Charter was intended, and argued instead that it was merely organised as a strike against wages reductions. He divorced the leadership from the aim of the strike, arguing that initial calls for the Charter before the strike were just bluff in order to frighten the masters out of carrying through the wage reductions, and that the aim for the Charter really came from the grassroots strikers not from the activists. While Mather was more willing to recognise that in some places the strike did become for the Charter he still insisted that in many places it remained for wages even during his third stage.⁴ Mather's reinterpretation of the strike was consolidated, for the Northwest, by Sykes.⁵ However the local historiography of the strike in the different regions, including the Northwest, will be looked at in the relevant chapters.

When we move on to examine the strike in the Northwest we shall see that Jenkins and Foster viewed the strike as a prime demonstration of 'working-class consciousness'; and indeed the 1842 general strike has continued to be seen as a display of class-consciousness, for example in Charlton's recent textbook on Chartism.⁶ The existence or extent of class-consciousness in the 1830s and 1840s had been a subject of fierce

⁴ F. C. Mather, 'The General Strike of 1842', in R. Quinault and J. Stevenson (eds), *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1974), 115-140

⁵ R. A. Sykes, 'Popular Politics and Trade Unionism in Southeast Lancashire 1829-1842' (PhD, Manchester, 1982), 662-723

⁶ M. Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London, 1980), 257; J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1974), 114-117; J. Charlton, *The Chartists* (London, 1996), 29-49

academic debate at the time Jenkins, Foster and Mather were writing. However since the 1980s the extent to which Chartism was a class-conscious movement has been questioned by a new body of work. A number of factors contributed to this. The influence of post structuralism has led to dissatisfaction with totalising theories such as class. A more gradualist view of the industrial revolution has supposedly removed the economic basis for class-consciousness. The influence of Marx has declined with the collapse of the USSR and eastern European communist states. Those influenced by the 'linguistic turn' especially Stedman Jones, Joyce and Vernon argue that class-consciousness cannot just be assumed from economic or social conditions. They argue there is no simple causal link between experience and consciousness and rather that identity and experience is created through language.⁷

Stedman Jones in his essays in *The Chartist Experience* and *Languages of Class* in 1982 and 1983 emphasised the political, in contrast to the social, nature of Chartism. Stedman Jones argued that, at least in terms of the public language used by the Chartists in print, Chartism was only a class based movement in a limited sense. He argued that the Chartists, like earlier radicals, continued to view political monopoly and the state as the source of social evils. According to Stedman Jones there was no move to a socialist ideology identifying capitalist production relations and the economic system itself as the source of social evils. The Chartist ideology remained that of 'the people' against the aristocracy and of the productive against the idle. There was hostility to the middle classes but this was due to their new influence on government due to their enfranchisement in 1832 rather than to their role as capitalists. In practical terms the working classes had now become 'the people.' Although there was now a very close fit between 'the people' and the working classes after 1832 the Chartists' public ideology remained the traditional radical ideology of 'Old Corruption', that is that the aristocracy and their place-men had corrupted the House of Commons and lived off taxes, rather than a new class-based ideology. Economic unfairness was seen in terms of unfair exchange rather than the result of the relation to the means of production and unfair exchange was rooted in political monopoly. Stedman Jones argued that they believed in a labour theory of value based on Paineite natural rights, that is the natural right to ones

⁷ G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), 90-179; G. Stedman Jones, 'The Language of Chartism', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 3-58; P. Joyce, *Visions of the People* (Cambridge, 1991), 1-23; P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects* (Cambridge, 1994), 1-20; J. Vernon, *Re-Reading the Constitution* (Cambridge, 1995), 1-21

property, which precluded socialism. He argued that the Chartists still believed in the political origin of oppression even though big capitalists, as well as landowners, had become targets of abuse. Furthermore the Chartists had a notion of political oppression by the state: the state used laws such as the 1834 Poor Law to create a tyranny to enslave the producers. Radical ideology was the language of a class after 1832 but it was not itself a class language. However *it should be noted that* he did not deny the possibility of class-consciousness existing outside of the public printed language of the Chartists.⁸

Joyce in *Visions of the People* argued that class was not the dominant identity and that other discourses such as that of 'the people' or the nation were more important. Joyce made the point that there were overlapping and competing discourses rather than a single discourse in the language of the Chartists and working classes. Joyce admitted with Stedman Jones that there was an overlap between class and people in 1840s when workers saw themselves as the true people and the notion of 'the people' may have taken on class meanings. Both Joyce and Vernon emphasised popular constitutionalism as the master narrative in nineteenth century England. In *Democratic Subjects* Joyce went so far as almost to deny the existence of the 'real' beyond language. However Joyce allowed for the existence of working class-consciousness as an imagined identity based on political exclusion after 1832 while still putting most emphasis on a melodramatic narrative of the people.⁹

Joyce suggested that because recent revisions of the Industrial Revolution have highlighted its gradual nature, with factory work the exception rather than the norm until well past 1850, there cannot have been a shared experience of job deskilling and loss of control over work necessary for the existence of class consciousness. In fact the gradualist notion of the Industrial Revolution is not unchallenged.¹⁰ However E. P. Thompson and those who have been influenced by him never built up their argument for the existence of class-consciousness simply in economic terms. Thompson, in his

⁸ G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983) 90-179; G. Stedman Jones, 'The Language of Chartism', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 3-58

⁹ P. Joyce, *Visions of the People* (Cambridge, 1991), 1-23; J. Vernon, *Politics and the People* (Cambridge, 1993), 252; P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects* (Cambridge, 1994), 154, 161, 193

¹⁰ P. Joyce, 'Work', in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of Britain* (Cambridge, 1990), 131-194; P. Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (London, 1992), 215-218

essay 'Peculiarities of the English', viewed exploitation as social, cultural and political as well as economic. In *The Making of the English Working Class* Thompson stressed that it was combined political and social oppression, crystallised by the 1832 Reform Act, which produced a sense of class consciousness. Thompson stressed the importance of 'agency' arguing that the working class was its own creator through political struggle. He did not concentrate on factory workers but rather on artisans and hand workers. Thompson did not argue that a homogenous working class existed but that the similarities between those who lived by manual labour were greater than the differences.¹¹

Stedman Jones, and even more so Joyce, have been much criticised by those who consider Chartism to be primarily a class conscious movement and social in nature. Kirk and others have criticised Joyce for insisting on a Marxist definition of class-consciousness. Joyce argued that if one defines class in terms of culture and political struggle than one can find class consciousness but Joyce went on to say that if this is not linked to the common experience of proletarianisation and labour for wages it is really just political, social or cultural struggle rather than class struggle. But there is no reason why class must be defined in the Marxist way Joyce insists upon and rather it may be seen as arising from a mixture of political, social and economic oppression.¹²

The methodology of the linguistic turn, emphasising that experience is created through language, especially in the form used by Joyce in *Democratic Subjects*, has been much criticised. For example Hewitt has shown that while Joyce denies the existence of the 'real' he in fact makes constant reference to the 'real' existing beyond language.¹³ In many ways stripped of its 'linguistic turn' methodology the work of Joyce and Vernon is a return to the older work of those such as Evans, who denied the possibility of class consciousness existing due to the great divisions in status among workers, and those such as Prothero who emphasised the popular nature of artisan ideology.¹⁴

¹¹ E. P. Thompson, 'The Peculiarities of the English', *The Socialist Register* (1965), 311-362; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), 112-114

¹² N. Kirk, 'In defence of class', *International Review of Social History* XXXII (1987) 2-48; N. Kirk, 'History, language, ideas and postmodernism: a materialist view', *Social History*, 19, (1994), 221-240

¹³ M. Hewitt, *The Emergence of Stability in Industrial City: Manchester 1832-67* (London, 1996), 14

¹⁴ I. Prothero, 'William Benbow and the Concept of the General Strike', *Past and Present*, 63, (1974), 132-170; E. J. Evans, *The Forging of the Modern State* (London, 1983), 176-187

Kirk, Epstein and Belchem have argued that one has to look at the language of the Chartist in context. They argue that the radical ideology of popular constitutionalism and 'the people' had become class based or at least could be used in a class-conscious way. Indeed Joyce admits that the fit between the people and the working classes was so close in the 1830s and 1840s as to make the two more or less interchangeable at times. Epstein argues that popular constitutionalism was a shared discourse so it could have different class meanings for the working class and the middle class. The people, nation and the popular constitution could be shared discourses so there could be a class-conscious working class sharing this common discourse with the middle class. Epstein argues that class discourse is there but it is just one among a number of discourses which include the people and nation. Stedman Jones had been criticised for using only formal language in print. Pickering has suggested that the class-consciousness could be displayed in visual symbols such as Feargus O'Connor wearing a suit of fustian, the normal clothes of working men.¹⁵ Stedman Jones' argument that the Chartist viewed social ills as arising from the corrupt political system rather than from capitalist production are convincing. As Taylor and Hewitt have pointed out, even when Chartist such as P. M. McDouall and James Leach criticised the factory system or encouraged trade union support for Chartism, they ultimately argued that economic ills were rooted in the corrupt political system rather than being inherent in the economic system itself. They did not develop a theory of capitalist exploitation and looked for regulation from a fair reformed political system.¹⁶

Despite the work of Mather, and as we shall see of Jenkins and Sykes on the Northwest strike, the origins and aims of the strike have still not been satisfactorily explained. Why the strike for the Charter broke out in the Ashton area at the time it did must be re-examined. The aims, concept and strategy of the strike nationally have never been discovered. Whether the aim of the strike was the enactment of the People's Charter or wage improvements must be re-assessed. Likewise it has never been shown whether the political strike for the Charter had a coherent strategy and concept. Whether the strike was an attempt by Chartist activists in the localities, in the face of caution on the part of the national Chartist leadership, to implement the most important 'ulterior measure' of

¹⁵ J. Epstein, *Radical Expression* (Oxford, 1994), 28; P. Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford* (London, 1995), 159-173

¹⁶ P. Taylor, *Popular Politics in Early Industrial Britain: Bolton 1825-1850* (Keele, 1995), 126-140; M. Hewitt, *The Emergence of Stability in Industrial City: Manchester 1832-67* (London, 1996), 206-212

the Chartist constitutional mass platform agitation in order to pressure Parliament into enacting the Charter must be investigated. Whether the strike was to be a peaceable display of united public opinion which would break the nerve of the government without recourse to violence also needs to be examined. A great deal has recently been written on ideology in the first half of the nineteenth century and it is necessary to examine the ideology articulated in the strike as a contribution to this important debate.

The thesis sets out to advance our understanding of Chartism and the general strike of 1842 by demonstrating that the strike nationally was overwhelmingly a political strike for the Charter and that only the miners' strike was not firmly for the Charter. The thesis has been entitled 'the strike for the People's Charter' in order to stress the political nature of the strike. The origins of the strike will be firmly secured: it will be shown that a section among the local Chartist activists who originated the strike in the Ashton district did intend that it should be a national strike for the Charter from the first and launched the strike in order to pre-empt a forced strike for repeal of the Corn Laws. The importance of Chartist activists in organising the strike and making its aim be the Charter in all regions will be demonstrated. We will see that outside the Northwest the strike was organised and begun by local Chartist activists from local platforms at public meetings, after receiving the news of the strike for the Charter in Manchester. It took the form of the implementation of a general strike, the most decisive of 'ulterior measures' of the mass platform agitation, but this strategy derived from the localities following the failure of the national leadership to propose serious 'ulterior measures' at the time of the rejection of the second National Petition in May. The strike outside the Northwest did not suffer from that division in aim present, though exaggerated by some, in the Northwest strike. Outside the Northwest the separate input of trade societies in the strike was much less than in the Northwest. It will be shown that the strike did possess a coherent strategy and furthermore that a similar concept of the strike was shared in all the regions. We will see that the underlying concept of the strike was remarkably coherent throughout the different regions. In general the strike was seen as a peaceful, moral, legal and constitutional means of delivering an overwhelming display of united public opinion that would break the nerve of the government and presently constituted Parliament and leave it with no choice but to enact the Charter. The thesis sets out to show that the dominant ideology in all strike areas was the traditional radical ideology inherited from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century radical movements.

Throughout the strike the traditional radical analysis was present. The aristocracy, state Church, pensioners and placemen were attacked along with the ‘millocrats’ and cotton lords who had now joined the traditional enemies of the people. Appeal was made to the historical English constitution and the rights of the freeborn Englishman. The working class or the people, the two meaning more or less the same thing, viewed social evils as arising from lack of political power. The Charter would guarantee fair wages by giving the workman, as well as the employer, a voice in the legislation and so heralding minimum wage laws, taxes on machinery and other reforms such as repeal of the Corn Laws, repeal of the New Poor Law, better factory legislation and lower taxation. The defeat of the strike was the defeat of the Chartist mass platform by the discrediting of its ultimate ‘ulterior measure’. It will be shown that a working class identity was present in the strike among other identities, which included the people and nation.

The thesis adopts a holistic approach by covering the strike in all regions of Great Britain significantly affected. The main primary sources on which the thesis is based are the Home Office, Treasury Solicitor, Assize, Palatine of Lancaster and other papers in the Public Record Office; the Chartist journal *The Northern Star* and other radical newspapers; the vast mass of local newspapers for the districts affected by the strike in the British Library Newspaper Library; private papers stored in the British Library and elsewhere including the Sir Robert Peel papers and Sir James Graham papers; and printed primary sources including the *Parliamentary Papers*, *State Trials*, autobiographies and contemporary pamphlets.

CHAPTER ONE

THE ORIGINS OF THE STRIKE AND THE STRIKE IN THE NORTHWEST

The strike for the People's Charter began in the Ashton, Stalybridge, Dukinfield and Hyde area near Manchester on Monday 8 August 1842 following Chartist-led public meetings held between 26 July and 7 August and following a turnout of Bayley Brothers' cotton factory workers in Stalybridge over a wage reduction on Friday 5 August. From the start the aim of the strike was to pressurise the government into enacting the People's Charter by a forceful display of public opinion. However a second aim was to obtain a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, and there were divisions over these aims among the original Chartist leaders of the strike. The strike was taken by the Ashton and Stalybridge turnouts to Manchester on Tuesday 9 August. It was spread to Bolton, Rochdale, Stockport, Oldham, Bury, Preston, Blackburn, Glossop and many other towns ranging geographically through Southeast Lancashire, Northeast Cheshire, Northwest Derbyshire and North Lancashire. There was also strike activity in Carlisle and the surrounding industrial villages in Cumberland. The strike was spread by crowds marching from town to town turning out the workers in the factories and workshops and pulling out the plugs of the steam boilers which powered the factories to temporarily disable the machinery. From this drawing of the boiler plugs by the turnouts the strike gained its contemporary name of the 'Plug Plot', which emphasised the view of many contemporaries that the strike had been planned in advance by either the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL) or the Chartists. The strike was also spread by delegate missions performed by six of the original leaders of the strike in the Ashton and Stalybridge area. Working people in many different occupations took part in the strike. These included not only factory operatives but also handloom weavers, skilled artisans, engineers, labourers and miners. Trades delegate conferences sat in Manchester from Thursday 11 to Saturday 20 August and declared in favour of the aim of the strike being the enactment of the People's Charter. During this time the strike throughout the Northwest was overwhelmingly for the enactment of the People's Charter. From around Saturday 20 August the civil and military authorities began to regain control. The return to work

in many places began soon after 20 August, with those who remained on strike, in some cases up to October, merely calling for higher wages.

Contemporaries blamed the strike in the Northwest on either the ACLL or the Chartists. J. W. Croker, in his 'Anti Corn Law Agitation' article in the *Quarterly Review* in late 1842, written on the behalf of the government, attempted to demonstrate that the ACLL had provoked the strike in order to embarrass the government into repealing the Corn Laws.¹ The early historiography of the strike in the Northwest however rejected either the ACLL or the Chartists as the instigators of the strike. The historiography has concluded that the League neither instigated them nor attempted to take advantage of them to any significant extent. There is a consensus among historians such as Kitson Clark and McCord that, whilst ACLL lecturers and propaganda may have inflamed passions in preceding months, the strikes in fact took the League leadership in Manchester by surprise and they made every effort to distance themselves from the strikes.² The early historiography of the strike also tended to discount the Charter as being the aim of the strike and instead tended to present the strike as a spontaneous revolt against hunger. Rose in his descriptive survey of events in Manchester and its neighbourhood viewed the strike as a problem of public order and the turnout crowds as 'mobs' which required dispersing. Read, writing on Manchester Chartism, took an economically determinist attitude to the strike seeing it largely as a blind revolt against depression and discounted its political nature emphasising instead the wage demands. Reid, examining the strike in Stockport, also played down the political aim of the strike in Stockport viewing it largely as a movement for higher wages.³

A shift in the historiography of the strike in the Northwest began in the 1970s signalled by Mather's article which concentrated on the strike in the Northwest. Sykes followed Mather's interpretation and looked at more detail at the strike in the Southeast Lancashire. Sykes and Mather recognised the role of the local Chartist activists in organising and leading the strike in the Ashton area but denied that a strike for the

¹ J. W. Croker, 'Anti Corn Law Agitation', *Quarterly Review*, VLXXI (December 1842), 244-314

² G. Kitson Clark, 'Hunger and Politics in 1842', *Journal of Modern History*, XXV (1953), 349-373; N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 1958), 125-6

³ D. Read, 'Manchester Chartism', in A. Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), 54; T. D. W. and N. Reid, 'The 1842 Plug Plot in Stockport', *International Review of Social History*, XXIV (1979), 55-79; A. G. Rose, 'The Plug Riots of 1842 in Lancashire and Cheshire', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, LXVII (1958), 75-111

Charter was intended; arguing instead that it was merely planned as a strike against wages reductions and that resolutions calling for the Charter before the strike began were merely bluff. Sykes and Mather believed the demand for the Charter came from grassroots strikers, rather than from the local Chartist activists, some days after the strike had actually begun. Sykes also emphasised the role of the trades, many of whom were themselves local Chartists, in demanding that the strike should be for the Charter, but again some days after the strike had actually begun. Sykes and Mather felt it was inconceivable that the local Ashton area Chartists could really have intended to initiate a general and national strike for the Charter. Sykes and Mather were willing to recognise that in many places the strike did become for the Charter. However they still insisted that in many towns in the Northwest it remained for wages without providing an explanation for these divergences.⁴

Jenkins' *The General Strike of 1842* is the only, though flawed, book devoted to the strike. However it deals almost solely with the Manchester district rather than with the strike nationally. Jenkins argued that the strike was the result of a long-standing plan by local Chartist activists dating back at least to the spring of 1842 if not earlier. However Jenkins offered no convincing evidence for this long-standing plan, was not able to pinpoint the specific reasons the local Chartists had for launching a general strike for the Charter at precisely that time, and did not recognise the division in aim among the local activists who started the strike. While Jenkins recognised the importance of the local Chartist activists in launching a strike for the Charter he presented them crudely as a Leninist revolutionary vanguard intent on a strike as a weapon in class warfare.⁵ A problematic area of Jenkins' book, a study of the strike in the Manchester district from a Marxist/Leninist perspective, is his assumption that the strike in the Northwest was a display of class-consciousness. In this Jenkins was following Foster who used the 1842 strike in Oldham along with the 1834 strike in Oldham as evidence for the existence of 'revolutionary' class consciousness. Foster in *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* argued that before 1834 Oldham factory workers had simply engaged in

⁴ F. C. Mather, 'The General Strike of 1842', in R. Quinault and J. Stevenson (eds), *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1974), 115-140; R. A. Sykes, 'Popular Politics and Trade Unionism in South-East Lancashire 1829-1842' (PhD, Manchester, 1982), 662-723; R. Sykes, 'Early Chartist and Trade Unionism in South-East Lancashire', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 152-193

⁵ M. Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London, 1980), 65-68, 240-253

sectional disputes for wages showing the existence of 'trade union' consciousness, but not of full 'revolutionary' class consciousness. However involvement in the general strike, with the political aim to help all workers, was evidence of full 'revolutionary' class-consciousness. Foster has been widely criticised, for example by Stedman Jones in an essay from 1975, for his unrealistic Leninist distinction of trade union consciousness and revolutionary class-consciousness. Foster can be criticised because the 1834 and 1842 strikes were relatively isolated incidents and there is no evidence that the Oldham workers were struggling for ownership of the means of production. Sykes has shown that during the strike in Oldham the demand was first of all for wages and the call for the Charter only came later. There is also dispute over how far the strike in Oldham had to be enforced by people from Ashton; although this can be explained by the shock of the turnouts arriving before discussion, by fear of losing possible shopkeeper support if they went for the Charter rather than wages, and by the influence of those Ashton activists coming who were never committed to the strike being for the Charter. The fact that Foster believed that class-consciousness rapidly declined after 1850 suggests that it had not been particularly revolutionary in the first place. Nevertheless the 1842 general strike has continued to be seen as a display of class-consciousness. For example Sykes viewed the general strike in Lancashire as a class-conscious movement and only criticised Foster's use of the term 'revolutionary' class-consciousness.⁶

Despite the attention paid to the strike in the Northwest in the historiography, a number of topics remain either unanswered or unexplored. The origins of the strike in the Ashton and Stalybridge area are still a matter of conflicting interpretations over how far in time plans for a strike extended, whether local activists really did hope to launch a fully general strike, and over whether, at the outset, they intended the aim of the strike to be the Charter or for wages. How far the strike was political in nature throughout the Northwest and why there were apparent differences in aim in different towns has remained unresolved. The concept and strategy of the general strike held by the strikers and by the National Charter Association (NCA) Conference and trades delegate conferences in Manchester have never been pursued. The ideology articulated in the strike has been curiously neglected. Jenkins assumed that the strike was an expression

⁶ M. Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London, 1980), 257; J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1974), 114-117; G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), 25-76; R. A. Sykes, 'Some Aspects of Working Class Consciousness in Oldham 1830-42', *Historical Journal*, XXIII, 1 (1980), 167-179

of class-consciousness but the extent to which other collective identities were articulated in the strike has been ignored.

Industrial and Political Background

Southeast Lancashire, Northeast Cheshire and Northwest Derbyshire were unique for the extent to which large-scale factory production, particularly in cotton textiles, had developed. In the Northwest large-scale factory production was at its most advanced. Factory production coexisted with still considerable numbers of handloom weavers, particularly in North Lancashire, and with large numbers of skilled artisans. Manchester was the commercial centre and had a diverse occupational structure with less than one half of its population employed in factories. However in out townships, such as Ashton-under-Lyne, the cotton industry was dominant. In 1841 out of the adult male population in Ashton, Oldham, Bolton, Bury, Stockport, Burnley and Preston 40% worked in the cotton industry, 30% worked in the artisan and skilled trades and 15% were miners or labourers. Spinning had long been mechanised in the cotton industry. However by 1842 weaving was also becoming increasingly mechanised in the Northwest. This contrasts with the woollen and worsted industry in Yorkshire where mechanisation in weaving took much longer to become dominant. Southeast Lancashire, Northeast Cheshire and Northwest Derbyshire were also unique in the large size of cotton firms in towns such as Ashton, Stalybridge, Glossop and Hyde. Although small firms were also present a few large firms employed a vast quantity of labour. Firms tended to be smaller in Oldham and in North Lancashire at least outside Blackburn and Preston. The Lancashire cotton industry was dominated by medium and large combined spinning and weaving and coarse and fine spinning firms. Small firms with less than 150 hands predominated only in the weaving sector. In 1841 57% of Lancashire cotton factories employed more than one hundred hands and 13% employed more than four hundred hands.⁷ The Northwest experienced expansion in the size of the industrial labour force, mechanisation, an increase in the size of the unit of production, an increase in the intensity of production, and a rapid growth of industrial towns and townships. The factory system bought with it an increase in those who were obliged to sell their labour

⁷ N. Kirk, *The Growth of Working Class Reformism in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago, 1985), 38-40; A. Howe, *The Cotton Masters* (Oxford, 1984), 3-8; V. A. C. Gatrell, 'Labour, Power and Size of Firms in the Lancashire Cotton Industry', *Economic History Review*, XXX (1977), 98

to earn a living. Although proletarianisation had long been making progress, with many hand workers long dependant on wages and not owning the material they worked on, its progress was quickened by the introduction of the factory system. Industrialisation had made particularly rapid growth in Ashton, Stalybridge and Dukinfield where the strike began. The principal employment in Ashton, Stalybridge and Dukinfield was cotton weaving and spinning and other branches of the cotton industry. In 1839 there were 33 cotton mills in Ashton, 32 cotton mills in Stalybridge and 11 cotton mills in Dukinfield. In 1841 there were 7000 cotton mill workers in Ashton out of a population of 22,686, 9000 cotton mill workers in Stalybridge out of a population of 20,000, and 5000 cotton mill workers in Dukinfield out of a population of 10,000. Spinning had long since been mechanised and by 1842 weaving was also largely done by power loom in the Ashton area. In Ashton in 1839 there were only 813 handloom weavers left, half of whom were women and children.⁸

In the Northwest industrialisation was accompanied by increased industrial unrest, which often merged with working-class political activity, and with a growth in trade unionism among skilled workers. Luddite activity against powerlooms had taken place in Lancashire in 1812/13 and again in 1826. In 1818 large-scale strikes occurred in Northeast Cheshire and Southeast Lancashire associated with the Philanthropic Hercules which was an early attempt at a general union. John Doherty set up his short lived Grand General Union of Operative Spinners in 1829 as a national union for spinners and his National Association for the Protection of Labour in 1831. 1833/4 witnessed the mushroom growth and then collapse of the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union associated with Robert Owen. These attempts ended in failure and trade unions were always vulnerable to economic downturns. Formal unions were largely confined to skilled workers. However it would be wrong to concentrate solely on formal unions. Informal local unionism based on the work place was equally as important and could extend to unskilled workers and unionism, whether formal or informal, could survive depressions at least among skilled workers. Despite the ban on the discussion of politics in many trade societies there was often an overlap between the leadership of trade unionism and working class political movements. The industrial depression, which began in 1838 and intensified in late 1841 led to reductions in wages, short time

⁸ E. Butterworth, *A Historical Account of the Towns of Ashton-under-Lyne, Stalybridge and Dukinfield* (Ashton, 1842), 89, 148, 176

working and unemployment. The effect was particularly severe in the Northwest where industrialisation and mechanisation in cotton textiles had made its greatest impact.⁹ In this context the movement of the Manchester trades towards formal commitment to Chartism as the only means to maintain wages from early 1842 was of great significance in the strike.¹⁰

The Northwest had been a centre of popular radicalism since the 1790s. With the post-war revival of popular radicalism in 1816, Hampden Clubs had spread throughout Southeast Lancashire and Northeast Cheshire. Manchester had been the starting point for the March of the Blanketeers and the Peterloo Massacre had taken place there in 1819. Henry 'Orator' Hunt, committed to the mass platform agitation and universal suffrage, annual Parliaments and vote by ballot, was the great leader of this stage of popular radicalism in the Northwest, with journalistic support from William Cobbett.¹¹ The Northwest, and in particular Southeast Lancashire, figured prominently in the popular movements of the 1830s with a strong Reform Bill agitation, Ten-Hours movement, Anti-Poor Law movement, trade union movement, and Owenite presence. Southeast Lancashire and Northeast Cheshire had, along with the West Riding, been the stronghold of the Ten-Hours movement since 1833. Short-time committees with working class activists who were later to figure in Chartism were widespread in the region. With the attempt by the government to introduce the New Poor Law into the north from 1837 the Northwest also became a centre of the Anti-Poor Law movement. Feargus O'Connor established himself as a leader of Northwest working class movements through the Anti-Poor Law movement in association with John Fielden the cotton spinner of Todmorden and Joseph Raynor Stephens the preacher of Ashton. Despite Stephen's stature the Tory radical element in these movements in the Northwest

⁹ J. Belchem, *Industrialisation and the Working Class* (London, 1990), 10-99; J. Rule, *The Labouring Classes in Early Industrial England 1750-1850* (London, 1986), 255-309; J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England* (London, 1979), 229-244

¹⁰ R. Sykes, 'Early Chartist and Trade Unionism in South-East Lancashire', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 152-193

¹¹ J. Belchem, 'Orator' Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism (Oxford, 1985), 44-132; W. Spater, *William Cobbett, Poor Man's Friend* (Cambridge, 1982), vol. 2., 331-354

was limited and Stephens himself was in many ways a liberal rather than Tory radical.¹²

In 1838 the Factory and Anti-Poor Law movements, together with support for the persecuted trade unionists the Glasgow cotton spinners and Dorchester Labourers, coalesced into the Chartist movement with the conviction that the First Reform Act had failed to alleviate the grievances from which the working classes suffered and only radical political reform enshrined in the six points of the Charter – universal adult male suffrage, annual Parliaments, vote by ballot, no property qualification for members, payment of members, and equal electoral districts - would bring about a government which would legislate fairly in the interests of the whole country rather than legislate solely in favour of a single class whether that be the aristocracy or the capitalists, with O'Connor emerging as the single most important national leader for the Northwest. The Northwest, along with Yorkshire, was the great centre of early Chartism. The pressure of public opinion and of forcible intimidation was exerted against the government through the constitutional mass platform agitation at torch light meetings, processions, by the electing of delegates to the first National Convention which met in London in February 1839, and through signatures to the first National Petition calling for Parliament to enact the People's Charter. The 'language of menace' and talk of 'peaceably if we can, forcibly if we must' was made use of to intimidate the government, with J. R. Stephens of the Anti-Poor Law movement doing much to create the impression of the 'physical force' nature of Northwest Chartism, and O'Connor also used the language of bluff at this stage though he was more cautious and ultimately counselled against violence. As part of its constitutional mass platform strategy the National Convention called on the country to support various 'ulterior measures' if the National Petition was rejected by Parliament. The 'ulterior measures' were stepped in importance with the supreme 'ulterior measure' being the 'sacred month' or general strike.¹³ The idea of a general strike of all the industrious or productive people against the unproductive and idle had a long history. It had figured in Volney's *Ruin of Empires* and most recently and persuasively had been presented by William Benbow in his *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* in 1832. However

¹² J. T. Ward, *The Factory Movement* (London, 1962), 30-185; J. Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom* (London, 1982), 32-38, 94-100; S. Weaver, *John Fielden and the Politics of Popular Radicalism* (Oxford, 1987), 1-217; J. Knott, *Popular Opposition to the 1834 Poor Law* (London, 1985), 65-127

¹³ R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement* (London, 1894), 10-160; D. Thompson, *The Chartists* (London, 1986), 57-76; J. Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom* (London, 1982), 110-193

with the rejection of the first National Petition by Parliament and the uneven support and lack of arms, resources or organisation throughout the country, the National Convention called off the ‘sacred month’. The bluff of the Chartist leaders had been called by the government. Arrests, trials and imprisonment of leaders and local activists for sedition followed, and there proved to be little enthusiasm for physical force initiatives in the Northwest.¹⁴

Following the collapse of Chartism in 1839 the emphasis was put on building up organisation. The *NCA organisation* was created at a conference in Manchester in 1840. From 1841 the NCA organisation struck firm roots and grew strongly in the Northwest, aided by increased economic depression. In early 1842 signatures flowed in from the Northwest for the second National Petition, which listed the New Poor Law and the inadequacy of the factory acts as grievances to be remedied along with the enactment of the Six Points, and a second National Convention was elected to meet in London for its presentation in May 1842. Manchester alone sent just short of 100,000 signatures to the petition.¹⁵

After the rejection of the second National Petition in May 1842 the national Chartist leadership had failed to propose firm ‘ulterior measures’ at the second National Convention which had met to oversee the presentation of the Petition. Instead they had merely called for a remonstrance to Parliament, a memorial to the Queen, and further conferences.¹⁶ The national leaders were reluctant to employ ‘forcible intimidation’ and the full resources of the constitutional mass platform following the defeat of 1839 and subsequent terms of imprisonment. This was particularly true of Feargus O’Connor after his release from prison in August 1841.¹⁷

At the Chartist convention in London in early May 1842 following the rejection of the second National Petition one of the delegates, William Beesley, a chairmaker of

¹⁴ R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement* (London, 1894), 145-160; William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* (London, 1832), 1-15; I. Prothero, ‘William Benbow and the Concept of the General strike’, *Past and Present*, 63 (1974), 132-170

¹⁵ *Northern Star*, 7, 14 May 1842; R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement* (London, 1894), 183-210; J. Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom* (London, 1982), 216-262; J. T. Ward, *Chartism* (London, 1973), 143, 155-6

¹⁶ *Northern Star*, 7, 14 May 1842

¹⁷ J. Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom* (London, 1982), 216-262

Accrington and officer of the North Lancashire NCA district, had opposed ever petitioning again and thought they should now return to their constituents and calmly enquire of them what course they should now pursue, and on his return from the convention Beesley of Accrington told a meeting in Preston that the Chartists should not petition any longer and should take the law into their own hands if something was not done for them directly. As early as April James Mooney an NCA officer of Colne told a camp meeting at Colne that there would be a bloody revolution unless the Charter was quickly granted and similarly violent language was used at a Chartist camp meeting on Enfield Moor at the on 29 May with James Mooney, Richard Marsden the Preston Chartist leader, and Thomas Tattersall the Burnley Chartist leader present. Marsden told the meeting that the working men had been petitioning for twenty years in vain and now they were convinced that appeals to the enfranchised and those possessing political power were in vain, 'we, therefore, tell our rulers calmly and deliberately that we can no longer bear the system of slow murder which they seem intent on following up. Better die by the sword than die by hunger; and if we are to be butchered, why not commence the bloody work at once.' Feargus O'Connor was so concerned by the language used in public at these meetings that he went on a lecture tour of North Lancashire to try to moderate feelings there and in an effort to quell the violent language suggested in the *Northern Star* that League spies were behind it. The preaching of funeral sermons for Samuel Holberry, one of the Chartists imprisoned in 1839 who died in prison in early June, added to the temperature.¹⁸ By August 1842 many of the local activists were however far more eager for a renewal of firm 'ulterior measures' but no initiative was forthcoming from the national Chartist leadership. In the Northwest Chartism was growing in support after the rejection of the petition and many local activists were deeply unhappy with the caution of the national leadership.

Manchester, as well as being a Chartist centre, was also the centre of the ACLL committed to a repeal of the Corn Laws. In the spring and summer of 1842 there was a strong feeling among many Leaguers that, in a time of prolonged depression, the League was losing its momentum and people were increasingly turning to suffrage reform whether of the Chartist or to the mainly middle class complete suffrage variety. The feeling among many League activists was that the public felt there was no hope of

¹⁸ *Northern Star*, 7, 14 May, 4, 11, 25 June, 2 July 1842

relief from Parliament as presently constituted, as shown by the response by Parliament to Anti-Corn Law petitions and to Villers' annual motion for enquiry into the Corn Laws, and so the overriding public demand had become for the extension of the franchise.¹⁹ This anxiety on the part of the League even in its base in Manchester resulted in efforts to revive an Operative ACLL and even to attract support from the Manchester trades for the repeal of the Corn Laws in the spring of 1842. However the working classes in general remained committed to Chartism with little support for the operative league and the trades in Manchester turned decisively toward Chartism rather than to the League. Richard Cobden, the League's leading public figure, adopted a cautious attitude to combining the movement for repeal of the Corn Laws with suffrage reform. However many Northwest Leaguers were also evincing support for Joseph Sturge's Complete Suffrage movement with John Bright of Rochdale, the Manchester manufacturer Richard Gardner, and Archibald Prentice editor and owner of the free trade *Manchester Times* attending its inaugural conference in April. Support for the National Complete Suffrage Union (NCSU), founded at this conference, was strong among those Leaguers in Manchester who were in favour of franchise reform.²⁰

Ashton and its neighbourhood had taken a full part in the early Chartism in the Northwest. The industrial out townships of the Northwest dominated by one or two industries, such as Ashton-under-Lyne and Stalybridge, were the great recruiting grounds for Chartism. Ashton was the base of J. R. Stephens and many Factory movement, Anti-Poor Law movement and trade activists in Ashton became prominent local leaders of Chartism. After the failure of 1839 and the reorganisation of Chartism in 1840 strong NCA localities were built up in the Ashton and Stalybridge region. By May 1842 Ashton had sent over 14,000 signatures to the National Petition. When in March 1842 wage reductions had been made by the Ashton cotton firms, local Chartist activists, including Richard Pilling and William Aitken, had advised against a partial strike against the reductions and had instead declared that if there were any more wage reductions they should strike for the Charter as it was the whole system which was responsible for their distress by class legislation and favouring the interests of the

¹⁹ N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 1958), 108-120

²⁰ P. Pickering, *Chartism and the Chartists in Manchester and Salford* (London, 1995), 86-104; A. Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge and the Moral Radical Party in Early Victorian Britain* (London, 1987), 119-133

masters rather than the men. It was a further series of wage reductions in Ashton and Stalybridge which was crucial for the creation of the strike for the People's Charter.²¹

Origins of the Strike for the Charter

Jenkins was correct to point out the importance for the organisation of the strike of the meetings in late July and early August.²² But there is no evidence for his claim that there existed a Chartist plot for a strike going back many months. The speeches made at public meetings in Ashton, Stalybridge, Hyde, and Mottram from 26 July to 7 August, the speeches made at the camp meetings on Mottram Moor on Sunday 7 August the day before the general strike began, evidence in the Treasury Solicitor Papers and in the depositions in the Cheshire Assize and Palatine of Lancaster papers, and a letter from one of the six delegates from Ashton (who went to spread the news of the strike to surrounding districts) in the *Northern Star* strongly suggests that the local Chartist activists did plan to inaugurate a general strike for the Charter but that this decision was made only in the two weeks before the strike was initiated on Monday 8 August.

By late July 1842 the Ashton, Stalybridge and Hyde Chartist activists had come to believe rumours that the local ACLL manufacturers intended to make three reductions in wages by Christmas with the intention of driving the operatives out on strike and so forcing the government to open the ports to corn due to the increased distress that would result. The announcement of reductions in wages by the ACLL manufacturers Rayners, Cheethams and Bayleys in July was believed by the Ashton and Stalybridge Chartist activists to be the preliminary to this series of three further wage reductions to force Corn Law repeal onto the government. The speeches made at the League's London conference in July bringing up the subject of stopping the mills and reports that League lecturers were suggesting that the League masters intended a lockout excited great concern during the second half of July and the first week of August. League lecturers especially John Finnigan and Timothy Falvey had been threatening that an outbreak was imminent in the Northwest in July and early August. In mid-July it was reported that the League lecturer James Acland had said that the League was intending a lockout to take place within three weeks. At the July League London conference a lockout had been

²¹ W. M. Bowman, *England in Ashton-under-Lyne*, (Ashton, 1960), 1-710; *Northern Star*, 12 March 1842

²² M. Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London, 1980), 241-244

advocated by the League delegate Ashdown from London. On his return to Manchester from the conference at the very start of August Alderman Chappell had also publicly declared in favour of a lockout. On 18 July a Chartist public meeting was held in Manchester with the Manchester NCA officer Thomas Railton in the chair. The meeting passed a resolution to send a memorial to Sir Robert Peel, the Prime Minister, asking for 10,000 stand of arms to protect the peace against threatened League violence. According to the memorial the League mill owners 'because they could not obtain such large profits from a starving people are about to resort to every means possible to excite the people to a breach of the peace by declaring against paying the income tax and other assessed taxes, by stopping supplies and also by stopping the mills.'²³ In Ashton at the end of July, Gregory, a pawnbroker of Ashton, minor League activist and supporter of Charles Hindley the free-trade MP for Ashton, told James Wilcox, one of the Ashton NCA officers and a shopkeeper that the current abatements in wages by Rayners, Cheethams and Bayley Brothers were designed to get the workers to sign Anti-Corn Law petitions and that there would be three more abatements in wages before Christmas in order to throw the hands in such a state as would embarrass the government and leave them with no choice but to repeal the Corn Laws. Gregory claimed to have heard this from the master in the news reading room. Similar rumours were repeated to other local Chartist activists.²⁴

In response to these rumours and the announced reductions by Rayners, Cheethams and Bayleys the local Chartist activists organised public meetings and committee meetings in Ashton, Stalybridge, Dukinfield and Mottram Moor from 26 July to 7 August. The purpose of these meetings was in the first place to call for the rescinding of the wage cuts and to threaten a general strike for the Charter if they were not rescinded. The first meeting was held on 26 July at Thackers Foundry in Ashton with 3000 to 4000 present and was convened by placards which told of the reduction by Rayners.²⁵ The second public meeting was held at the Haigh in Stalybridge on 29 July.²⁶ Another important public meeting was held at Hyde on 1 August.²⁷ The fourth meeting on the 2 August at

²³ PRO HO 45/249, Memorial to Sir Robert Peel, Manchester, 18 July 1842

²⁴ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 46-9, Case against the Chartists, 1842

²⁵ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v Thomas Pitt and others, 1842

²⁶ F. O'Connor (ed.), *Trial of Feargus O'Connor and Fifty-Eight Others* (London, 1843), 16

²⁷ PRO TS 36/26, ff. 1-326, R. v. William Moorhouse and others, 1842

Dukenfield.²⁸ Rayners and Cheethams withdrew their notices of reductions, however when the Bayley workers went to Bayley Brothers mill and asked for the withdrawal of the notice of reduction on 5 August, the day the notice was to expire, the Bayley Brothers refused and told that workers that they might 'go play a while'. The Bayley's workers struck and were joined by local Chartist activists and then went on a parade and held a meeting at the Haigh where they were addressed by Chartist speakers. They met again on the evening at Stalybridge and were addressed by Chartist activists.²⁹ The final two meetings before the strike began were held on Mottram Moor on Sunday 7 August with several thousand present.³⁰ After Bayleys had implemented their reduction on 5 August the sole aim of the meetings was to organise a general strike. This culminated with the Mottram Moor camp meetings on Sunday 7 August when local Chartist activists declared that a general strike for the Charter would begin on Monday and would be spread to Manchester on Tuesday. The turnouts began on the morning of 8 August, launched from a public meeting in Stalybridge with Chartist speakers, and went to Manchester on the 9 August as planned. On the same day Chartist activists were sent as delegates to the surrounding towns to spread the strike, supplied with money for the journey from local shopkeepers.³¹

All but one of the organisers and speakers at the meetings between 26 July and 7 August can be identified as local Chartist activists. At the meeting on 26 July at Thackers Foundry in Ashton, William Woodruff a cordwainer of Ashton and NCA locality officer was in the chair and William Aitken a schoolmaster of Ashton and NCA officer spoke warning the 'cotton lords' to stay indoors as the 'reckoning day was nigh'.³² At the meeting on 29 July in Stalybridge James Fenton a shoemaker of Ashton who had been an active Chartist in 1839 was in the chair, Alexander Challenger a power loom weaver and local NCA officer, P. M. Brophy a Chartist lecturer, Thomas Storah a powerloom weaver of Ashton and NCA locality officer, William Stephenson a NCA locality officer, Richard Pilling powerloom weaver of Ashton and on the South Lancashire NCA committee, William Woodruff and James Milligan an Ashton NCA officer and power loom weaver all spoke. Pilling and Milligan proposed and seconded

²⁸ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 17

²⁹ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 46-9, Case against the Chartists, 1842

³⁰ PRO TS 36/26, ff. 1-326, R. v William Moorhouse and others, 1842

³¹ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 46-9, Case against the Chartists, 1842

³² PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v Thomas Pitt and others, 1842

resolutions.³³ At the meeting at Hyde on 1 August George Candelet a factory operative of Hyde who had been a previous speaker at Chartist meetings in May 1842 was in the chair and Robert Wilde, a skinner of Mottram and an officer of the Hollingwood NCA locality, and Stephen Hirst spoke.³⁴ At the meeting which took place in Dukenfield on the 2 August Pilling spoke and Albert Wolfenden, a tailor and Chartist of Ashton, Challenger, Stephenson and Storah were present.³⁵ At the two meetings of Bayley's hand in Stalybridge on 5 August after the turnout of the Bayley's workers James Fenton, was chosen chairman, and Thomas Mahon, John Durham, all three of whom were Chartist shoemakers, and William Stephenson spoke.³⁶ At the first meeting at Mottram Moor on Sunday 7 August William Moorhouse, the bellman and billposter of Hyde and a Hyde NCA locality officer was in the chair and the meeting was also addressed by Robert Wilde, William Stephenson, and George Candelet. At the second camp meeting at Mottram Moor on 7 August William Moorhouse was again in the chair and John Leech, a Hyde tailor and NCA locality officer, Robert Wilde, George Candelet, Thomas Storah, Thomas Mahon, William Stevenson, Thomas Cheetham and John Crossley, a tailor, spoke. Of all these speakers at the strike meetings between 26 July and 7 August only Crossley did not have a history as a Chartist activist, but he did support the call for the Charter.³⁷

The Chartist activists also formed the strike committees or committees of 'Public Safety' which met at Stalybridge, Ashton and Dukenfield to organise the strike before it began and then to oversee the strike once it had begun. A meeting in Ashton on about the 3 August appointed a 'Committee of Public Safety' (a term reminiscent of the French Revolution) with Richard Pilling as chairman. The Ashton Committee met repeatedly in the Chartist rooms in the Charleston throughout the turnout and was very active in preparing for it. Its membership was composed of the Ashton Chartists including Pilling, James Milligan and others.³⁸ A strike committee of Chartist activists was formed at Stalybridge on 5 August and met daily. Its members included Thomas

³³ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 16-17

³⁴ PRO TS 36/26, ff. 1-326, R. v. William Moorhouse and others, 1842

³⁵ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 18

³⁶ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 19

³⁷ PRO TS 36/26, ff. 1-326, R. v. William Moorhouse and others, 1842; PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. William Moorhouse and Stephen Hurst, 1842

³⁸ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 46-9, Case against the Chartists, 1842

Mahon, William Stephenson, John Fairhurst and Robert Wilde.³⁹ There were divisions in the committees over what the aim of the strike should be. After the strike had begun John Fairhurst told a public meeting at Mottram on 12 August that he had been at Stalybridge two or three days at the meeting of delegates, where some had been for making the turnout a wage question, but he had advocated making it a political question. Another of the delegates on the Stalybridge Committee, Robert Wilde had been at the committee meetings at Stalybridge and had supported the same view as Fairhurst for making the strike a national political question for the Charter, although some members of the Stalybridge Committee had advocated making it a wage question.⁴⁰

There was not therefore complete unity in aim among the activists about whether the general strike should be for the Charter or for wages. One section of the Chartist activists who initiated the strike intended to pre-empt the free-traders by starting a general strike for the Charter. Among this section the most prominent were William Moorhouse, Robert Wilde and Thomas Mahon. This section of the activists was aiming the strike against the Government to pre-empt a forced strike for repeal of the Corn Laws. A second section, including most notably Richard Pilling, was concerned not so much with making the general strike one for the Charter but rather to make it against the wage reductions both because they meant hardship and also because the ACLL masters hoped to use the working men for the selfish purpose of gaining repeal. This original division in aim among the Ashton, Stalybridge and Hyde Chartist activists was to seriously affect the nature of the strike elsewhere in the Northwest.

The resolutions passed at the meetings up to the 5 August might leave some doubt about whether the call that a strike for the Charter would be made if the reductions were carried out was just bluff. Nevertheless this should not go unchallenged. The Chartist activists did believe that the League manufacturers were intending to force out their workers to create distress to force the government to repeal the Corn Laws, and so although they hoped to prevent the reduction, the call for a strike for the Charter if the reduction was not cancelled was not necessarily just bluff as they thought it necessary to pre-empt a League inspired turnout by striking first for the Charter. At the meeting at

³⁹ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 20

⁴⁰ PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. John Fairhurst and Samuel Lees, 1842

Stalybridge on 29 July a resolution was proposed declaring that the present reduction of wages was injurious, not only to the working men but also to the shopkeepers and to all other classes of the community. After this was passed unanimously a second resolution was proposed and passed unanimously calling for a fair day's wage for a fair day's work and further stating that a fair day's wage could not be obtained without the Charter being made the law of the land.⁴¹ The call for a strike for the Charter was first made explicit at the meeting at Hyde on 1 August. Here the resolution was that 'it is the opinion of this meeting that reductions are injurious not only to the working people, but to the tradesmen, shopkeepers, and to all classes of the community, except to those who are in receipt of pensions. And this meeting consider it the imperative duty of shopkeepers, manufacturers and tradesmen to assist the working people to obtain political equality; and that it is the opinion of this meeting, that the wages received at the present by the working men and women of this district, are insufficient to afford them that subsistence which producers should have; and this meeting pledges itself that should another reduction take place in this district, they will give over working until they can obtain a fair days work, and the Charter become the law of the land.' Candelet from the chair told the meeting that if they determined to stand out the Charter would soon be obtained.⁴²

The speeches made and resolutions passed at the two camp meetings on Mottram Moor on 7 August, the day before the strike began, make it clear that the aim of the strike was to be the gaining of the Charter among a significant section of the Chartist activists who organised the strike. Bayley Brothers had already decided to implement their wage reduction and Mahon and Stephenson of the Stalybridge Chartist strike committee had refused to go to see William Bayley when William Bayley had made it known that he wanted to see the strike committee on Sunday.⁴³ William Moorhouse opened the first Mottram Moor meeting on 7 August making it clear that the strike was not a wage question, telling the meeting 'My friends and fellow workmen, I am appointed chairman of this meeting and must inform you, we are not met here for a wage question or for a religious question. It is a national question...my brother Chartists from Stalybridge, Ashton and Hyde...will explain to you that we as Chartists are met here for a national

⁴¹ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 17

⁴² PRO TS 36/26, ff. 1-326, R. v. William Moorhouse and others, 1842; *Northern Star*, 6 August 1842

⁴³ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 20

question.' At the second camp meeting John Leech proposed the resolution that the people must quit working until the Charter become the law of the land and the way to obtain the Charter was a national strike. Leech denounced the masters and the aristocracy and criticised bad laws and bad government. He said there was no cure for it but the Charter. Leech told them that they would take the turnout to Manchester on Tuesday. William Stephenson seconded the resolution and spoke about the distress and the people being in actual starvation and that these evils could not be removed without the Charter.⁴⁴ Thomas Cheetham spoke about the improvement of machinery having caused great distress in the nation and said the Charter was the remedy for it by a national strike. Thomas Mahon, John Crossley, Thomas Storah, George Candelet and Robert Wilde also spoke in favour of Leech's resolution that there should be a total suspension of labour until the Charter become the law of the land. The resolution was passed unanimously by the meeting.⁴⁵ Moorhouse closed the second meeting on Mottram Moor on 7 August by telling the people that the aim of the strike which was to begin next day was the enactment of the Charter 'You people have been told the evils we labour under, and I am requested also to tell you that tomorrow a meeting will take place at Stalybridge at five o'clock in the morning when we will proceed from factory to factory, and all the hands that will not willingly come out we will turn them out. And friends, when we are out we will remain out till the Charter which is the only guarantee you have for your wages, becomes the law of the land. I hope to meet you all tomorrow morning at Stalybridge when we will all join hand in hand in this great national turnout.'⁴⁶

Leadership by local Chartist activists speaking at the meetings which organised the strike and leading the strike from place to place continued in the Ashton, Stalybridge, Dukenfield and Hyde area during the first week of the strike and beyond until its defeat.⁴⁷ Very early in the morning on 8 August there was a meeting at Stalybridge of up to 14,000 people including not merely the Bayley Brothers workers, they were addressed by Chartist speakers Alexander Challenger, William Stephenson, James

⁴⁴ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. Albert Wolfenden and others, 1842

⁴⁵ PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. William Moorhouse and Stephen Hurst, 1842; PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. Thomas Cheetham, 1842; PRO 27/11 Part 2, R. v. Thomas Mahon, 1842

⁴⁶ PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. William Moorhouse and Stephen Hurst, 1842; PRO TS 36/26, ff. 1-326, R. v. William Moorhouse and others, 1842

⁴⁷ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. Thomas Pitt and others, 1842; PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. William Moorhouse and Stephen Hurst, 1842; *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842

Fenton, John Crossley and P. M. Brophy. After an adjournment until 9 a.m. they agreed to go on procession through Dukenfield and thence to Ashton to turn out the mills. There was also an early morning meeting at Hyde, with William Moorhouse, John Leech, George Candelet and William Stephenson speaking, where the people were requested not to return to work. The turnouts who had met at Stalybridge (one third of the crowd were female) then went in procession through Dukenfield, Ashton and Hurst carrying a red cap of liberty mounted on a pole and the mills turned out as they arrived. Early in the afternoon the turnouts attended a meeting in Ashton with Richard Pilling, P. M. Brophy and John Crossley as speakers and it was resolved that 'the people of Ashton go to Oldham; and those of Stalybridge and Dukenfield to Hyde; and that the people of Stalybridge, Dukenfield and Hyde meet in Ashton tomorrow morning, Tuesday at seven o'clock.' The Stalybridge people then went in turnout procession to Denton and Hyde and turned out all the mills pulling the boiler plugs and the Ashton people went to Oldham.⁴⁸ At a meeting in Hyde early in the morning on 9 August with William Moorhouse, John Leech and George Candelet speaking, John Leech told the people that they were to go and join the Ashton people and they would go together to Manchester.⁴⁹ At the meeting in the morning on 9 August at Thackers Foundry in Ashton with 3000 present Richard Pilling spoke and told them that they would go to Manchester and stop all the mills, they would have their breakfast first and then meet again later in the morning and go to Manchester. The turnouts met in Ashton and then went on procession into the centre of Manchester turning out the mills and pulling the boiler plugs and turning out all the workshops and every description of work there.⁵⁰

Local Chartist activists also went on missions to spread the strike to towns further afield. On 9 August at a meeting in the Market Place in Ashton William Aitken, Alexander Challenger, Thomas Storah, Richard Pilling, James Taylor an NCA locality officer, and George Johnson who had been an active Chartist since 1839, were appointed to go on missions to other towns to spread the strike there. They were told to get other towns to agree on a set of wages which reflects the influence of those such as Pilling among the Ashton, Stalybridge and Hyde activists who were determined on a wages strike and also the fact that they were receiving financial support from the Ashton

⁴⁸ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 49-55, Case against the Chartists, 1842; PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. William Moorhouse and Stephen Hurst, 1842; *Manchester Guardian*, 10 August 1842

⁴⁹ PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. William Moorhouse and Stephen Hurst, 1842

⁵⁰ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. Thomas Pitt and others, 1842

shopkeepers, who were prepared to support a strike for wages but not a strike for the Charter. It was due to the influence of some of these delegates that there was confusion and differences in the aim of the strike during the first week in some of the towns visited by the delegates. In many places where the delegates visited, the terms of the mission, and in the case of Richard Pilling and George Johnson their personal inclination, led them to concentrate on the wages aim. The Ashton shopkeepers formed a committee and met with the Chartist strike committee and agreed to pay the expenses of the delegates, but only for a strike for wages. Aitken and Challenger were to go to Preston and places in that district. Pilling and Storah were to go to Bolton, Accrington and the surrounding district. Johnson and Taylor were to go to Saddleworth and the adjacent towns in Yorkshire.⁵¹

Mather and Sykes claim that the call for the Charter came from the grassroots strikers, rather than the local Chartist activists, some days after the strike began and that the Chartist local activists before the strike got underway were just bluffing when they said that there would be a strike for the Charter in order to frighten the masters out of carrying through the wage reductions. But this ignores the fact that a section among the local activists really did intend to launch a pre-emptive strike for the Charter from the start in order to pre-empt a forced strike for repeal of the Corn Laws. Most of the activists, feeling that they had no choice but to pre-empt a forced League strike, decided to launch a pre-emptive strike for the Charter to unnerve the government so that it would bow before the pressure of public opinion and enact the Charter. Only a minority of the activists such as Richard Pilling, did aim the strike against the League manufacturers.

Despite divisions over the aim of the strike among the local leaders many of them declared that the strike was for the Charter at many meetings in the Ashton, Stalybridge and Hyde area during the first week of the strike from its commencement on 8 August. Mather and Sykes were incorrect to state that in the first few days of the strike the only demand was for wages. The hiatus which Mather and Sykes identified between 8 and 11 August during which time they thought that the demands made were for wages rather than the Charter in fact has been greatly exaggerated. The call was made for the Charter

⁵¹ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 46-9, Case against the Chartists, 1842; PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. Thomas Pitt and others, 1842

at meetings throughout this period and the strike was aimed against the government by many of the activists. At the first meeting at Hyde on the morning of 8 August the day the strike began the Chartist speakers William Moorhouse, George Candelet, John Leach and William Stephenson all requested the people to be true and not to return to their work again until the Charter became the law of the land. At the early afternoon meeting in Ashton on 8 August after the Stalybridge people had helped turnout out the mills there John Crossley told the meeting that the Charter was the remedy.⁵² While the Stalybridge turnouts were turning out the mills in Hyde and elsewhere it was the general cry that all must give over working until such times as they could obtain the Charter.⁵³ At the meeting at Hyde the following morning on 9 August before the procession to Manchester the Chartist activists William Moorhouse, John Leech and George Candelet addressed the meeting and again told the people to remain out of work until they obtained the Charter.⁵⁴ Once the Stalybridge and Hyde turnouts had gone to Compstall on 11 August William Moorhouse urged there that 'they must stand for the Charter and no surrender, that if they would stand firm this time they could get it, but if they did not they need never try again.'⁵⁵ At a meeting at Mottram Moor on the evening of 10 August the local Chartist activist and strike leader Robert Wilde declared 'fellow workmen and countrymen, we are not met here for a wage question, but upon a national question, and friends protection is wanted for our work and that will never be got until the men in power are hurled out and men put in of your own choosing, you must not work anymore until the Charter becomes the law of the land...'⁵⁶ Thomas Mahon was among the turnouts from Stalybridge and Hyde who went to Glossop on 10 August and at a meeting at Glossop Mahon declared that the mills at Glossop must not go to work again until they had a fair day's work and the Charter became the law of the land.⁵⁷ The Charter was a necessary precondition for fair wages, because only once the Charter was in place would there be fair legislation in the interests of the majority rather than a class, which could include minimum wages and the placing of the workman and his employer in a position of legal equality. This evidence, based on speeches at the meetings, suggests that the strike was thus aimed from the very start against the government rather

⁵² PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. Albert Wolfenden and others, 1842

⁵³ PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. Albert Wolfenden and others, 1842

⁵⁴ PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. William Moorhouse and Stephen Hurst, 1842

⁵⁵ PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. William Moorhouse and Stephen Hurst, 1842

⁵⁶ PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. Robert Wilde, 1842

⁵⁷ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. Thomas Mahon, 1842

than the masters even when the wage demand was combined with the demand for the Charter.

After the strike had begun, in the Ashton area some local Chartist leaders continued to stress that the strike should be for the Charter and against the government rather than merely for wages. Many workmen there already earned the same as they did in 1840, and only by making it a political question could they attract many types of trades including those who already had high earnings. John Fairhurst speaking at Mottram Moor on 11 August was 'against making the turnout a wage question, for if so it would be of no use to him, for the wages of his trade were the same as they had been for ten or eleven years.' Similarly at the same meeting Robert Wilde exhorted the people to make their proceeding a national question 'in order to secure the co-operation of all trades and parties...he would have no interest in making it a wage question, and standing up for the wages of 1840 for he was earning more wages at the present time than in 1840. He stated the case was the same with the block printers and others, and he argued from this the necessity of making it a national question, because if they did not they would lose the support of those parties.' At another meeting on Mottram the next day Robert Wilde continued to 'recommend the people to stand firm until they obtained their political rights they had so long been deprived of.'⁵⁸

Throughout the first week of the strike there was a strong sense among many of the activists that the Charter was obtainable in the very near future. This was something that had been lacking from the Chartist movement since 1838 and 1839. For example John Fairhurst on 11 August while speaking at a meeting at Mottram Moor 'strongly advised the people to stand out for the Charter. He had thought the Charter was twenty years from being obtained, but now it was not twenty days off if the people would stand firm.'⁵⁹ Combined with the eagerness for the implementation of 'ulterior measures' was the belief that the League had provoked the strike but now the working men must ensure that they got the Charter from the strike.

⁵⁸ PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. John Fairhurst and Samuel Lees, 1842

⁵⁹ PRO ASSI 65/3, R. v. John Fairhurst and Samuel Lees, 1842

The League and the Strike

Sir James Graham and Sir Robert Peel held the ACLL morally responsible for creating the atmosphere in which the strike occurred and in order to try to demonstrate the moral responsibility of the League arranged for J. W. Croker to publish the ‘Anti Corn Law Agitation’ article in the *Quarterly Review* drawing particular attention to the many inflammatory speeches made by League leaders and activists in the spring and early summer of 1842.⁶⁰ The Ashton area Chartist activists certainly believed that the reductions were inspired to force the government to repeal the corn laws and minor League activists and lecturers such as Gregory seemed to have encouraged this belief. However there is no evidence that the Bayley brothers, far less the League leadership, did plan this. Whether the Ashton and Stalybridge masters were considering making three wage reductions before Christmas to force a strike for Corn Law repeal is less important than the fact that this is what the local Chartist activists believed, given that the manufacturers never had the opportunity to launch the three stages of wage reductions which were to follow the current reduction. But there is no evidence that Cheethams, Rayners and the Bayley Brothers arranged their reductions to force a strike.

Richard Cobden and John Bright had discussed a simultaneous stoppage of the factories in private in March but Cobden had decided firmly against it. In March 1842 Bright had proposed a simultaneous closing of the works to Richard Cobden as a possible future course of action to solve the League’s dilemma over what move to make in the first half of 1842 and around the same time and earlier similar suggestions were being made to George Wilson, the president of the League and its organisational genius from Newall’s Buildings in Manchester.⁶¹ Bright suggested to Cobden on 9 March that a circular should be circulated calling for a meeting of all the employers in the cotton district and a deputation should then be sent to Peel with authority from the meeting to declare that ‘unless the Government consent to open their trade by repealing the Corn Laws they will at a given time close their working’ in order to ‘shake Peel either from office or into the Total Repeal’. In order to placate the working people the meeting would declare that they did not wish to keep the people from their political rights, but that the Corn

⁶⁰ J. W. Croker, ‘Anti Corn Law Agitation’, *Quarterly Review*, VLXXI (December 1842), 244-314; Sir Robert Peel Papers, BL Add MS 40,447, Graham to Peel, 18, 22 November 1842

⁶¹ N. Edsell, *Richard Cobden, Independent Radical* (London, 1987), 102-118; Keith Robbins, *John Bright* (London, 1979), 31-38; Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 1958), 108-136

Law cause being the most pressing it must be immediately obtained, and resolutions would be passed declaring that the employers would have kept up wages if they could. At the same time a meeting of the Yorkshire woollen district should be held to do the same thing.⁶² Cobden however was against the plan of a simultaneous stopping of the factories for practical reasons: firstly because he did not believe it was possible to get the people to unite and so would not succeed, and secondly because any successful attempt on the part of the League ‘would draw upon it the odium from the working class of throwing them overboard.’⁶³ In April Cobden was thinking of, and then dismissing, hopes of ‘desperados’ in the Commons to resist taxes. But finally he concluded that the League must employ the ‘old means of raising the moral feelings of and convincing the judgement of the people’ because although it might appear a slow process ‘it is the only means for affecting a *permanent* change in our policy.’⁶⁴ By the end of June Cobden was thinking of the possibility of a ‘fiscal rebellion’ by refusal to pay taxes in Manchester rather than of Bright’s old suggestion of a simultaneous stoppage of the factories. Cobden writing from the League conference in London asked Bright on 21 June to ascertain if there was support among committed Leaguers for carrying out the ‘Quakers principle of stopping the supplies’. Cobden warned that ‘Villiers and others are constantly preaching, in private, the doctrine that the landlords will only yield to fear after the people have begun to burn and destroy’ however Cobden himself felt that this was a course which ‘no Christian or good citizen’ could look at with hopes of advantage and instead believed that there was a ‘more effectual way of alarming them by the moral resistance so often put in force by the Quakers with such success’. Cobden was sure that a ‘widespread and determined “fiscal rebellion” would terrify the enemy far more than pikes or pistols.’⁶⁵ By this time any thought of a simultaneous stoppage of the factories by the League leadership had been dismissed.

When the strike broke out the League leaders were taken by surprise. When the turnouts arrived in Rochdale John Bright ‘did not think our prophecies were so near their fulfilment.’⁶⁶ Once the strike had begun Wilson in Manchester and Cobden who was in communication from London were in favour of no involvement whatsoever in the

⁶² BL Add. MS 43,383, John Bright to Richard Cobden, 9 March 1842

⁶³ BL Add. MS 43,649, Richard Cobden to John Bright, 12 March 1842

⁶⁴ BL Add. MS 43,653, Richard Cobden to Henry Ashworth, 7 April 1842

⁶⁵ BL Add. MS 43,649, Richard Cobden to John Bright, 21 June 1842

⁶⁶ BL Add. MS 43,383, John Bright to Richard Cobden, 11 August 1842

strike. On 11 August the League Council in Manchester withdrew all its lecturers, who had done much to stir up discontent, until the strike was over.⁶⁷ The crucial meetings of the League Council took place on 15 and 16 August. Bright argued that they should take an active course at least by issuing a strong placard blaming the government for the strike. However he was overruled. Wilson and the moderates on the League Council, Greg, Callender and Brooks, were all firmly against involving the League in the strike and disturbances. Cobden's letters to Wilson which were read out to the League Council were decisive in ensuring that the moderates prevailed. Instead of the fierce placard condemning the government which Bright wanted, the League Council issued a mild address dissociating itself from the strike and denying the claims of the *Times* and other newspapers that the strike was a 'League Plot'.⁶⁸ Cobden in his letter to Wilson preceding the League Council meeting on 16 August 'advised very strongly that they should be cautious and quiet just now' and suggested to Wilson that they might put out an address 'exculpating ourselves'. Cobden hoped that the meeting at the League Council would 'pursue the cautious course which I have recommended'. He feared that the League was 'at this moment under trial by the public for charges laid on by the *Times*, *Standard* and other papers.' Nevertheless he still hoped that 'all that is necessary to rise higher than ever is for us to keep aloof in Manchester from the present commotion' and that the League would 'rise superior to all if we are now quiet in Manchester'.⁶⁹ League support for the strike did not go beyond individual acts of sympathy by League members such as Henry Ashworth of Bolton refusing to fulfil his duties as a magistrate during the strike on the pretext that such duties might involve ordering the shedding of blood which would be inconsistent with his Quaker principles. John Bright closed his mills in Rochdale immediately the turnouts arrived, though once he realised the aim of the strike among the Rochdale workers was the Charter he issued a placard advising them to return to work and join in the struggle against the Corn Laws. A number of the free trade magistrates were initially rather supine during the strike until prodded into activity by the Home Office and fortified by the presence of

⁶⁷ BL Add. MS 43,663, George Wilson to Richard Cobden, 11 August 1842

⁶⁸ BL Add. MS 43,383, John Bright to Richard Cobden, 15, 16 August 1842

⁶⁹ BL Add. MS 50,750, Richard Cobden to Frederick Cobden, 15 August 1842

more troops.⁷⁰

Nevertheless Graham and Peel were justified in their belief that the League's agitation, particularly in July and August, had helped create the climate which made the strike possible. The language used by ACLL lecturers such as J. Finnigan and T. Falvey in the Northwest in July and early August, the report that the League lecturer James Acland had said in July that the League was intending a lockout to take place within three weeks, the speeches made by delegates at the July ACLL London conference, especially by Ashdown from London calling for a lockout, and by Alderman G. R. Chappell in Manchester on his return from the conference, contributed considerably to the fears of the Ashton and Stalybridge Chartist activists provoking them to launch a pre-emptive strike. It was a myth of the middle-class press that Feargus O'Connor blamed the ACLL for the strike only after it had occurred to shift the blame from the Chartists. In fact the local Ashton and Stalybridge activists were blaming the League manufacturers from the start.⁷¹

The Course of the Strike for the Charter in the Northwest

In many ways the strike in the Northwest outside the Ashton district starting point was similar to the strike in Yorkshire, the Midlands, South Wales and Scotland where local Chartist activists organised the strike for the Charter from the local platforms. The strike can be seen as the implementation of the ultimate 'ulterior measure' of the mass platform agitation but this time from the local platforms by local activists rather than by the national leadership from the national platform. The eagerness for 'ulterior measures' of the mass platform agitation, which was not being fulfilled by the national leadership, helps explain the enthusiastic response to the strike for the Charter by local activists in many of the towns of the Northwest. However the situation was more complicated in the Northwest than in Yorkshire, the Midlands, South Wales and Scotland. This was because the turnout crowds often irrupted into the Northwest towns without prior news or preparation by the Chartist activists of that town. It was often Chartist activists from the Ashton and Stalybridge area, who came with the turnouts or as individual speakers,

⁷⁰ PRO HO 48/34, Law Officers, Cases 40, 42, 43 and 44 respecting the conduct of magistrates, November 1842; A. G. Rose, 'Truckling Magistrates of 1842', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 83 (1985), 40-70

⁷¹ J. W. Croker, 'Anti Corn Law Agitation', *Quarterly Review*, VLXXI (December 1842), 244-314

rather than their own trusted local leaders, who called on the people to strike. This helps explain why there was some hesitation over whether to strike in some towns and some confusion over what the aim of the strike was to be. For example in Stockport and Rochdale the irruption of the Ashton and Stalybridge turnouts caused some confusion and it was only when the towns' own local Chartist activists began to take control that the strike got firmly under way.⁷² In contrast the local Chartist activists in Yorkshire, the Midlands, South Wales and Scotland had time to organise and launch the strike themselves in their own localities without outside interference.

The turnout in the Northwest was rapidly extended to towns throughout the region. The strike was taken to Manchester on 9 August, a crucial part of the Ashton and Stalybridge activists' plan for the strike, and the turnout was rapidly taken up by the Manchester people.⁷³ The strike had already been taken to Oldham by processions of Ashton and Stalybridge turnouts on 8 August though the local Oldham Chartist leaders were taken by surprise and advised a return to work and it was on the following day that the strike in Oldham got underway when the turnouts again visited and Chartist speakers from Ashton persuaded the Oldham people to agree to strike.⁷⁴ The Stalybridge and Hyde turnouts went to Compstall and Glossop on 10 August.⁷⁵ The strike was extended to Rochdale when the Ashton district turnout crowds entered in procession on 11 August, following a visit by delegates from Ashton on 10 August.⁷⁶ Turnout processions from the Ashton and Stalybridge area took the strike to Stockport on 11 August with the activists John Leech, George Candelet and Robert Lee speaking at a meeting there.⁷⁷ Bolton went on strike from 11 August following a delegate visit by Pilling from Ashton the previous day. Bury struck from 11 August after a delegate visit from two delegates, Aitken and Challenger, from Ashton on 10 August.⁷⁸ Turnouts arrived in Middleton from Hollingwood, Oldham, Rochdale, Royton and other places on 11 August and began the strike there.⁷⁹ The turnout began in Preston on 12 August

⁷² *Manchester Guardian*, 13, 17, 20 August 1842; *Stockport Advertiser*, 12, 19 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 13, 20 August 1842

⁷³ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 13 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842; PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 58-62, Case against the Chartists, 1842

⁷⁴ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 13 August 1842

⁷⁵ ASSI 65/3, R. v. William Moorhouse and Stephen Hurst, 1842

⁷⁶ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 13 August 1842

⁷⁷ *Stockport Advertiser*, 12 August 1842

⁷⁸ *Bolton Free Press*, 13 August 1842

⁷⁹ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 13 August 1842

after a delegate visit by Aitken and Challenger on 11 August.⁸⁰ The Rochdale people went to Todmorden on 12 August and those mills which had not already turned out did so. After meetings in Rochdale and Todmorden delegates were sent to Colne, Padiham and Burnley and to the different towns in Yorkshire.⁸¹ The turnout started in Blackburn and Wigan on 15 August.⁸² Further north news of the strike for the Charter in Manchester encouraged turnouts of weavers and artisans in Lancaster from 17 August and in Carlisle and the towns surrounding Carlisle from 22 August.⁸³

The leaders of the strike in the Northwest were local Chartist activists, Chartist activists from Ashton and Stalybridge who had either come with the turnout processions or on delegate missions, and Chartist lecturers who happened to be in the area. For example at Oldham the strike was led by a mixture of Oldham and Ashton Chartist activists. Speakers at the public meetings in Oldham from which the strike was organised and led between the 8 and 26 August included the local Oldham Chartist leader and shoemaker Samuel Yardley, together with Richard Pilling, Stephen Hurst from Ashton, and John Bailey officer of teetotal NCA locality from Manchester.⁸⁴ Thomas Mahon and William Moorhouse spoke at strike meetings at Glossop on Wednesday 10 August after the Stalybridge and Hyde turnouts had taken the strike there.⁸⁵ At Preston, Aitken and Challenger were present as delegates and the Preston Chartist activists Richard Marsden and James Williams were among those apprehend by the police for taking part in the crowds.⁸⁶ At Bolton the local Chartist activist John Gillespie, a handloom weaver, was a prominent leader and Richard Pilling visited on a delegate mission. At Bury, Challenger and Aitken from Ashton visited as delegates and the local Chartist activist Henry Roberts, a shoemaker, led the strike.⁸⁷ At Rochdale Chartist activists came with the turnout from Ashton and the local Rochdale Chartist NCA officers Thomas Livsey and James Ashley also spoke at meetings.⁸⁸ At Stockport John Leach, George Candelet and

⁸⁰ *Preston Chronicle*, 13, 20 August, *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

⁸¹ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 13 August 1842

⁸² *Preston Chronicle*, 20 August 1842

⁸³ *Manchester Guardian*, 20, 24, 27, 31 August 1842

⁸⁴ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 13, 20 August 1842

⁸⁵ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. Thomas Mahon, 1842

⁸⁶ *Preston Chronicle*, 20, 27 August 1842

⁸⁷ *Bolton Free Press*, 13 August 1842

⁸⁸ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 13 August 1842; *Manchester Guardian*, 13 August 1842

Robert Lee from Ashton, John Jackson a shoemaker and Chartist from Newtown, and the local Oldham Chartist activist John Wright, bellman and labourer, led the strike.⁸⁹

In Manchester the Ashton and Stalybridge activists, Pilling and Challenger (together with the Manchester activist William Dixon), had first spoken at meetings on 9 August after they had brought the turnout to Manchester. But local Manchester Chartist activists and lecturers took up the leadership of the strike. Christopher Doyle, a NCA officer and Chartist lecturer, Bernard McCartney, a Chartist lecturer from Liverpool, William Dixon, a Manchester NCA officer and *Northern Star* reporter, P. M. Brophy, a Chartist lecturer, and Daniel Donovan, an NCA officer at the Carpenters Hall locality and on the South Lancashire NCA committee, spoke at strike meetings on 10 August and regularly hereafter. However Manchester was unique in the role the Trades Delegates played in the organising and leading the strike. Yet, perhaps this uniqueness was more apparent than real, as those trades which were active in the leadership of the strike were in fact the trade localities of the NCA which had been joining the NCA over the previous few months and their members were all committed Chartists. The Chartist leadership of the strike in Manchester was thus continued even when the Trades Delegates took the dominant part. It was the mechanics, whose NCA trade locality was one of the most strongly committed to Chartism, and the powerloom weavers, who though not formally organised in a union, had been receiving help in organising from local Chartists throughout the past two years, who formed the initial trades conferences on 11 and 12 August. Daniel Donovan and William Dixon, two Chartists who had been helping to organise the powerloom weavers over the past two years, were both present at the conferences of the 'various trades and mill-hands' on 11 and 12 August. When the Great Trades Delegate Conference met the following week many of the delegates elected from Manchester came from regular NCA localities and NCA trade localities including the conference chairman Alexander Hutchinson, Daniel Donovan, John Roberts, Thomas Whittaker, Thomas Doyle, John Connor, Samuel Pemberton, William Robinson, Benjamin Stott, and George Hadfield.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ *Stockport Advertiser*, 19, 26 August 1842

⁹⁰ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 58-62, Case against the Chartists, 1842; *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1842; *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 20 August 1842; R. Sykes, 'Early Chartism and Trade Unionism in South-East Lancashire', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 152-193

Local meetings of trades were of more importance in the strike in the Northwest towns than elsewhere in the country. However in the various towns outside Manchester the role of the trades who did meet was mainly confined to electing delegates for the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference. It was often Chartist activists who were elected by these trade meetings in the various towns to go to the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference as delegates, for example at Colne the Chartist activist James Mooney. At Oldham John Nield and Henry Hunt Whitehead, both officers of the Oldham NCA locality, were elected to represent the hatters and cardroom workers of Oldham. Henry Worthing, an officer of the Eccles NCA, was elected to go to the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference to represent the plasterers of Eccles.⁹¹

Historians have often debated whether the aim of the strike was for wages or for the enactment of the Charter. In fact once the strike had spread to Manchester and the surrounding areas until about the 20 August when the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference was forced to dissolve, the resolutions passed were overwhelmingly either for the Charter or for both wages and the Charter to protect wages. Formal resolutions in favour of the aim of the strike being the enactment of the Charter were passed at public meetings at, for example, Mottram Moor on 11 and 12 August, at Preston on 12 August, at Stalybridge by the visiting Glossop turnouts on 13 August, at Stockport on 13 August, at Rochdale by 15 August at the latest, at Lees on 15 August, at Oldham on 16 August and of course at the metal trades and millworkers conferences in Manchester on 12 August. The first resolution passed by the conference of the 'various trades and mill-hands' on the morning of 12 August was that 'we the delegates representing various trades of Manchester and its vicinity, with delegates from the various parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire, do most emphatically declare that it is our solemn and conscious conviction that all the evils which affect society, and which have prostrated the interests and energies of the great body of the producing classes arise solely from class legislation, and that the only remedy for the present alarming distress and widespread destitution, is the immediate and unmutilated adoption, and carrying into law, the document known as the People's Charter.' The second resolution passed was that 'this meeting recommend the people of all trades and callings, to forthwith cease work, until the above document becomes the law of the land.' The conference of the 'mechanics, engineers, millwrights, moulders and smiths' held on the

⁹¹ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 1 January, 8 June 1842

afternoon of 12 August had adopted the first resolution and in place of the second had called for a regional conference, although it had been reported in the local press as adopting both resolutions.⁹² The strikers felt they were in an unfair position as they had no say in legislation and only the Charter would enable them to protect their wages by law with for example minimum wage legislation being enacted once the Charter was passed.

Historians such as Mather and Reid have noted that some localities gave more consistent support to wages than to the Charter. There were exceptions to the overwhelming aim for the Charter but these can be explained without rejecting the view that the strike was truly a strike for the Charter. In a number of localities where there was a current, though normally a temporary one, for the strike to be for wages alone, it was often due to the temporary influence of speakers from the Ashton area who had started the strike and belonged to the section which was committed to a wages strike. As we have seen the Chartist activists from the Ashton, Stalybridge and Hyde area who started the strike were divided from the start about whether the strike should be for the Charter or to combat the ACLL manufacturers' wage reductions. Some of those Ashton speakers in favour of the wage question who travelled as delegates to other areas to spread the strike often used their influence in favour of the wage question. The argument was used by some Ashton activists who had received financial support from the shopkeepers for their delegate mission to the surrounding towns that the middle classes and shopkeepers would financially support a strike for wages but not one for the Charter and the fear of losing the possible financial support of the shopkeepers was often the cause of votes at meetings for the strike to be for wages alone. Two examples of this are Stockport and Lees. Stockport is a particularly important case as Reid insisted that the strike in Stockport was a wage strike and that support in Stockport for a strike for the Charter was superficial. A Stockport public meeting which included local Chartist activists as speakers voted for the strike to be for the Charter on 13 August. But on 15 August when Richard Pilling was a speaker another meeting at Stockport tended more towards it being a wage question alone. An argument used at that meeting was that the shopkeepers would provide credit for a wages strike but not for a political strike. Richard Pilling had all along been in favour of the strike being a wage question

⁹² *Manchester Guardian*, 13, 17, 20 August 1842; *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 13, 20 August 1842; *Stockport Advertiser*, 12, 19 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 13, 20, 27 August 1842

unlike many of the originators of the strike. At Lees there was a vote for the strike to be for the Charter at a public meeting on 15 August. But delegates from the Ashton area were at that meeting and left telling the crowd that the shopkeepers would withdraw support, and the result was a vote for wages at a meeting at Lees on 16 August.⁹³ Where the fear of loss of shopkeepers' support or the influence of Ashton delegates in favour of the wage question, such as Pilling, was strong there tended to be temporary votes for the strike to be a wage question alone. Otherwise the public meetings tended to resolve that the strike should be for the Charter or for both the Charter and wages. It was the influence of that section of the Ashton and Stalybridge strikers who wanted to confine the strike to wages which produced the few days lag at the start of the strike noticeable in some though not all towns when resolutions were simply for wages on 8, 9 and 10 August. It was after the local activists of places such as Stockport and Rochdale reoriented themselves after the surprise of the irruption of the turnouts and began to lead the strikes in their own towns that the call for the Charter became predominant.

The summer of 1842 witnessed the most severe industrial depression of the nineteenth century and nowhere was it more severe than in the Northwest where large-scale factory production was at its most advanced. But the strike for the Charter was not a blind reaction to depression. Rather the Chartist analysis was convincing in a period of depression. Social evils were seen to be the result of class legislation. The strike was to be a massive display of public opinion to unnerve the government and make it bow to public opinion by enacting the Charter. Once the Charter was enacted fair laws could be established including the repeal of indirect taxes, an efficient factory act, minimum wage levels, taxes on machinery, and the abolition of the New Poor Law. It was this belief in the Chartist analysis which helps explain why the strike was general in many Northwest towns. For example in the Rochdale area it was being said at every meeting that 'the Anti-Corn Law League have caused us to make this movement, but it is our own fault if we do not get more than they think; we will have the Charter, and not be deceived by the middle classes in this question as on the Reform Bill.'⁹⁴

In many towns in the Northwest the strike was general among the labouring classes for a week or more. The only significant groups among the labouring classes not to strike

⁹³ *Stockport Advertiser*, 19 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

⁹⁴ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 13 August 1842

were the agricultural labourers and rail transport workers. In Manchester itself virtually all business was suspended between 9 and 20 August. The same was true in many of the outlying industrial towns such as Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Bury, Glossop and of course the Ashton, Stalybridge and Hyde district. For example at Rochdale on 11 August, according to John Bright, 'every description of work has stopped.'⁹⁵ A wide range of occupational groups was involved, reflecting the overall occupational structure of the towns and townships in which the strike occurred. The textile workers formed the backbone of the strike. Those involved were not only the powerloom weavers but also the better-paid spinners. Auxiliary textile workers were also among the strikers. For example out of a sample of a group of 72 turnouts with occupations given from the Heywood and Bury area who were arrested after they went on procession to the collieries at Radcliffe there were 20 weavers (of whom 8 were definitely powerloom weavers), 3 spinners, 5 piecers, 1 cardroom jobber and 1 twister. Labourers were also well represented in the strike. However skilled artisans also took part in the strike including shoemakers, tailors, plasterers, mechanics, and engineers. For example in the sample of 72 there were three smiths, three mechanics, one wheelwright, one shoemaker and one clogger.⁹⁶ The wide spread of trades involved in the strike, many of them relatively well paid, emphasises the political nature of the strike until 20 August. Significantly all trades apart from the cotton spinners and weavers rapidly returned to work after 20 August when it was clear that the Charter was not obtainable through the strike. As one Bolton Chartist activist declared after the strike, 'if the strike were not for the Charter, what had the mechanics, mill-wrights, engineers, tailors and shoemakers to do with it? They had no interest in the spinners' and weavers' strike. We certainly struck for the Charter.'⁹⁷ Working class women, as well as men, were active participants in the turnout crowds throughout the Northwest. For example young women were at the front of the turnout procession which marched into Manchester on 9 August, and women were active in the turnout crowd at Preston on 13 August even collecting stones for the crowd to throw.⁹⁸

The vast majority of the local and national Chartist leaders of the strike called for it to be a peaceful moral force action. There were a few exceptions, most notably Thomas

⁹⁵ BL Add MS 43,383, f. 79, J. Bright to R. Cobden, Rochdale, 11 August 1842

⁹⁶ *Bolton Free Press*, 20 August 1842

⁹⁷ *Bolton Free Press*, 27 August 1842

⁹⁸ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 78; *Manchester Guardian*, 10 August 1842

Cooper at the NCA Conference, but the exceptions were insignificant. The crowds however were not as restrained as the majority of the local leaders called for. Elements of the traditional crowd action identified by E. P. Thompson and Rudé were present. The crowds were still at a transitional stage between traditional collective actions involving some damage to property and fully fledged peaceful institutions.⁹⁹ The 'Plug Plot' has often been seen as an undisciplined outbreak of Chartist violence but the opinion of contemporaries was that the strike was surprisingly peaceful given the fact of the large numbers involved and that the authorities lost control of many towns for periods of time. There was little violence beyond that necessary to turn out the mills. In the vast majority of cases the workers left work enthusiastically and willingly. In a few cases some personal violence was done to masters who resisted and the windows were broken at mills which the masters barricaded or defended with special constables. There were however some cases of stoning of special constables and the military. Bread and sometimes money were donated by shopkeepers to passing processions though it is hard to know how far these were given willingly. The ransack of Stockport Workhouse for food on 11 August by a section of the turnouts was the only serious case of the mass taking of food and no violence towards persons was used.¹⁰⁰ The taking of food from the unjust New Poor Law ordained workhouse, may been seen as a traditional form of crowd action associated with the 'moral economy'. The Mayor of Stockport's widely publicised speeches at the ACLL Conference in London in July, in which he declared that he would not order the troops to fire on a starving people, may also have been a contributory factor. No deaths were caused by the strikers and those deaths that occurred where the result of the military firing on the unarmed people. The military were ordered to shoot into the crowds, with fatalities resulting, at Preston on 13 August and at Blackburn on 15 August. The most serious cases of violence were thus the work of the authorities rather than the crowds and on the face of it the actions of the crowds at Preston and Blackburn do not seem to have been more serious than in Manchester where no firing took place. At Preston the crowd had been throwing stones at the special constables with whom they were fighting a running battle and they then attempted to throw stones at the military. At Blackburn the crowd had been throwing stones at the military when prisoners were about to be escorted by the military in a

⁹⁹ G. Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (New York, 1964), 195-269; E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136

¹⁰⁰ *Stockport Advertiser*, 12, 19, 26 August 1842

coach. Perhaps these two cases should be seen in the light of the talk by local Chartists in North Lancashire in May and June of armed rebellion which undoubtedly panicked the magistrates in North Lancashire.¹⁰¹

The Conferences in Manchester

The Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference sat from 15 to 20 August and voted in favour of the aim of the strike being the Charter. The Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference originated in separate conferences in Manchester of the 'various trades and mill-hands' held on 11 and 12 August and of the 'mechanics, engineers, millwrights, moulders and smiths' also held on 11 and 12 August. As we have already seen, the conference of the various trades and mill-hands blamed distress on class legislation and called for strike to be for the Charter on 12 August. The conference of the mechanics, engineers, millwrights, moulders and smiths on the same day affirmed its belief that distress was the result of class legislation which could only be remedied by the Charter and called for delegates to be elected throughout the region to meet on 15 August. The conferences of the mill-hands and mechanics merged together on 13 August to call for elections to a Great Trades Delegate Conference which was to sit on 15 August.¹⁰² The background to the trades conferences has been examined by Sykes and Mather showing that it is not surprising that the trades conferences should have convened itself almost spontaneously as the trades in Manchester had been joining the NCA throughout the first half of the year.¹⁰³ However they may have exaggerated the extent to which trade unions, as distinct from members of the same trade who were Chartists, were forming themselves into separate NCA localities. Two further reasons can be given for the convening of the trades conferences in Manchester once the strike had been brought there by the Ashton and Stalybridge turnouts. Firstly the mechanics NCA trade locality had been the most active of the trade localities to join the NCA in July and early August holding many meetings and lectures, so it is natural that they should have taken the initiative to convene the trades conference. In addition the trades

¹⁰¹ *Preston Chronicle*, 13, 20 August 1842

¹⁰² PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 62-7, Case against the Chartists, 1842; *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 13, 20 August 1842

¹⁰³ F. C. Mather, 'The General Strike of 1842', in R. Quinault and J. Stevenson (eds), *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1974), 115-140; R. Sykes, 'Early Chartist and Trade Unionism in South-East Lancashire', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 152-193

committee attached to the Hunt Memorial Committee, which included representatives of the Chartist Mechanics amongst others, had planned a trades procession on 16 August to celebrate the Peterloo anniversary and the Hunt memorial opening. The trades procession was banned and the trades instead used the opportunity to set up the conferences. The delegates to the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference itself which met on 15 August were not elected by trade societies but rather by members of the same trade whether they were unionists or not and it was often Chartist activists who were voted as delegates. The Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference was far less 'syndicalist' than it might appear at first sight. Rather it fitted in much more with McDouall's ideas in the *Chartist and Republican Journal* where he saw trade support as essentially organisational. The courting of the trades by the NCA Executive members James Leach, John Campbell and P. M. McDouall was a preparation in case the 'sacred month' was ever revived. At the 1839 General Convention it was stressed that the 'sacred month' would need trades support. McDouall began courting the trades in 1841 openly stating that if there was to be another 'sacred month' or similar measure Chartist associations based on members of the same trade would be useful for organisational purposes. McDouall stressed that these associations should be composed of member of the same trade who were Chartists rather than be based on trade unions which included those who were not Chartists, unless of course particular unions were unanimously in favour of the Charter which was unlikely due to the Owenite and Anti-Corn Law presence in many of the trades societies.¹⁰⁴

The concept of the strike developed at the Manchester Great Trades Delegate conference was overwhelmingly of a peaceful moral force move to unnerve the government by an irresistible display of public opinion. Once the government and Parliament had lost its nerve the Queen would have no choice but to appoint ministers who would carry the Charter through Parliament. They believed that a display of overwhelming unity among the working classes, would leave the government with no choice but to capitulate and pass the Charter. The Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference aimed the strike against the government rather than against the masters. Once the Charter was enacted further legislation would protect the working man and his

¹⁰⁴ McDouall's *Chartist and Republican Journal*, 17, 24 April 1842; *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 20 August 1842; *Manchester Guardian*, 13, 17 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 13, 20 August 1842

wages. Throughout the strike the trades conferences condemned any destruction of life or property and insisted that the strike must remain peaceful.

The Great Trades Delegate Conference viewed the strike as a replay of the Reform Bill agitation even if they exaggerated the influence of the working classes in that agitation. The address of the merged trades conference on 13 August declared that 'The Trades of Britain carried the Reform Bill. The Trades of Britain shall carry the Charter.'¹⁰⁵ The Trade Delegates envisioned the strike as a peaceful legal constitutional move. For example their resolution of 16 August printed and placarded as an address 'Resolved – that the delegates in public meeting assembled, do recommend to the various constituencies we represent, to adopt all legal means to carry into effect the People's Charter; and further we recommend that delegates be sent through the whole country to endeavour to obtain the co-operation of the middle and working classes in carrying out the resolution of ceasing labour until the Charter becomes the law of the land.'¹⁰⁶ By contrast it was the authorities who were held, in the Great Trades Delegate Conference address issued on the morning of 16 August drafted on the basis of Monday's meeting, to have interfered 'with the legal and recognised constitutional rights of the people...by placard or otherwise' by banning and dispersing meetings and processions.¹⁰⁷

The strike for the Charter was to be a moral force display of irresistible public opinion, which was to be entirely peaceful in nature. The Great Trades Delegate Conference described themselves as being 'supported by the indestructible bulwark of public opinion...We have only one course to recommend, which we know you will most readily adopt, namely to watch over the safety of life and property.'¹⁰⁸ The Trade Delegates' commitment to a peaceful moral force strike as a display of united public opinion is evidenced in their concluding address issued on 20 August in which they 'exceedingly regret' and 'had not the slightest anticipation' of the 'civil commotion' that had arisen in the strike and which they felt had made the strike for the Charter impractical for the present, but they affirmed that the 'national cessation from labour until the Charter becomes the law of the land and could be done 'legally and constitutionally' and they would attempt it again once their organisation was sufficient

¹⁰⁵ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

¹⁰⁶ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 62-7, Case against the Chartists, 1842

¹⁰⁷ *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1842

¹⁰⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1842



and their resources adequate for it.¹⁰⁹ The vast majority of the Trade Delegates insisted throughout in their debates that the strike must remain peaceful. A small handful argued that the strikers should take food to support themselves. However one was James Duffy, a former League lecturer who had recently turned to the Chartist and whose loyalty was doubtful. Another delegate argued that they would be right to take the crops from the hills, reminiscent of William Benbow's plan for a 'National Holiday'. However the vast majority of the conference were firmly against taking food and insisted that they must remain within the law. Closely linked with the concept of the strike as a peaceful display of overwhelming public opinion that would unnerve the government was the idea that labour was the source of all wealth. If labour was the source of all wealth then it appeared common sense to the Trade Delegates that once labour had ceased nationally the government and Parliament would feel they had no choice but to submit as the alternative would be the rapid decline of the country's national wealth. The Trade Delegates thus called 'most emphatically upon the people to discontinue the production or creation of wealth' in their address on the morning of 16 August.¹¹⁰

The Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference voted overwhelmingly in favour of the aim of the strike being the enactment of the Charter. On 15 August when the question was put to the vote out of 85 delegates present 59 were for making it a strike for the Charter, 19 to abide the decision of the meeting, and only 7 for making it merely a wage question.¹¹¹ Historians have sometimes expressed their opinion that it was not clear how the aim of the strike could be both for wages and the Charter, and whether the strike was aimed against the masters or the against the government. However this vagueness was not present at the time and the Great Trades Delegate Conference were clear in their thinking about the aim of the strike. For the Great Trades Delegate Conference the strike was aimed against the government. They wanted to receive fair wages and a fair working day, but this was unobtainable in the current situation due to unfair class legislation which did not protect the working man's property, his labour. Only the enactment of the Charter could provide fair laws that would include minimum wage legislation, efficient factory acts and other reforms for social grievances. However the Charter could only be obtained by aiming the strike as a display of public opinion

¹⁰⁹ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 62-7, Case against the Chartist, 1842

¹¹⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1842; William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* (London, 1832), 1-15

¹¹¹ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

against the government to force the government to submit, and not by aiming it against the mill owners. This can be seen in for example the address issued on the morning of 16 August by the Great Trades Delegate Conference, which found ‘by reference to the reports of the delegates...that it is the embodied opinion of the working classes, from a comparison of the past with the present, as a criterion to judge of the future, that no sufficient guarantee is afforded to the producers of wealth, but from the adoption and establishment of the people’s political rights.’ Similarly in their concluding address on 20 August the Great Trades Delegate Conference found ‘that the labourer and artisan having, for a series of years, vainly struggled to maintain the standard of wages which would enable them to obtain a supply of even the commonest necessities of life, are of the opinion, that the repeated prostration of their efforts are to be solely attributed to their political disenfranchisement...we came to the conclusion that the only means by which the labouring and the producing classes of this country can be fairly remunerated, property protected, and themselves eventually raised from the unparalleled depths of degradation to which they are at present reduced, is by the legislative enactment of the document known as the People’s Charter.’¹¹²

But more than this, the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference did also see itself as an alternative provisional government. Parssinen was unduly dismissive of it as a type of anti-parliament though it was not a true anti-parliament as Parliament had been prorogued.¹¹³ For example the conference described itself as ‘we the people’s delegates’ who were ‘prepared to watch over and guard the people’s interests, as a personification of the people’s will’ and as the ‘true and *bona fide* representatives of the people of these districts.’ William Benbow’s element of a congress, from the *Grand National Holiday and Congress*, was present in the conference. It might have developed to include delegates from other parts of the country but the conference, public meetings, and the strike itself were put down by force before this could develop. Working people all over the country in Yorkshire, the Midlands, South Wales, Scotland and London looked to the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference for leadership in the strike for the Charter, as did those in the Northwest region itself.¹¹⁴

¹¹² PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 62-7, Case against the Chartists, 1842

¹¹³ T. M. Parssinen, ‘Association, Convention and Anti-Parliament in British Radical Politics’, *English Historical Review*, 88 (1973), 504-33

¹¹⁴ William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* (London, 1832), 1-15

The NCA and Executive conference was also sitting in Manchester by prior arrangement to coincide with the opening by Feargus O'Connor of the Henry Hunt memorial on the anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre on August 16 and with a trades procession organised by the Hunt memorial committee which was to march through Manchester on the anniversary of Peterloo to attend the ceremony. The conference had been convened to discuss Chartist organisation and resolve disputes among the leadership. It was also to consider (unnamed) 'ulterior measures', which may possibly have included resurrecting the idea of a 'sacred month' given P. M. McDouall's, James Leech's and John Campbell's support for trade involvement in Chartism. However there is no evidence that the Chartist leadership had any involvement in or knowledge of the strike in Ashton before it began. The NCA and Executive Conference which met on 16 and 17 August gave an overwhelming though not completely unanimous endorsement of the strike for the Charter which was already underway and which the Manchester trades conferences had declared in favour of. In the absence of firm ulterior measures from the national leadership and following the initial lead from Ashton the local activists in the Northwest were implementing ulterior measures themselves from the local platforms in the form of the strike for the Charter. The national Chartist leadership had neglected the ulterior measures of the mass platform following the rejection of the second national petition in May with the national leaders unwilling to use the 'language of menace' after the failure of 1839. The national Chartist leadership had not planned the strike or been involved in its outbreak but it did now attempt to gain control. There were divisions in the NCA Conference, in particular William Hill, the editor of the *Northern Star*, and George Julian Harney, the minor national leader who in 1839 had stretched the language of the constitutional mass platform to the utmost, were against endorsing the strike for the Charter because it was not completely national, the people were unarmed, the authorities would undoubtedly use force to repress it and punish those involved, and the Chartist movement would be crippled if the strike failed.¹¹⁵

However a very large majority in NCA Conference was in favour of supporting the strike for the Charter. All four members of the Executive present, James Leach, P. M. McDouall, John Campbell and Jonathan Bairstow, were strongly in favour of the strike

¹¹⁵ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 153-4; PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. James Leach and others, 1842; A. R. Schøyen, *The Chartist Challenge: George Julian Harney* (London, 1958), 98-121

for the Charter. Feargus O'Connor clearly had grave doubts but went with the large majority in favour of the strike for the Charter. The conference attempted to provide a national platform for the strike for the Charter by issuing and printing an address by the Executive and a resolution and address by the conference giving firm support to the strike for the Charter.¹¹⁶ A large majority at the NCA and Executive Conference passed a resolution on 17 August enthusiastically supporting the strike. While insisting that 'the Chartist body did not originate the present cessation from labour', the NCA Conference delegates' resolution went on to 'express their deep sympathy with their constituents, the working men now on strike' and confirmed that 'we strongly approve the extension and continuation of their present struggle till the People's Charter becomes a legislative enactment....and pledge ourselves on our return to our respective localities to give a proper direction to the People's efforts.'¹¹⁷ More important than divisions in the conference itself was Hill's role as editor of the *Northern Star*. He had already cast damp water on the strike as a League ploy in the 13 August edition and continued this more strongly in the 20 August edition refusing to print the Executive address that had been issued in support of the strike for the Charter.¹¹⁸

The NCA and Executive Conference in their address 'to the Chartist Public' issued on Wednesday 17 August took the view that the strike was due to the actions of the Ashton and Stalybridge cotton masters in making reductions in wages in the hope of creating turmoil to embarrass the government into repealing the corn laws. The people had been forced to strike, but now that the people had turned out they had aimed the strike against the government and for the Charter, not for the repeal of the Corn Laws, but also not against the masters merely for a rise of wages. Thus the NCA Conference address could claim that 'the People appear to have made the "strike of the League" for a repeal of the Corn Laws, into a stand for principle and the Charter'.¹¹⁹ Although the strike was aimed against the government the gaining of the Charter from the government would also be a blow against the 'milloocracy' who would have to bow to remedial legislation such as minimum wages laws and would no longer be able to rely on an unfair advantage from class legislation.

¹¹⁶ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. James Leach and others, 1842; *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 153-4

¹¹⁷ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. James Leach and others, 1842

¹¹⁸ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. James Leach and others, 1842

¹¹⁹ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

The majority of those at the NCA and Executive Conference, like the majority of those at the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference, shared a concept of the strike as a peaceful 'moral force' move. However it would not be completely accurate to make a rigid distinction between moral and physical force. A united people peacefully displaying their unity of object had the ultimate sanction, though not stated by the conference in 1842 unlike in 1839, of using physical force if their wishes were denied. Nevertheless there was little use of the 'language of menace' and the 'peacefully if we can, forcibly if we must' stance of 1839. A very small minority at the NCA Conference had an openly physical force concept of the strike. Thomas Cooper, the leader of the Leicester Chartists, was the principal exponent of this view, talking of the Potteries men being prepared to fight and that being prepared to show that they would fight would be the only thing that would move the government. Yet even Cooper put the emphasis on putting up a show that they were prepared to fight rather than actually engaging in violence. Cooper essentially hoped to move the government by putting on a bold front rather than by actually fighting.¹²⁰ The strike was to be completely peaceful and there was no place in it for any violence or damage to persons or property, the NCA Conference advised the strikers in its address 'against waging warfare against recognised authority...we would, above all things, counsel you against the destruction of life and property.'¹²¹

For the Chartist leadership the strike for the Charter was a display of united opinion against the government, based on moral force public opinion. It was to be an overwhelming display of united public opinion which would unnerve the government and Parliament as presently constituted, and leave it with no choice in the face of a united hostile public opinion but to enact the People's Charter. This can be seen in the address issued by the NCA Executive Committee, 'When the universal holiday prevails...then of what use will bayonets be against public opinion? What tyrant can then live above the terrible tide of thought and energy, which is now flowing fast, under the guidance of man's intellect, which is now destined by a Creator to elevate his people

¹²⁰ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R v. James Leach and others, 1842; *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 127; Thomas Cooper, *Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1873), 207-11

¹²¹ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

above the reach of want, the rancour of despotism, and the penalties of bondage...'¹²² The unity of the people was essential if this display of peaceful moral force public opinion was to become powerful enough to leave the government with no choice but to submit and the NCA Conference stressed the importance of unity in its address, 'We believe the moral strength of a united people to be sufficiently powerful, when well directed, to overcome all physical force that tyranny can summon to its aid...let union and peace be the watchword.'¹²³

The NCA and Executive Conference felt that there was no conflict between the demand for higher wages, satisfaction of social grievances and hatred of the mill owners on one hand, and a strike for the Charter aimed against the government on the other. Labour was a prey both to the government through taxes and to the mill owners because although labour was the source of all wealth it did not receive its fair reward due to class legislation which gave capital an unfair advantage in exchange and distribution. Labour, which was the property of the working men, did not receive protection like all others forms of property. Thus the NCA Executive Committee address declared that 'labour...is not possessed of the same legal protection which is given to those lifeless effects...which labour have alone created...if labour has no protection, wages cannot be upheld nor in the slightest degree regulated, until every workman of twenty-one years of age, and of sane mind, is on the *same political level as the employer*'.¹²⁴ The enactment of the Charter would provide a Parliament and government which would legislate in the interests of the majority removing laws which unfairly favoured the mill owners and providing a minimum wage law, efficient factory acts and other social reforms. Thus the NCA Executive could claim that 'the Charter would remove by universal will, expressed in universal suffrage, the heavy hand of taxes which now crush the existence of the labourer, and cripple the efforts of commerce; that it would give cheap government as well as cheap food, high wages as well as low taxes, bring happiness to the hearthstone, plenty to the table, protection to the old, education to the young, permanent prosperity to the country, long-continued protective political power to

¹²² PRO HO 45/249c, f. 218, Placard, The Executive Committee of the National Chartist Association to the People, 17 August 1842

¹²³ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

¹²⁴ PRO HO 45/249c, f. 218, Executive Committee placard, 17 August 1842

labour, and peace, blessed peace, to exhausted humanity and the approving nations...',¹²⁵

Class and other Collective Identities

Multiple collective identities were articulated in the strike in the Northwest of which class was the most important identity. Different identities present in the strike in the Northwest were those of class, the people or nation, and nonconformist Christianity. Collective identities are 'imagined identities'. This is not to suggest that collective identities have no existence outside of language or that there is no material basis for collective identities.¹²⁶ However aspects of peoples lives are prioritised through written and spoken language and by symbols.

The language of class or classes was present throughout the strike in the Northwest. The strikers, for example in the placard issued by the Blackburn trades meeting on 18 August and in various of the addresses issued by the trades conferences which met in Manchester, often referred to the 'working classes'. The plural 'classes' rather than the singular 'class' was normally used, and this was essentially a descriptive term, descriptive in the sense of occupation, meaning those who worked with their hands. There was no monolithic factory proletariat in existence even in the Northwest. Many handloom weavers still existed. In Manchester itself factory workers were a minority and traditional artisans abounded as Sykes has demonstrated. Nevertheless the Northwest strikers felt that there was a divide between the working classes and middle classes whether the plural was used or not. This use of horizontal classes or class language was in contrast to the eighteenth century language of vertical orders, degrees and interests identified by Briggs. The strikers felt that there was a significant difference between those who performed manual labour to earn their living and those who did not need to do so. This was not a stable or monolithic sense of class but it would be wrong to dismiss it as a class identity. There is no need for us to adopt the dogmatic Marxist definition of class which some postmodernist historians insist upon. Even Marx's own distinction of 'class in itself' and 'class for itself', that is class-consciousness, does not

¹²⁵ PRO HO 45/249c, f. 218, Executive Committee placard, 17 August 1842

¹²⁶ P. Joyce, *Visions of the People* (Cambridge, 1991), 1-23; P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects* (Cambridge, 1994), 1-20

need to be dogmatically adhered to in order for us to find a loose class identity present in the strike. In the end almost all historians use class in a descriptive way. Similarly in 1842 the strikers in the Northwest themselves used class language in a descriptive, loose but nevertheless significant way. They recognised a difference between the working and the middle classes even if not all historians have done so.¹²⁷

This working class identity articulated in the strike in the Northwest was the product of a combination of political, economic and social oppression. Stedman Jones and Joyce have placed too much emphasis on class as a political construction.¹²⁸ In the strike in the Northwest, class was the product of economic and social oppression as well as political oppression. For example the Blackburn trades deprecated 'the late conduct of the employers in making frequent reductions in the wages of the labouring man, thereby depriving him of procuring sustenance.' The Bolton spinners complained that the masters had reduced their wages, forced them into unhealthy and disagreeable homes, charged them unreasonable rents, had meanly and disgracefully employed apprentices to supersede the regular journeymen, and in various ways had curtailed their wages by not paying up to the list that the masters had unanimously agreed to. They were further of the opinion that a great deal of the distress in the manufacturing districts was owing to the improvements in machinery, thus superseding manual labour and creating a redundant and burdensome population.¹²⁹

The working class identity articulated in the strike in the Northwest was not necessarily a conflictual identity aimed against the middle classes in their economic role in contrast to their political role. For example addresses issued by the Blackburn trades on 18 August, by the Bolton spinners on 15 August and by the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference on 16 August all called on the middle classes to help the working classes in their struggle to gain their political rights. The address of the merged trades

¹²⁷ PRO HO 45/249, f. 181, Placard with the resolutions passed by the Blackburn trades meeting, 18 August 1842; A. Briggs, 'The Language of Class in Early Nineteenth Century England', in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds), *Essays in Labour History* (London, 1960), 43-73; R. A. Sykes, 'Popular Politics and Trade Unionism in South-East Lancashire 1829-1842' (PhD, Manchester, 1982), 1-79

¹²⁸ G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), 90-179; G. Stedman Jones, 'The Language of Chartism', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 3-58; P. Joyce, *Visions of the People* (Cambridge, 1991), 1-23; P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects* (Cambridge, 1994), 1-20

¹²⁹ PRO HO 45/249, f. 181, Blackburn placard, 18 August 1842; PRO HO 45/249, f. 127, Placard with the resolutions of the Bolton spinners meeting, 15 August 1842

conference in Manchester on 13 August pledged the conference to ‘persevere in our exertions until we achieve the complete enfranchisement of our brethren of the working and middle classes from the thraldom of Monopoly and Class legislation’. The League manufacturers who were held to have provoked the strike and other large manufacturers were strongly criticised. However these were seen as a separate element from the shopkeepers and small manufacturers. They were the ‘milloccracy’ who had more in common with the aristocrats and financiers than with the lesser middle classes. Even where employers were criticised as in the Bolton and Blackburn trades addresses the blame was normally put on a temporary aberration from customary norms on the part of the masters, with the interests of the working men and the masters being basically the same. The class identity articulated in the strike in the Northwest did not involve a socialist analysis of society as argued for by Foster. Stedman Jones was correct that exploitation was located in exchange and distribution rather than in production. The chief economic and social demand made in the strike in the Northwest, in addition to the enactment of the Charter, was a ‘fair day’s wage for a fair day’s work’ and there was no call for the working classes to take control of the means of production. Much of the criticism was made in moral as much as in economic terms, the Bolton spinners complaining of ‘those principles of injustice and tyranny’ practised by the master thus proving ‘their unprincipled meanness and trickery.’¹³⁰

A class based ‘labour’ identity was articulated in the strike. ‘Labour’ was opposed to ‘capital’ and the ‘tyrants’: the mill owners. This class-based ‘labour’ identity can be seen for example in the address issued by the NCA Conference on 17 August. This address argued that the strike had been intended by the League millowners to embarrass the government into repealing the corn laws, but now the people had turned it into a strike to press the government to pass the Charter. Despite declaring that the strike was aimed against the government and for the Charter, in the address ‘ill requited labour’ and the ‘interests of labour’ were opposed to ‘all powerful capital..tyrants..oppressors.. who have steeped you in poverty and accumulated vast incomes by your distress’. According to the address ‘Ours is a battle of labour against capital, of right against might, of justice against injustice, and of knowledge against bigotry and intolerance’.¹³¹

¹³⁰ PRO HO 45/249, f.181, Blackburn placard, 18 August 1842; PRO HO 45/249, f.127, Bolton placard, 15 August 1842; *Manchester Guardian*, 13, 17 August 1842

¹³¹ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

The Executive address urged that 'Labour must no longer be the common prey of masters and rulers...he has been convinced that all wealth, comfort, and produce, everything valuable, useful and elegant, have sprung from his hands and he feels that his cottage is empty, his back thinly clad, his children breadless, himself hopeless, his mind harassed, and his body punished, that undue riches, luxury, and gorgeous plenty might be heaped on the palaces of the taskmasters, and flooded in the granaries of the oppressor. Nature, God, and reason, have condemned this inequality, and in the thunder of a people's voice it must perish forever.'¹³² A class based identity of conflict between labour and capital, blending with the idea that labour was the source of all wealth, even if this conflict was centred in exchange and distribution rather than in ownership of the means of production, was here articulated in the strike, although the remedy for inequality lay in labour gaining political power.

However the class identity articulated in the strike in the Northwest was also the product of political oppression. By the first Reform Act in 1832 the working men had been marked out as the disenfranchised class. The main benefit of Stedman Jones' work has been to enforce the political analysis of Chartism.¹³³ The Chartists did believe that social evils were due to a corrupt political system and that political reform would remedy it by bringing fair laws and ending class legislation, that is legislation for the benefit of a minority rather than for the majority. For example the Bolton spinners, after describing their economic and social grievances against their masters, declared their opinion that 'the above evils ariseth from class legislation, and we are further of the opinion that misery, ignorance, poverty and crime, will continue to exist until the People's Charter becomes the law of the land.' Similarly the Blackburn trades after listing their economic and social grievances affirmed that 'class legislation is the primary cause of most of the evils which now afflict and disorganise society.' Likewise the two trades conferences which met in Manchester on 12 August passed resolutions declaring their conviction 'that all the evils that afflict society, and which have prostrated the energies of the producing classes, arise solely from class legislation; and that the only remedy for the present alarming distress and widespread destitution is the

¹³² PRO HO 45/249c, f. 218, Executive Committee placard, 17 August 1842

¹³³ G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), 90-179; G. Stedman Jones, 'The Language of Chartism', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 3-58

immediate and unmutilated adoption and carrying into law the document known as the People's Charter.¹³⁴

But class was not the only identity articulated in the strike in the Northwest. The language of 'the people', 'the nation', and the 'productive' was also present. Before 1832 the people included both the middle classes and the working classes. But after the first Reform Act the middle classes could be considered as no longer forming part of the people due to their enfranchisement and their encouragement of Whig legislation such as the New Poor Law, *Municipal Corporations Act*, unsatisfactory and grudging factory reforms, and support of the persecution of trade unionists in the cases of the Glasgow cotton spinners and Dorchester labourers. However on another reading the departure of the middle classes from the people could be considered as more apparent than real as they had not gained real political power by the Reform Act. The aristocracy were still firmly in power. The 'people' was still a fluid inclusive identity which could still be stretched to take in the virtuous middle classes especially shop keepers and small masters. The strikers in the Northwest used the language of the people as much, if not more than, the language of class. For example the addresses of the Manchester Trade Delegates frequently made reference to 'the people'. Nevertheless in the strike in the Northwest 'the people' often meant more or less the working classes. For example the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference resolved that they would consult 'the middle classes generally, for the purpose of ascertaining how far they are prepared to assist and support the people in the struggle for the attainment of their political rights'. This suggests that the people does not include the middle classes and refers instead to the working classes.¹³⁵

Much use was also made of the inclusive language of 'the nation' and of the 'productive' which could include both the working and middle classes. The masters could be held to belong to the 'productive' or 'industrious' classes due to the useful work performed in their managerial capacity. But similarly in the strike in the Northwest these were used to mean more or less the working classes. For example one of the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference addresses of 16 August declared

¹³⁴ PRO HO 45/249, f. 181, Blackburn placard, 18 August 1842; PRO HO 45/249, f. 127, Bolton placard, 15 August 1842; PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 62-7, Case against the Chartists, 1842

¹³⁵ *Manchester Guardian*, 17 August 1842; PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 62-7, Case against the Chartists, 1842

that 'it is the embodied opinion of the working classes...that no sufficient guarantee is afforded to the producers of wealth, but from the adoption and establishment of the people's political rights, as a safeguard for the lives, liberties and interests of the nation generally.' Here the working classes were equated with the people, the productive and the nation.¹³⁶

The ideology of popular constitutionalism and of the rights of freeborn Englishmen had also been much in evidence in the Northwest in speeches and addresses issued in the first half of 1842. For example an address produced in March 1842, five months before the strike, by a trades meeting in Manchester which had been instigated by the Operative ACLL to gain working men's support for repeal of the Corn Laws but which instead called for the Charter alone, made great use of the language of popular constitutionalism. The address complained of 'the devouring monster-class legislation', the national debt, the standing army, and the 'moneyocracy' or financiers. This was a traditional radical ideology attacking William Cobbett's 'Old Corruption'. It implied a reduction in taxation and corruption rather than a redistribution of wealth or the common ownership of the means of production. The address said that the evils complained of were 'for the aggrandisement of an idle, vicious, reckless, pampered aristocracy, and a grasping avaricious, knavish, plundering moneyocracy...very shortly there will be only very rich and very poor in this country.' The opposition to aristocracy was again a part of the traditional radical ideology and implied a division between people and aristocracy not between working and middle classes.¹³⁷ During the strike the language of popular constitutionalism was still used. For example the address of the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference on 16 August spoke of the 'legal and recognised constitutional rights of the people.'¹³⁸ However not surprisingly during the strike criticism was much more frequently made of the large manufacturers than of the aristocracy. Also in the Northwest strike the working classes differed from middle class radicals in why they wanted political reform. The working classes had their own alternative political economy or 'moral economy' which differed from the political economy of the middle classes and which as Epstein and Belchem have suggested marks the difference in the use of the language of popular constitutionalism by the

¹³⁶ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 62-7, Case against the Chartist, 1842

¹³⁷ *Northern Star*, 19 March 1842

¹³⁸ PRO TS 11/813/2677, ff. 62-7, Case against the Chartist, 1842

middle and working classes. Most importantly, in the context of the strike, the strikers believed that only political power could make wage increases permanent by putting them on an equal legal footing with the masters with the possibility of a Parliament elected by universal suffrage passing, for example, minimum wage laws. The six points would allow further beneficial legislation, it would end the *New Poor Law*, bring decent factory legislation to limit hours, minimum wage legislation, taxes on machinery, reduce indirect taxation, get rid of the rural police, and reduce the income of the Church of England. The Bolton spinners, for example, were of the opinion that once the six points were in place the distress in the manufacturing districts could be removed by further legislation which would include the establishment of an efficient *Factory Act*, restrictions on all moving power, and the colonisation of the crown lands.¹³⁹

Finally a strand of Christian identity was also present in the strike in the Northwest. Hymns and psalms were often sung by the turnout crowds as they processed from town to town to unplug the boilers and turn out the workers and at the strike meetings. Nevertheless this religious identity was not always used in an inclusive way. Rather the working classes were often identified in the strike as the true Christians. For example at a Rochdale strike meeting on 12 August one speaker compared the working classes 'to Christ, who was deserted in the day of tribulation by the rich and wealthy of this world.'¹⁴⁰

Class identity was strong in the Northwest and other identities such as the people, nation and religion were often reducible to a working class identity. This can be linked to the exploitation from factory production in large sized factories the development of which had been more rapid in the Northwest than in any other region. Of all the strike regions the Northwest had the strongest factory operative presence in the strike. But even in the strike in the Northwest, class was not the only identity present and it was a strongly political identity, not simply reducible to economic position.

¹³⁹ PRO HO 45/249, f. 127, Bolton placard, 15 August 1842

¹⁴⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 13 August 1842

Defeat of the Strike

The arrests and repeated dispersal of the Trades Delegates in Manchester forcing their final dissolution on 20 August was a major blow to the strike throughout the Northwest, and indeed nationally, and with it the hope that the Charter could be obtained quickly faded and the return to work soon began. The national Chartist leadership's endorsement of the strike had small effect. In part it came too late and its influence was limited by the hostility of Hill's editorials in the *Northern Star* of Saturday 20 August and his deliberate failure to print the Executive address although local newspapers printed it. The NCA and Executive Conference signally failed to convene itself into a National Convention. The Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference had appeared to be close to fulfilling this purpose, however once the Great Trades Delegate Conference dispersed no elected national conference was left sitting which was a fatal weakness.¹⁴¹ Sir William Warre, the military commander of the North, and the Manchester stipendary magistrate had been doubtful of the legality of arresting the delegates much to Sir James Graham's anger. A London magistrate was sent up to Manchester and the arrests of the delegates rapidly followed. Sir James Graham ensured that the troops were reinforced in Manchester and its area and the magistrates, now reassured by the actions of the Home Office and the arrival of more troops, began to act more firmly and declared all public assemblages illegal on the advice of the Home Office.¹⁴² From the start of the strike until 20 August the strike had been overwhelmingly either for the Charter or for the Charter and wages. However after the 20 August most trades apart from the spinners and weavers resumed work after the clear defeat of the political strike for the Charter. The weavers and spinners remained out longer, but merely for wages, as they were affected by the wage reductions. The strike in Oldham lasted until 26 August when several mills including the spinners resumed work, the hatters had already returned on the Tuesday and a few mills had resumed work on Thursday.¹⁴³ The Preston mills had resumed work on 15 August following the shooting by the military on the Saturday. On 17 August there was an attempt by a procession from Chorley to renew the strike in Preston. However this was defeated by

¹⁴¹ PRO PL 27/11, Part 2, R. v. James Leach and others, 1842

¹⁴² Sir James Graham Papers, Cambridge University Library, Bundle 52A, Graham to Warre, 15 August 1842, Graham to Queen Victoria, 16, 17, 18, 19 August 1842, Graham to Wellington, 19 August 1842

¹⁴³ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 27 August 1842

the military at Walton Bridge.¹⁴⁴ The Rochdale workers returned to work on 24 August.¹⁴⁵ In Bolton the mills resumed work on 25 August although the men gave two weeks notice for a purely industrial strike.¹⁴⁶ In Stockport most trades returned soon after the 20 August. However the textile mills remained out purely for wages into September with most back by 16 September and the rest returning to work the following week.¹⁴⁷ In Manchester itself most trades returned to work soon after the dispersal of the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference on 20 August, the cotton spinners and power looms weavers remained out merely for wages. The cotton spinners slowly returned to work over the following two weeks but the power loom weavers remained out until late September. In the Ashton and Stalybridge area the mills also remained out until late in September for wages with all back at work by 24 September.¹⁴⁸

In addition to the dispersal of the Trade Delegates in Manchester, whom the rest of the Northwest looked to as leaders of the strike for the Charter, the authorities in the different towns and districts defeated the strike by the arrest of the strike leaders, by declaring public meetings and processions illegal, and by the use of military and special constables to prevent public meetings, processions and the turning out of mills. For example the local Oldham Chartist activist and Oldham strike leader Samuel Yardley was arrested on 24 August and the military and specials were on orders to prevent any large meetings.¹⁴⁹ Similarly in Stockport John Wright was arrested on 19 August and the magistrates issued placards banning public meetings and the military and specials were much in evidence.¹⁵⁰ We have already seen that the military were used to fire on the crowds at Preston and Blackburn the shock of which effectively destroyed the strike in Preston.¹⁵¹ The military were poured into the Northwest by train by order of the Home Office and Sir William Warre's overall command was superseded by Sir Thomas Arbuthnot's appointment to the command of the whole of the Northwest, West Riding

¹⁴⁴ *Preston Chronicle*, 27 August 1842

¹⁴⁵ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 27 August 1842

¹⁴⁶ *Bolton Free Press*, 27 August 1842, *Manchester Guardian*, 27 August 1842

¹⁴⁷ *Stockport Advertiser*, 16, 23 September, 1842

¹⁴⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, 24 August, 3, 14, 17, 21, 24 September 1842

¹⁴⁹ *Manchester and Salford Advertiser*, 27 August 1842

¹⁵⁰ *Stockport Advertiser*, 26 August 1842

¹⁵¹ *Preston Chronicle*, 13, 20 August 1842

and Midlands disturbed districts.¹⁵²

In conclusion local Chartist activists in the Ashton, Stalybridge and Dukenfield area did plan to inaugurate a general strike for the Charter but this decision was made only in the two weeks before the strike was initiated on 8 August. By late July 1842 the Ashton, Stalybridge and Hyde Chartist activists had come to believe rumours that the local ACLL manufactures intended to make three reductions in wages by Christmas with the intention of driving the operatives out on strike and so forcing the government to open the ports to corn due to the increased distress that would result. However there was not complete unity in aim among the activists about whether the general strike should be for the Charter or for wages. One section of the Chartist activists who initiated the strike intended to pre-empt the free-traders by starting a general strike for the Charter. A second smaller section was concerned not so much with making the general strike be for the Charter but rather to make it against the wage reductions both because they meant hardship and also because the ACLL masters hoped to use the working men for the selfish purpose of gaining repeal. After the rejection of the second National Petition in May 1842 the national Chartist leadership had failed to propose firm 'ulterior measures' and were reluctant to make use of the full potential of the constitutional mass platform agitation following the defeat of 1839 and subsequent terms of imprisonment. Many of the local activists were however far more eager for a renewal of firm 'ulterior measures'. The strike can be seen as the implementation of the ultimate 'ulterior measure' of the mass platform agitation but this time from the local platforms by local activists rather than by the national leadership from the national platform.

In the Northwest outside the immediate Ashton neighbourhood, in some towns especially those more distant from the Ashton centre such as Preston and Bolton, local Chartist activists started the strike in much the same way as was to occur in Yorkshire, the Midlands, Eastern Scotland and South Wales. That was, as we shall see in later chapters, by local Chartist activists starting the strike from local platforms at public meetings, after receiving the news of the strike for the Charter in Manchester. However in many towns in the Northwest the turnouts swept in from the Ashton region before local activists had prepared the people for a strike and often before news of the strike

¹⁵² Sir James Graham Papers, Bundle 52A, Graham to Queen Victoria, 17, 18 August 1842, Graham to Wellington 19 August 1842, Wellington to Graham 19 August 1842

had been received. In many of these cases, such as in Manchester itself, local activists were quickly able to organise the strike from public meetings, but in others the shock of the unannounced irruptions explains the initial hesitancy which greeted the strike in places such as Oldham and Stockport. Some of the delegates who came on missions from the Ashton area were in favour of the aim of the strike being limited to the wage demand and this helps explain the initial confusion over what the aim of the strike was to be in some towns.

Once the strike had spread to Manchester and the surrounding areas, until about the 20 August when the Great Trades Delegate Conference was forced to dissolve, it was overwhelmingly either for the Charter or for both wages and the Charter to protect wages. The strikers felt they were in an unfair position as they had no say in legislation and only the Charter would enable them to protect their wages by law with, for example, minimum wage legislation being enacted once the Charter was passed. The Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference and the NCA Conference which both sat during the strike in Manchester both conceived of the strike for the Charter as a peaceful moral force move to unnerve the government by an irresistible display of public opinion. Once the government and Parliament had lost its nerve they would have no choice but to carry the Charter through Parliament. They believed that a display of overwhelming unity among the working classes, together with the financial aid of the shopkeepers, would leave the government with no choice but to capitulate and pass the Charter. The strike was therefore clearly aimed against the government rather than against the masters.

Throughout the strike the traditional radical analysis was present. The aristocracy, state Church, pensioners and placemen were attacked along with the 'millocrats' and 'cotton lords' who had now joined the traditional enemies of the people. Appeal was made to the historical English or British constitution and the rights of the freeborn Englishman. The working class or the people, the two often meaning more or less the same, viewed social evils as arising from lack of political power. Once the Charter was enacted further legislation would protect the working man and his wages. The Charter would guarantee fair wages by giving the workman as well as the employer a voice in the legislation and so bringing minimum wage laws, taxes on machinery and other reforms such as repeal of the Corn Laws, repeal of the New Poor Law, better factory legislation and lower

taxation. Multiple collective identities were articulated in the strike in the Northwest of which class was the most important identity. Different identities present in the strike in the Northwest were those of class, the people or nation, and Christianity. The working class identity articulated in the strike in the Northwest was the product of a combination of political, economic and social oppression. Of all the strike regions the Northwest had the strongest factory operative presence in strike. But even in the strike in the Northwest, class was not the only identity present and it was a strongly political identity not simply reducible to economic position.

CHAPTER TWO

THE STRIKE FOR THE CHARTER IN THE MIDLANDS

The strike for the Charter in the Northwest coincided with a miners' industrial strike in the Midlands but was also the spur to other strikes for the Charter throughout the industrial districts of Great Britain including the Midlands. In the Midlands, which this chapter will cover, there were several strands. A miners' strike over miners' wage and other industrial grievances began in the Potteries district of North Staffordshire in June and continued in the South Staffordshire and Worcestershire Black Country and nearby mining districts of Shropshire and Warwickshire until the end of September. In the Potteries a strike for the Charter also took place and lasted one week from Monday 15 to Monday 22 August during which time the strike was general among potters and miners, the two largest industrial groups of the area. However in the Potteries strike for the Charter the turnout processions, meetings and crowd action were confined to Monday 15 and Tuesday 16 August. In the Black Country, unlike the case in the Potteries, the strike never became for the Charter and the only occupational group to strike on any scale were the miners. In the East Midlands the miners of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire came out on strike for a few weeks over wages and industrial grievances. Most significantly the strike for the Charter in the Northwest was the spur to a strike for the Charter in the East Midlands. The strike for the Charter was launched in the East Midlands in Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire with an initial period of agitation lasting from around Monday 15 to around Thursday 18 August followed by the strike for the Charter itself which lasted from around Friday 19 to Monday 27 August in the industrial villages with the workers in the towns returning to work slightly before this. The strike was almost complete among the framework knitters of Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. Among other trades, including factory workers, artisans and labourers, it was less general. As in other regions the strike for the Charter in the Midlands was organised from public meetings and conducted by turn out processions. However the pulling of boiler plugs was not a significant feature of the strike in the Midlands apart from the disabling of mine pumps.

In the existing historiography most attention has been paid to the miners' strike in the Midlands to the relative neglect of the strike for the Charter in the East Midlands. The strike in the Midlands is relegated in Mather's widely adopted framework to an initial non-political stage of strike activity in July preceding the outbreak of the strike for the Charter in August. Most debate in the historiography has concentrated on the question of the extent to which the miners' strike, particularly in the Black Country, was political in nature. Fyson, while acknowledging Chartist leadership, emphasised the economic aims of the strike in the Potteries, contrary to the trend of recent historiography, although this is largely explained by his concentration on the proceeding Potteries miners' strike. Fyson also highlighted the violent nature of the Potteries strike. Golby emphasised the economic nature of the strike in Shropshire, but this should not be surprising, for this was merely a miners' strike. Challinor demonstrated that the Chartists provided leadership for the miners' strike in the Black Country as well as in the Potteries. Challinor, along with Barnsby, went on to emphasise the political nature of the Black Country miners' strike, whereas Griffin identified the Black Country miners' strike as being basically economic in aim against wage reductions though Chartist leadership was important for organising, sustaining and unifying the miners' strike. Griffin's case is the stronger but he has gone too far in suggesting that the miners became hostile to the Charter.¹ Harrison and Temple Patterson portrayed the strike in Leicestershire as being simply a spontaneous reaction to events in Manchester and ignored the clear evidence that the strike for the Charter was instead carefully organised and launched by the local Chartist activists after news had arrived of the strike for the Charter in the Northwest. In Nottingham Church underestimated the potential support for a strike among factory workers as well as framework knitters. Epstein in his article on Chartist culture in Nottingham emphasised the existence of trades delegates meeting in Nottingham to stress links between Chartism and trade unionism. However this delegate meeting only took place after the Chartist activists had already organised and launched the strike. Griffin argued that the Leicester and Derby miners' strike was

¹ F. C. Mather, 'The General Strike of 1842', in R. Quinault and J. Stevenson (eds), *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1974), 115-140; R. Fyson, 'The Crisis of 1842: Chartism and the Colliers Strike, and the outbreak in the Potteries', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 194-220; J. M. Golby, 'Public Order and Private Unrest, A study of the 1842 Riots in Shropshire', *University of Birmingham Historical Journal* (1968), 157-169; R. Challinor and B. Ripley, *The Miners' Association: A Trade Union in the age of the Chartists* (London, 1968), 1-43; G. Barnsby, *The Working Class Movement in the Black Country 1750-1867* (Wolverhampton, 1977), 78-117; G. Barnsby, C. Griffin and R. Challinor, 'Letters', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* nos. 19, 20, 22-25, 27 (1969-73)

mainly an economic strike; this appears to be on the whole correct for the East Midland miners but it would be unwise to infer that this economic nature extended to the whole strike in the East Midlands.²

The primary emphasis in the historiography on the miners' wage strike and the brief outburst of violence in the Potteries, and the tendency to view the Midlands miners' strike as a preliminary to the outbreak of the strike for the Charter in the Manchester area, has led to the strike for the People's Charter in the East Midlands being marginalised and its significance undervalued. The chapter will examine the origins, leadership and aims of the strike in the East Midlands. Attempts to change the nature of the Midlands miners' strike into a strike for the Charter will be pursued. Links between the strikes in the Northwest and in the Midlands will be sought. The involvement of middle class radicals in the Midlands strike will be inquired into. The concept of the general strike for the Charter in the Midlands and the ideology articulated in the Midlands strike will be examined. Rather than being a mere preliminary to the strike in Manchester or being dominated solely by a miners' wage strike, the strike in the Midlands was an attempt by local leaders to implement the most important ulterior measure of the Chartist constitutional mass platform agitation in order to pressure Parliament into enacting the Charter. The Midlands shared a similar concept of the strike and ideology with the rest of the strike regions. This reinforces the view that the strike for the Charter was a well-organised national political strike rather than merely a series of uncoordinated outbreaks. Demonstrating the significance of the strike for the Charter in the Midlands furthers the argument that the 1842 strike was the highpoint of the Chartist movement and not a mere coda to the presentation of the 1842 National Petition.

Industrial and Political Background

The single largest industry in the East Midlands towns and industrial villages was

² J. F.C. Harrison, 'Chartism in Leicester', in A. Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), 111-114; A. Temple Paterson, *Radical Leicester: A History of Leicester 1780-1850* (Leicester, 1954), 302-331; R. Church, *Economic and Social Change in a Midland Town, Victorian Nottingham* (London, 1966), 128-161; C. Griffin, *The Leicestershire and Derbyshire Miners* (Leicester, 1981), 1-172; J. Epstein, 'Some Organisational and Cultural Aspects of the Chartist Movement in Nottingham', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 221-268

framework knitting. Framework knitting dominated the industrial villages of Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire and was also the single most important industry in Loughborough, Leicester, Nottingham and Derby. In Nottingham in 1841 at least 20% of the town's population of 53,091 people worked in the hosiery industry. Around 10,000 lived in the surrounding villages and here the percentage working in the hosiery industry was higher. There were over 20,000 knitting frames in Leicestershire and Leicester itself, with a population of around 50,000, contained over 4,000 knitting frames. Framework knitting remained unmechanised with the framework knitter working in his own home or, particularly in the towns, in workshops where a number of frames would be placed. However factory production also existed in the East Midlands including lace factories in Nottinghamshire and spinning factories in Leicestershire, and the Struts complex at Belper in Derbyshire. The framework knitters suffered low wages due to the over supply of labour. Other grievances included frame rents being charged even when work was not given out for the whole week, deductions, the arbitrary practices of the masters, and the widespread introduction of low quality cut ups and slop work. The strength of Chartism in the Midlands did come from the impoverished framework knitters in the towns and industrial villages. The framework knitters, in contrast to the factory operatives, had no chance of a better future through industrial change and instead hoped for improvement through legislation which could only be obtained once the Charter was enacted. But there was also support for Chartism from factory workers and artisans. Collieries were also located in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire although these were of less significance than those in Staffordshire, Warwickshire and Shropshire.³

The Potteries district was composed of the five towns of Stoke, Hanley, Burslem, Fenton and Longton in North Staffordshire. Pottery manufacture and mining were the principal industries. The Potteries had a total population of about 80,000 people of whom 17,442 worked in the pottery industry. The Black Country was the industrial district in South Staffordshire including Dudley in Worcestershire. The main townships were Dudley, Walsall, West Bromwich, Wednesbury, and Bilston with Wolverhampton as a commercial centre. The principal industries were mining, iron making where iron

³ 'Census Occupations Abstract', *PP* (1844) vol. xxvii; 'Report of the Commissioners on the Condition of Framework Knitters', *PP* (1845), part 1 and 2; William Felkin, *Account of the Machine Wrought Hosiery Trade* (London, 1845), 1-50; William Felkin, *History of the Machine Wrought Hosiery Trade and Lace Manufactures* (London, 1867), 460-70; Thomas Cooper, *Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1872), 133-142

was smelted from ore to produce cast or wrought iron, and iron-working such as nailmaking and chainmaking which were often organised on a domestic outwork basis. In 1841 the Black Country had a population of 226,106 and there were at least 16,700 miners. Shropshire and Warwickshire contained mining districts around Wellington and north of Coventry respectively and Coventry was the centre of ribbon manufacture. Birmingham in Warwickshire, with a population in 1841 of 183,000, was famed for its small workshops for the manufacture of hardware articles, guns, and other metal goods. However Birmingham had a variegated occupational structure reflecting its commercial status as the largest city in the Midlands. Briggs has suggested that its small-scale workshops were productive of class co-operation though this argument has been criticised by Behagg.⁴

The Midlands had a long radical tradition among the working and middle classes. Local radical societies had sprung up in, for example, Birmingham and Leicester in the early 1790s. However the loyalist reaction during the war, witnessing the riots in Birmingham which drove Joseph Priestly to emigrate, crippled the emerging radical societies. Before the end of the war Luddism took hold among the East Midlands framework knitters. Following the end of the war radical societies among the lower classes began to emerge particularly in the East Midlands. During this period of post war radicalism among the working classes the ideology of William Cobbett's 'Old Corruption' and of Major John Cartwright's Ancient English Constitution was supreme, and Henry Orator Hunt's constitutional mass platform agitation was the accepted strategy to force the government to accept universal suffrage, annual Parliaments and vote by ballot. Jeremiah Brandreth's failed Pentridge Rising of 1817 when labourers, framework knitters and artisans marched under arms intending to take Nottingham as part of a national revolution to unseat the government was an isolated incidence of an alternative insurrectionary strategy. There was a strong Reform Bill agitation in the Midlands, witnessing both co-operation and conflict between middle and working classes radicals. Of most importance was Thomas Attwood's Birmingham Political Union which

⁴ 'Census Occupations Abstract', *PP* (1844) vol. xxvii; 'First Report of the Midland Mining Commission', *PP* (1843), XIII; Old Potter (Charles Shaw), *When I was a Child* (Stoke, 1903), 1-258; G. C. Allen, *The Industrial Development of Birmingham and the Black Country* (London, 1929), 1-45; G. Barnsby, *Social Conditions in the Black Country* (Wolverhampton, 1980), 1-53; C. Behagg, *Politics and Production* (London, 1990), 1-19; A. Briggs, 'The Background of the Parliamentary Reform Movement in Three English Cities', *Cambridge Historical Journal*, X, 3 (1952), 293-317

attempted to unite middle and working class radicals behind the Reform Bill and staged monster meetings in Birmingham. The trade union, Anti-Poor Law and Ten Hour movements all had some presence in the Midlands in the 1830s among working class radicals.⁵

The Midlands had played an active part in the first phase of Chartism. The East Midland towns and industrial villages were important centres of Chartist strength in 1839 and indeed Sir Charles Napier's northern district military command headquarters was temporarily based at Nottingham. Attwood's Birmingham Political Union had revived to enter the initial phase of Chartism contributing the scheme for the National Petition and General Convention. In 1839 the General Convention had moved to Birmingham to discuss ulterior measures and it was there that the Bullring Riots occurred when the populace clashed with metropolitan police sent down as a riot force. After the failure of constitutional forcible intimidation from the mass platform in 1839 and the failure of the uprisings in Newport and the West Riding, the first phase of Chartism had ended in failure. However the National Charter Association (NCA), after a slow start when created in 1840, had begun to take firm root in the Midlands in 1841. Chartism was at its zenith in the Midlands by the early summer of 1842. The NCA was particularly strong and active in Bilston and Dudley in the Black Country, in the Potteries at Hanley, Shelton, Fenton and Longton, and in the East Midlands in Loughborough, Leicester, Nottingham and Derby and the surrounding framework knitting villages. Chartism had even been extended into Shropshire at Easter 1842. Local leaders were important for making particular towns strongholds of the NCA organisation. These included Samuel Cook at Dudley, Joseph Linney at Bilston, John Richards in the Potteries, Jonathan Barber at Nottingham, and John Skevington at Loughborough. Leicester had a large enrolled membership under Thomas Cooper, though the Leicester Chartists were divided between Cooper's Shakespearean Chartists and the older leader John Markham's All Saints Chartists. Birmingham was divided between George White's NCA Chartists and Arthur O'Neill's 'new move' Christian Chartists. The East Midlands towns in particular had a long middle class Nonconformist radical tradition. Middle class free trade radicals were active in many of the Midlands towns and indeed the free

⁵ J. Belchem, *Industrialisation and the Working Class* (Aldershot, 1990), 60-104; M. I. Thomis and P. Holt, *Threats of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848* (London, 1977), 1-99; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), 515-733; C. Flick, *The Birmingham Political Union* (Hamden, 1978), 1-90

trader Charles Villiers had been elected MP for Wolverhampton. In 1842 a strong middle class Complete Suffrage movement grew in the Midlands particularly in Birmingham, Nottingham and Leicester. Many of the free traders felt that the repeal movement was losing out to those who believed suffrage reform to be a pre-condition for any other reforms. Indeed a number of the delegates to the Anti-Corn Law League's (ACLL) London conference in June and July 1842 had called for the suffrage to be agitated for along with Corn Law repeal. The growing feeling that suffrage extension was necessary for further reform was reflected in the growth of the National Complete Suffrage Union (NCSU) and attempts at partial co-operation between middle class free trade radicals and Chartists in the Midlands in the first half of 1842.⁶

The Strike in the East Midlands

The strike in the East Midlands was in no way spontaneous. Rather it was carefully launched by the local Chartist activists in response to the news of the strike for the Charter in Manchester. Chartist activists proposed, built up support for, and then launched the strike in the East Midlands from the local platforms at seventeen public meetings in Nottingham, Leicester, Loughborough, Derby and Belper held between Monday 15 August and Friday 19 August. Six public meetings for this purpose were held at Nottingham on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, five at Leicester on Monday, Tuesday and Thursday, three at Loughborough on Monday, Thursday and Friday, two at Derby on Tuesday and Thursday and one at Belper on Friday. The Chartist activists also held private meetings to decide in advance what resolutions would be put to the public meetings and smaller public meetings were held in the outlying industrial villages. Fifteen prominent speakers at the public meetings can be identified, six at Nottingham, three in Loughborough, two in Leicester, four in Derby and Belper, and all were Chartist activists. From the earliest of these meetings from 15 August at Nottingham, Leicester and Loughborough and from 16 August at Derby

⁶ A. Temple Paterson, *Radical Leicester: A History of Leicester 1780-1850* (Leicester, 1954), 275-331; R. Church, *Economic and Social Change in a Midland Town, Victorian Nottingham* (London, 1966), 128-161; G. Barnsby, *The Working Class Movement in the Black Country 1750-1867* (Wolverhampton, 1977), 56-116; C. Flick, *The Birmingham Political Union* (Hamden, 1978), 147-174; J. Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom* (London, 1982), 138-262; D. Thompson, *The Chartists* (London, 1986), 11-90; N. McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 1968), 120-1

resolutions were passed stating that a strike would take place starting on the Thursday or Friday.⁷

The strike in the East Midlands was organised by local Chartist activists not by trade societies. The strike in the East Midlands was similar in this respect to the strike in Yorkshire, Eastern Scotland and South Wales. The six speakers at the Nottingham meetings were Jonathan Barber, Thomas Clark, Benjamin Humphries 'Commodore' E. P. Mead, James Sweet and H. Smith. Jonathan Barber was a framework knitter aged thirty-eight and an officer of the Nottingham NCA locality. Thomas Clark, a cotton weaver in Stockport who had been born in Ireland in 1821, was a Chartist lecturer and a strong O'Connorite who was lecturing in Nottingham.⁸ Benjamin Humphries was a framework knitter and officer of the Nottingham NCA locality. 'Commodore' E. P. Mead was a Chartist lecturer from Birmingham who was lecturing in Nottinghamshire at the time. James Sweet was a hairdresser and shopkeeper aged thirty-eight and treasurer of the NCA Democratic Chapel in Nottingham. H. Smith was a Chartist activist from Mansfield.⁹

In Leicester the two speakers at the meetings were Thomas Beedham and James Duffey. Thomas Beedham was a carpenter and secretary of Thomas Cooper's Shakespearean Association of Leicester Chartists. James Duffey was a Chartist lecturer born in Ireland in 1794, who had been imprisoned for his part in the attempted Sheffield rising of 1840 and had been released from prison in 1841 due to ill health and was now lecturing in Leicestershire.¹⁰ An unnamed Chartist delegate from South Staffordshire was also an active speaker. In Loughborough the three speakers at the meetings were John Skevington, James Duffey and Charles Jarret. John Skevington was an officer of Loughborough NCA locality, a shopkeeper and former Primitive Methodist preacher born in 1812, who had been a delegate to the 1839 Convention where he had supported

⁷ PRO HO 45/250, ff. 95-100, Depositions in the case of John Skevington, 20 August 1842; *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842; *Nottingham Mercury*, 19 August 1842; PRO HO 45/254, ff. 13-15, Mayor of Nottingham to HO, 19 August 1842; *Derby Reporter*, 18 August 1842; PRO HO 45/244, ff. 34-35, Mayor of Derby to HO, 17 August 1842, ff. 42-43, Magistrates of Derby to HO, 19 August 1842

⁸ *Nottingham Mercury*, 19 August 1842; J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. IV (London, 1972), 6-7; S. Roberts, *Radical Politicians and Poets in Early Victorian Britain* (New York, 1993), 89-105

⁹ *Nottingham Mercury*, 19 August 1842; J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. IV (London, 1972), 171-3

¹⁰ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842; C. Godfrey, *Chartist Lives* (New York, 1987), 494-495

the call for the 'sacred month'.¹¹ Charles Jarret was a framework knitter and Loughborough Chartist activist.¹² In South Derbyshire the four speakers at the meetings were John West, Enos Ford, John Moss and James Vickers. John West, a 30 year old Irishman, was a Chartist lecturer and silk handloom weaver of Macclesfield who had taken part in the Reform Bill agitation, and was lecturing in South Derbyshire in August 1842.¹³ Enos Ford was secretary of the Derby Chartist Association and a joiner by trade. John Moss was a tailor and former secretary of the Derby Chartist Association and James Vickers was a bookseller and officer of the Belper Chartist Association.¹⁴

The strike in the East Midlands was unambiguously from the start a strike for the Charter unlike in the Black Country and Potteries. The resolutions put by the Chartist activists from the East Midlands platforms at the public meetings were for a strike with the aim of the enactment of the People's Charter. The call for the Charter to be the aim of the strike did not simply come up from the grassroots as Mather and Sykes believed happened in Lancashire.¹⁵ These resolutions were invariably passed, often unanimously, at the public meetings indicating support for the Charter as the aim from the grassroots strikers themselves as well as from the activists. In the East Midlands only the Belper framework knitters and the Leicester glove hands turned out for wages a few days before the Chartist activists launched the main strike on the 18 and 19 August; and these Belper framework knitters and Leicester glove-hands explicitly changed the aim of their strike once the main strike for the Charter had been launched in the East Midlands.¹⁶

Local Chartist activists advocated a strike for the Charter at public meetings in Nottingham on 15 and 17 August; in Leicester on 17 and 18 August; and in Derby on 16 and 18 August. An address 'to the magistrates, gentleman and tradesman of Nottingham' presented to the Nottingham magistrates on 19 August and signed by the Nottingham Chartist leaders explicitly stated that the strike was to be for the People's

¹¹ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842; J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. I (London, 1972), 300-302

¹² PRO HO 45/250, ff. 95-100, Depositions in the case of John Skevington, 20 August 1842

¹³ *Derby Reporter*, 18 August 1842; J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. VI (London, 1984), 245-250

¹⁴ *Derby Reporter*, 18 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 12 February, 23 April 1842

¹⁵ F. C. Mather, 'The General Strike of 1842', in R. Quinault and J. Stevenson (eds), *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1974), 115-140; R. A. Sykes, 'Popular Politics and Trade Unionism in South-East Lancashire 1829-1842' (PhD, Manchester, 1982), 662-723

¹⁶ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

Charter. Resolutions for a strike for the Charter were passed, often unanimously, at public meetings in Nottingham on 18 August; at Leicester on 17 and 18 August; in Loughborough on 19 August; in Derby on 16 August, and in Belper on 19 August. During the week the local Chartist activists in the more important of the framework-knitting villages including Calverton and Mansfield in Nottinghamshire and Duffield, Ilkeston and Hearer in Derbyshire held public meetings at which resolutions were passed to strike for the Charter.¹⁷

Many of these public meetings were of a relatively large size and included people from the surrounding industrial villages. The Chartist William Corah, in a letter written to his father the next evening, reported, probably with some exaggeration, that 20,000 were present at the meeting in Leicester on 17 August. At the meeting on the evening of 18 August in Nottingham 10,000 were present including men from the surrounding industrial villages. At the meeting in Loughborough on 15 August 4-5000 were present including numbers from Shepshead, Hathern and other north Leicestershire framework knitting villages.¹⁸

The decision to strike for the Charter in the East Midlands was confirmed by a Chartist delegate meeting on 18 August. There were constant communications between the Chartist activists, sometimes travelling by train, in the East Midlands towns in order to co-ordinate their activities.¹⁹ The delegate meeting, the idea of which appears to have originated with the Nottingham Chartists on or before 16 August, was composed of twenty-one Chartist delegates from Leicestershire, Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire and was held at Loughborough, as the central place for the three counties. The Chartist delegates confirmed that they would strike for the Charter in the three counties and agreed to put the resolution to strike for the Charter to public meetings in their constituencies that night if possible or the next day and this duly took place at the public meetings in the towns on 18 and 19 August which resolved unanimously to strike for

¹⁷ PRO HO 45/254, ff. 15-16, Nottingham address, 19 August 1842; PRO HO 45/250, ff. 93-94, Loughborough resolutions, 19 August 1842; *Nottingham Mercury*, 19 August 1842; *Nottingham Review*, 19 August 1842; *Derby Reporter*, 18 August 1842; *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20, 27 August 1842

¹⁸ *Nottingham Mercury*, 19 August 1842; *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20, 27 August 1842

¹⁹ *Derby Reporter*, 18 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

the Charter.²⁰

When launching the strike for the Charter from the local platforms in the East Midlands the local Chartist activists emphasised that they were responding to the strike for the Charter in the Northwest. This news had been received by letter or through the newspapers especially the Saturday 13 August edition of the *Northern Star*. At Nottingham it was the intelligence from the Northwest which had an effect on the Nottingham working men from 15 August. Thomas Clark read out a letter from Stockport, which stated, with exaggeration, that 60,000 had declared they would not go to work again until the Charter was the law of the land, which was greeted with the cheers of the Nottingham men.²¹ At Derby the notice announcing the meeting for the 16 August made it clear that the strike was to be in response to the strike in the Northwest stating 'Working men, you must be aware that our fellow workmen in various parts of the country have commenced a National Strike; we wish you, therefore, to take such steps as you may deem expedient in the present crisis.'²²

The main influence of events in Manchester came through newspaper reports and letters telling of the strike for the Charter in the Northwest and of the decision of the Manchester Trades Delegates to make the aim of the strike the enactment of the Charter. However there were also links to the Northwest strike through the Manchester NCA Conference members exerting direct influence, though this was limited to Leicestershire. John Skevington from Loughborough and Thomas Cooper from Leicester attended the Manchester NCA Conference and returned to Leicestershire afterwards. At the conference Cooper was prominent in the debates but when he came back to Leicester, bringing Jonathan Bairstow, a member of the NCA Executive with him, Cooper stayed indoors except to issue a mild address and Bairstow did nothing. John Skevington had called for a strike at a public meeting before he left Loughborough on 15 August; he supported the call for the strike to be for the Charter at the NCA Conference, and on his return to Loughborough led the strike there.²³

²⁰ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

²¹ *Nottingham Mercury*, 19 August 1842

²² *Derby Reporter*, 18 August 1842

²³ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20, 27 August 1842

Unlike in the Northwest strike there was little trade society leadership in the East Midlands strike. However there was one trades conference during the East Midlands strike. At Nottingham there was a trades delegate meeting on 24 August composed of delegates from the trades of Nottingham and the surrounding districts which passed resolutions for a strike for the Charter. However the strike had already been launched by the Chartist activists from the local platform before the trades delegates met and indeed the strike was already losing its impetus in the face of repression by the authorities by this time.²⁴

The strike for the Charter in the East Midlands was physically launched on the 18 and 19 August by the activists from the local platforms at public meetings which included people from the industrial villages as well as the towns. The strike commenced after a public meeting on Thursday in Leicester and after public meetings on Friday in Nottingham and Loughborough. In South Derbyshire it began on Friday when the framework knitters already on strike decided to change the aim of their strike from wages to the Charter.²⁵ The strike for the Charter in the East Midlands lasted for around ten days with a general return to work on 27 August. However only the framework knitters in the outlying industrial villages, where the civil and military authorities could not concentrate their forces, remained out this long. In the large towns of Nottingham, Leicester, Loughborough and Derby the strike was ended a few days before this due to the vigorous actions of the civil and military authorities who attempted to intercept the turnout processions and to prevent public meetings. The strike was spread by turnout processions in the towns and through the surrounding country from one industrial village to another. The turnouts from the towns first went on procession in the towns themselves to end all work there and then marched off to take the strike to the industrial villages.²⁶

The Chartist activists went with the crowds and gave speeches at meetings in the villages along the way, for example Charles Jarret spoke at Belton after the

²⁴ *Nottingham Mercury*, 26 August 1842

²⁵ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20, 27 August 1842; *Nottingham Mercury*, 26 August 1842; PRO HO 45/244, ff. 42-43, Magistrates of Derby to HO, 19 August 1842; PRO HO 45/254, ff. 13-15, Mayor of Nottingham to HO, 19 August 1842

²⁶ *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842; *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20, 27 August 1842; *Nottingham Mercury*, 19, 26 August 1842; *Nottingham Review*, 2 September 1842

Loughborough turnout processions arrived there. Crowds from the industrial villages also entered the large towns to meet up with the town turnouts or went to neighbouring industrial villages; for example in the country outside Loughborough the Shepshead turnouts went on procession to Hathern, Long Whatton and Diseworth to spread the strike there. Crowds from the industrial villages came back to the main towns in the evenings to hear speeches by the Chartist activists who directed the strike; for example on Friday 19 August the Loughborough turnouts returned in the evening attended by many from the villages to attend a public meeting that evening. The strike for the Charter continued to be directed from public meetings by the same Chartist activists who had drummed up support for a strike for the Charter at the public meetings which preceded the strike; for example a Chartist public meeting was held in Leicester before the turnouts went on procession on 20 August.²⁷ The Chartist activists also continued to hold indoor meetings to decide on tactics; for example there was a meeting in the Chartist rooms in Loughborough on 22 August before a turnout procession.²⁸ In South Derbyshire the strike took a slightly different form to that in Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire as the hose and glove framework knitters and nail-makers of Belper, Duffield, Ilkeston and Heaner had turned out for wages in an independent strike on 15 August, and had then turned out the framework knitters at Derby, before changing the aim of their strike to the Charter. The strike in South Derbyshire was more concentrated in the industrial villages than in Derby itself because from an early stage the authorities were able to prevent public meetings and prevent turnout processions entering Derby from outside.²⁹

Many industries were involved in the strike for the Charter. However in terms of the occupations of those who went on strike those belonging to the dominant industry in each area predominated. In the East Midlands the hand framework knitters were the main strike force. Of the twenty-seven tried at the Nottinghamshire Michealmas Quarter Sessions in October 1842 for their part in the strike for the Charter nineteen were framework knitters. The remainder were four lace makers who may or may not have been factory operatives, one labourer, one glove maker, one shoemaker and one nail maker.³⁰ Indeed there was a truly general strike of framework knitters in the East

²⁷ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842

²⁸ *Nottingham Mercury*, 26 August 1842; *Leicestershire Mercury*, 27 August 1842

²⁹ *Derby Reporter*, 18, 25 August 1842

³⁰ *Nottinghamshire Mercury*, 21 October 1842

Midlands. In Loughborough on the first day of the strike on 19 August the strike was complete as far as the framework knitters and twist and warp hands were concerned. Scarcely a single frame or twist machine was at work. In the framework knitting villages of Leicestershire all the framework knitters were out by 22 August.³¹ Among the artisans, labourers and factory operatives the strike was more partial. In Loughborough on 18 August although all the framework knitters were out the strike was reported to be very partial with respect to other occupations. Workers in the worsted spinning factories either did not turn out in Leicester on 18 August when asked to by the turnout procession or went back in again after the crowds had left.³²

However it would be unwise to suggest, as Church and Temple Paterson do, that the East Midlands strike for the Charter was merely a strike of the framework knitters. Artisans were among the strikers even if the strike among the artisans was only partial. In Nottingham at the trades conference on 24 August there were delegates from the artisans including the coach makers, masons, smiths, dyers, tobacconists, joiners, shoemakers and tailors of Nottingham. Thus artisans, some of very high status such as the coachbuilders, were represented in addition to the twistnet hands, silk hose hands, rib top hands and framework knitters. Some at least of the artisans represented at the conference came out on strike and on the afternoon of 25 August a procession consisting of masons, joiners, tailors, shoemakers, framework knitters and others, about seven hundred in all, paraded in Nottingham. They paraded to New Radford and asked the men at the factories there to join them, they then proceeded to Higson where they paraded, and they then went back to Nottingham. They were reputed to be orderly, many of them well dressed and appeared to be a superior class of operatives.³³ The strike was also general among the nail makers in south Derbyshire in Belper and other industrial villages.

Temple Patterson suggested that the factory operatives did not strike. Certainly in Leicestershire the factory operatives were reluctant to turn out. However in Nottinghamshire factory operatives did turn out at many lace factories. In Nottingham itself on 19 August the operatives of at least three lace factories all turned out willingly

³¹ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

³² *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

³³ *Nottingham Mercury*, 26 August 1842

when the framework knitters came in procession. They also turned out the workers at a dye house and the females at the lace dressing rooms. Thus dyers and the female auxiliary lace workers were also represented in the strike. On 19 August the turnout crowds turned out the factory hands at two lace factories in Carrington who stayed out until 23 August. On 22 August at New Basford the procession managed to turn out the operatives at all the different factories except for one lace factory. Well paid factory operatives did turn out; for example on 19 August at New Basford two lace factory operatives who agreed to turn out were receiving wages of two pounds a week or more. A reluctance to strike among factory operatives was not necessarily due to hostility to the Charter. After all the factory operatives were in reasonably well paid jobs, and so had more to lose from an unsuccessful political strike than had the framework knitters many of whom were only partially employed. Many of the factory operatives were reported to be willing to strike if they thought that the strike was general. For example at Radford in Nottinghamshire on 20 August the operatives at one lace factory did not turn out but implied that they would strike if the strike was general. In Derbyshire at another factory the operatives stated that they did not believe the strike was the right way of gaining the Charter; nevertheless they would forgo their wages and so suffer hardship if it did seem that there was a realistic chance of the Charter being obtained by the strike.³⁴

The strike was very peaceful in the East Midlands where the aim of the strike was for the Charter although the Chartist activists did not have complete control over the rank and file. There was some throwing of stones by the crowd at the police in Leicester on 18 and 19 August after meetings. In Loughborough on 22 August when the military were escorting five prisoners to Leicester they were pelted with stones from a bridge on their way to the railway. However there were no injuries and this did not compare to the attack on the military outside Halifax in the previous week. In general the political strike in the East Midlands was noted for its peaceable nature. When turnouts visited factories to ask the hands to stop they sent in small deputations to confer with the master and men and normally left if the men did not wish to turn out. There were occasional threats to unplug the boilers or break windows but they were not carried out.

³⁴ *Nottingham Mercury*, 26 August 1842

The crowds normally tried to avoid rather than confront the civil and military authorities.³⁵

Although the main strike in the East Midlands was for the Charter there were in fact two separate strike movements taking as the East Midlands miners were also striking, but over wages rather than for the Charter. The Leicestershire and Nottinghamshire miners came out for their own wage and industrial grievances. The North Leicestershire miners came out from 13 August and the Nottinghamshire miners came out only after the main Nottingham strike for the Charter had ended. Two delegates from a South Staffordshire miners' meeting at Wednesbury on 11 August travelled up to the Leicestershire pits and encouraged the men to turn out and distributed handbills stating the demand for four shillings wages made by the Black Country miners on 1 August at West Bromwich. The East Midlands Chartist activists did make efforts to draw the miners into the strike for the Charter but they were not very successful. The Chartist activist Pepper from Normanton spoke to the Loughborough area miners when they came out but the miners still confined their demands to industrial grievances. The Chartist activists in Nottingham over the weekend 20 and 21 August hoped that the Nottinghamshire miners would turn out on 22 August and join up with the operatives in the strike for the Charter on the Monday. On the Saturday a turnout procession went from Nottingham to the Old Radford Coalpit to encourage the miners to strike but they refused.³⁶ In Derbyshire John West hoped to bring the miners into the strike for the Charter and there was a partial convergence of the two strikes in Derbyshire when the miners attended the meeting organised by West on 22 August. A pamphlet printed in the Potteries was distributed in late August calling on the Derbyshire miners to strike for the Charter; but the miners' strike remained mainly a wages and weight grievance strike and the Derbyshire miners never accepted the Charter as the aim of their strike.³⁷ Nevertheless in the East Midlands the main strike was one for the Charter involving framework knitters and other trades and was solidly for the Charter. This contrasts with the strike in the Black Country and to a lesser extent the Potteries where the miners' strike was of far greater significance.

³⁵ PRO HO 45/254, ff. 13-15, Mayor of Nottingham to HO, 19 August 1842; *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20, 27 August 1842

³⁶ *Nottingham Mercury*, 26 August 1842

³⁷ PRO HO 45/244, f. 56, Address to the Colliers, 31 August 1842

The Strike in the Potteries

As in the East Midlands there were two strike movements going on in the Potteries: a miners' strike and the strike for the Charter. The miners' strike was principally aimed against the wage cuts made in the Potteries in June. There were four principal Chartist activists involved in the Potteries strike: John Richards, George Hemmings, William Ellis and Thomas Cooper. John Richards was seventy years old, a shoemaker and a radical since Peterloo and secretary of the Upper Hanley NCA branch and of the Potteries regional district of the NCA. George Hemmings was the miners' leader and an officer of the NCA.³⁸ William Ellis, born in 1809, was a potter living in Shelton, and a leading Chartist orator at meetings in the Potteries in the first half of 1842.³⁹ Thomas Cooper, Chartist journalist, organiser and preacher, at this time leader of the O'Connorite Shakespearean Chartists in Leicester, was lecturing in the Black Country and the Potteries while on his way from Leicester to Manchester.⁴⁰ In June, July and early August John Richards, George Hemmings, and William Ellis had been organising the Potteries miners' wage strike which had begun at the start of June, intensified on 11 July, and after a return to work was renewed on 6 August. The cause of the strike had been wage cuts. Richards was the leading member of the Committee of Operative Colliers which organised the strike.⁴¹

Thomas Cooper, William Ellis, John Richards and George Hemmings took the lead in attempting, from the local platform, to extend the already existing strike for redress of miners' grievances into a strike for the Charter including other trades. The Potteries Chartist activists decided in their committee meeting on Sunday 14 August to launch a strike for the Charter the next day after receiving a letter from Manchester. Public meetings announcing that a strike for the Charter would take place were held in Hanley on Sunday evening and Monday morning with Thomas Cooper as main speaker. A resolution to strike for the Charter (moved by Richards, seconded by Hemmings and put

³⁸ R. Fyson, 'Homage to John Richards', in O. Ashton, R. Fyson and S. Roberts (eds), *The Duty of Discontent* (London, 1995), 71-96

³⁹ R. Fyson, 'The Transported Chartist: The case of William Ellis', in O. Ashton, R. Fyson and S. Roberts (eds), *The Chartist Legacy* (Rendlesham, 1999), 80-101

⁴⁰ Thomas Cooper, *Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1873), 185-6; J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. IX (London, 1993), 51-57

⁴¹ *Northern Star*, 16, 30 July, 6, 13 August; PRO TS 11/602, Letter from the Committee of Operative Colliers, 13 August 1842

by Cooper) was passed unanimously by the 8-10,000 present at the Monday morning meeting. William Ellis and John Richards were the main speakers at morning and evening public strike meetings on 16 August in Hanley. At the morning meeting Ellis declared that they must get the Charter and that he was for 'political rights to the working classes' and until they obtained those rights they must not expect a 'fair days wages.' At the evening meeting on 16 August Ellis and Richards proposed another resolution to strike for the Charter.⁴²

In the Potteries the turnout processions to the pottery manufactories and the collieries still at work took place on 15 and 16 August. The strike was general in the Potteries towns for these two days. After the military fired on the crowds at Burslem on Tuesday 16 August no more turnout processions took place, however the potters and miners did not return to work until 22 August.⁴³ Something approaching a general strike of all trades took place in the Potteries towns over 15 and 16 August. Of the 221 indicted at the Special Commission for their part in the Potteries disturbances 102 (46%) were potters, 40 (18%) were miners and 25 (11%) were labourers. Almost all the potters came out. Other trades apart from potters and miners were also represented among those convicted at the Special Commission. The next largest groups of the 221 were ten shoemakers, the traditional radical artisans, followed by five bricklayers, four brickmakers, three blacksmiths, two tailors, two joiners and two engineers.⁴⁴

In the Potteries the Chartist activists did manage to change the aim of the strike and extend it to the potters though it degenerated immediately into some of the worst destruction of property of the whole strike. In the Potteries the miners were probably still contending for their own grievances, however they formed a minority of those involved in the Potteries disturbances once the strike for the Charter had been launched. Before this in late July some pottery works had been brought to a standstill by lack of coal but the potters did not actively join in the miners' strike. However once the general

⁴² *Reports of State Trials 1839-43*, New Series, vol. 4 (London, 1892), 1279-1304; Thomas Cooper, *Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1873), 189-192; *Northern Star*, 20 August, 1842; *North Staffordshire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

⁴³ PRO HO 45/260, f. 346, Major Powys to HO, 23 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August, 1842; *North Staffordshire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

⁴⁴ PRO PCOM 2/401, County Prison Staffordshire Sheriff's Gaol Register, 1842

strike for the Charter was announced the potters, the largest industrial group in the area, were the main strike force as we have seen.⁴⁵

The Potteries Chartist were acting in response to the news of the strike for the Charter in the Northwest when they attempted to transform the miners' wage strike into a strike for the Charter. It was a letter, informing them that the ACLL had turned out the people by reducing wages, and that the Manchester Chartist thought it a fitting opportunity for getting the Charter, and asking them to bring out the potters, received from what Cooper described as the Chartist Committee in Manchester, and which was probably the Ashton or Stalybridge strike committee rather than one of the initial Manchester trades delegates conferences, which prompted the Potteries Chartist to launch a strike. The resolution which began the strike for the Charter in the Potteries also showed the influence of events in Manchester, declaring 'We hereby agree to stand by the resolution passed by the Manchester meeting: that is, to strike and cease from labour until the Charter becomes the law of the land.'⁴⁶

There were physical links between the strike in the Potteries and the strike in the Northwest with turnouts from the Northwest reaching as far as the Potteries at a crucial point. Earlier in July the Potteries miners had attempted to extend the miners' turnout to the Poynton colliers by a strike march after having heard that coal was being brought from there into the Potteries. Of far more significance was the entry of turnouts from Macclesfield and further north via Leek into Burslem in the Potteries on 16 August. These turnouts had caused alarm to the magistrates of Derby on 15 August when it was rumoured they were making for Derby though this did not in fact happen. The turnouts had gone from Macclesfield to Leek on 15 August, and in the evening a portion left Leek on their way back to Manchester, but the rest attended a meeting of the workpeople of Leek which they had called, remained in that town and early on Tuesday morning set out to march to the Potteries. On 16 August the Northwest turnouts did enter Burslem and were among the crowd fired upon by the military in Burslem Market Place.⁴⁷ At the subsequent Special Commission a handloom weaver and a machine

⁴⁵ PRO PCOM 2/401, County Prison Staffordshire Sheriff's Gaol Register, 1842

⁴⁶ *Reports of State Trials 1839-43*, New Series, vol. 4 (London, 1892), 1301; Thomas Cooper, *Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1873), 189-192

⁴⁷ PRO HO 45/244, ff. 32-33, Magistrates of Ashbourne to HO, 16 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

maker both from Macclesfield, a silk twister from Leek and a machine maker from Manchester were among those tried for having been part of the crowd which entered Burslem from Leek and Macclesfield.⁴⁸

There was more violence and destruction in the Potteries, where the strike for the Charter had been grafted onto the miners' strike, than in the East Midlands. In the Potteries there was some personal violence during the phase of the miners' strike similar to that which occurred in the Black Country miners' strike. Once the strike for the Charter had been initiated in the Potteries there were two days of gutting the houses of unpopular men of authority in the community and the destruction of records and furniture of unpopular institutions. This was quite alien to the orderly and generally peaceful nature of strike in East Midlands and throughout the rest of the country with partial exceptions. On 15 August after the morning meetings the crowds brought out and destroyed all the furniture and books of the police stations at Hanley, Stoke, Lane End and Fenton injuring two policeman and leaving one of them in irons in Stoke police station. They destroyed the books and papers of the Collector of the Poor Rates and of the Court of Requests, the small debtors' court, where they also slightly wounded the clerk. The houses of Bailey Rose, the Stipendary Magistrate, and of Thomas Allen, who was thought to have firearms, were gutted destroying all furniture and books. In the early hours of 16 August the houses of the unpopular parsons Rev. Dr R. E. Aitkins and Rev. Dr Vale and of W. Parker, the magistrate, were gutted and burned. Stones were thrown at the military and special constables in Burslem market place.⁴⁹ This was traditional ritualised crowd action aimed at the property of unpopular persons with the damage being inflicted on property not persons in the main. In many ways the behaviour of the Potteries crowds was a throwback to 'collective bargaining by riot' and the type of eighteenth and early nineteenth century crowd behaviour identified by E. P. Thompson. This was unusual in the strike as in the rest of the country in general the crowds did not destroy property.⁵⁰ The targets suggest that it would not be a complete explanation to view this spate of destruction as being the result of tension from the bitter

⁴⁸ PRO PCOM 2/401, County Prison Staffordshire Sheriff's Gaol Register, 1842

⁴⁹ PRO HO 45/260, f. 271, Major Powys to HO, 16 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August, 1842; *North Staffordshire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

⁵⁰ E. P. Thompson, 'The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century', *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136; G. Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (London, 1964), 179-191; J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England 1700-1870* (London, 1979), 112

nature of the miners' strike. Rather the targets were in the main those concerned with the administration of the New Poor Law, unpopular magistrates, the local police, the small debtors court, the hated records belonging to the poor law contractor, all of which were very unpopular and the cause of long standing grievances in the community. Thomas Cooper's Sunday 'Thou shalt do no murder' sermon aroused a strong sense of outrage among the people in the Potteries, it inflamed their sense of injustice and brought long simmering tensions in the community to a head. In fact the burning of property of those connected with the administration of the New Poor Law bears some similarity to the Todmorden Poor Law Riots of 16 November 1838.⁵¹

The Strike in the Black Country and Surrounding Area

The miners' strike in the Black Country and surrounding mining areas was far more serious than was the miners' strike in the East Midlands. There had been long simmering grievances including the weighing of coal, the unfair practices of the butties (middlemen who leased the mine from its owner), and truck (payment by tokens which had to be redeemed in a mine shop often owned by the butty), but the strike was principally against the wages cuts made in the Black Country in July.⁵² The principal Chartist activists involved in the Black Country miners' strike were Arthur O'Neill, George White, Joseph Linney, Samuel Cook and John Fussell. Arthur O'Neill, born in 1819 at Chelmsford of a Protestant Irish cordwainer father and an English mother, had studied medicine and theology at Glasgow and became Pastor of the Chartist Church at Birmingham in 1840. The Birmingham Christian Chartist Church, which also included John Collins among its leaders, was part of the 'New Move' Chartism, outside the NCA structure and particularly receptive to an alliance with middle class radicals, which was denounced by Feargus O'Connor as a divisive influence in Chartism.⁵³ George White was leader of the Birmingham NCA Chartists and was feuding with the 'New Move' O'Neill. Born in Ireland in 1817, White went to Leeds to work as a woolcomber receiving six months in prison in 1840 for his Chartist activities, and came to Birmingham in 1841 as *Northern Star* correspondent.⁵⁴ Joseph Linney, a Chartist

⁵¹ Thomas Cooper, *Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1873), 187-9; S. Weaver, *John Fielden and the Politics of Popular Radicalism* (Oxford, 1987), 201-2

⁵² 'First Report of the Midland Mining Commission', *PP* (1843), XIII, cxxi

⁵³ J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. VI (London, 1990), 192-98

⁵⁴ S. Roberts, *Radical Politicians and Poets in Early Victorian Britain* (New York, 1993), 11-38

lecturer and former Manchester power loom weaver, was leader of the Bilston Chartists. Samuel Cook, a draper, was leader of the Dudley Chartists. John Fussell was an associate of White's who had been arrested prior to the Bullring riots in 1839 and like White had the reputation of being a physical force Chartist.⁵⁵

Arthur O'Neill, George White, Joseph Linney and Samuel Cook had been organising the Black Country miners' strike since late July when a wage reduction had been announced for 1 August.⁵⁶ The Black Country Chartist activists organised great public strike meetings of Black Country miners on 1 August in West Bromwich and on 11 August at Wednesbury. 8-10,000 Black Country miners attended the West Bromwich meeting and 20,000 attended the Wednesbury meeting. O'Neill was the main organiser and speaker at the West Bromwich meeting with George Hemmings from the Potteries also speaking. O'Neill, Linney, White and Thomas Cooper (who was on a lecture tour while making his way to the Manchester NCA conference) spoke at the Wednesbury meeting. After the Wednesbury meeting 100 delegates met in the Chartist rooms in Wednesbury and delegates were appointed to go to the Shropshire, Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Warwickshire and Lancashire coal fields to bring about a general organisation of colliers to stop work. Delegates from the Wednesbury meeting soon turned up at the Loughborough and Shropshire coalfields and elsewhere and O'Neill himself went to the Warwickshire and Derbyshire collieries.⁵⁷

The Chartist activists helped to ensure unity with the Potteries miners over the miners' demand for four shillings pay. At the West Bromwich meeting four shillings a day was declared to be the aim of the miners' strike and George Hemmings spoke at this meeting to unify the demands of the miners' strike in both the Potteries and the Black Country.⁵⁸ The published demands of the miners made at the West Bromwich meeting were also widely distributed in the Black Country, Potteries and East Midlands coalfields.⁵⁹ Thomas Cooper later claimed that at the Wednesbury meeting on 11 August the Black Country miners had resolved to strike for the Charter, but in fact the only resolution

⁵⁵ J. Bellamy and J. Saville (eds), *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, vol. VI (London, 1990), 64-68, 159-161

⁵⁶ *Northern Star*, 25 June, 16, 23, 30 July, 6 August 1842

⁵⁷ *Northern Star*, 6 August 1842; *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 10, 17 August 1842

⁵⁸ *Northern Star*, 6 August 1842

⁵⁹ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 10, 17 August 1842

passed at Wednesbury was that colliers should work a stipulated number of hours and the colliers carried banners demanding 'Miners right – 4 shillings a day and eight hours work' which was what the miners were contending for. The miners at Wednesbury may indeed have expressed support for the Charter in response to Cooper's speeches, but they had not made the Charter the aim of their strike.⁶⁰

The same Chartist activists who took the lead in helping the miners to organise their wage strike in the Black Country also attempted to change the nature and extend the already existing miners' strike from the 13 August. O'Neill, White and Fussell led the attempt to extend and politicise the miners' strike and to extend the strike to Birmingham. Joseph Linney and Samuel Cook were mainly content with keeping the miners' strike over miners' grievance going without necessarily increasing its political content. O'Neill, White, Fussell and their Chartist associates pursued three main strategies simultaneously.

The first strategy was to extend the Black Country miners' strike in order to immobilise industry by lack of fuel throughout the Midlands and Birmingham to force others who had not struck to leave work and so leave the government with no choice but to submit. This strategy was mainly the work of O'Neill. This first strategy was linked to the second, of extending the strike to Birmingham, as O'Neill hoped that a lack of coal fuel would force work to stop in Birmingham, and also with the third as O'Neill constantly hoped to extend the interest of the miners in the Charter. O'Neill had been involved in organising the extension of the Black Country miners' strike to others areas from Thursday 11 August when he addressed the Wednesbury meeting after which delegates set off to other mining districts to extend the strike and he himself went to Bedworth colliery with the other delegates on 12 and 13 August. But it only becomes certain that he was trying to use the miners' strike to stop all other forms of industry in Birmingham and the other Midlands towns to force Parliament to grant the Charter from 13 August when news of the political nature of the strike in Manchester had arrived. O'Neill made his strategy explicit on 13 August, while he was bringing the Bedworth and Foleshill miners of Warwickshire out on strike, declaring that 'if coals could not be had, the mighty machinery of society would be at a standstill from the great railroad and steamship speculations to the business of domestic life, all would be affected, and

⁶⁰ *Reports of State Trials 1839-43*, New Series, vol. 4 (London, 1892), 1277-78

therefore the object of the strike might be accomplished.' O'Neill also attempted to combine the first strategy with the third strategy, of politicising the miners' strike. O'Neill realised that for the miners the object was miners' grievances, but he also hoped the miners would themselves adopt the Charter as their aim along with their wages grievances. He advised them that 'the only means of restoring society to a healthy and happy state, was to make the People's Charter the law of the Land.' By this stage the main purpose of the miners' strike for O'Neill was as a lever for obtaining the Charter.⁶¹ Again at this meeting in Cradely on 26 August, as at the earlier meeting on in Warwickshire on 13 August, O'Neill told the miners that he hoped to have a general miners' strike to stop other forms of industry by reducing the coal supply, and so force the government to grant the Charter so normal life could resume.⁶²

The second strategy was to launch a strike for the Charter in Birmingham among all the working classes. George White at a meeting in Birmingham on 15 August called frequently for the people of Birmingham to come out on strike for nothing less than the Charter. At a meeting in Birmingham on 19 August White argued that the system of government must be destroyed or else the people would continue in the distressed state in which they were. White and Fussell declared that they would hold a meeting on 23 August in Birmingham with the aim of starting a strike for the Charter in Birmingham. O'Neill and the Christian Chartists had planned a public meeting for the day before to memorialise the Queen and take into consideration what Birmingham should do.⁶³ The police stopped the Monday meeting but O'Neill announced before it dispersed that he had come prepared to move resolutions declaring in favour of the Charter and recommending that from that day the payment of all taxes should cease.⁶⁴ A large meeting in Birmingham on 23 August organised by George White and John Fussell voted for the Charter, 12,000 being present, however no strike took place. White and Fussell held nightly meetings in Birmingham and often brought the Black Country miners from Bilston and the surrounding areas into Birmingham in procession to hear their speeches as on 23 August.⁶⁵ Here the third strategy, of politicising the miners' strike, was being combined with the second strategy.

⁶¹ *Coventry Herald and Observer*, 19 August 1842

⁶² *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 31 August 1842

⁶³ PRO HO 45/261, f. 50, Burgess to HO, 20 August 1842

⁶⁴ *Birmingham Journal*, 27 August 1842

⁶⁵ PRO HO 45/261, ff. 56-7, Burgess to HO, 19 August 1842; *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 31 August 1842

The third strategy was to change the nature of the Black Country miners' strike so that the miners would demand the enactment of the Charter as well as the settlement of their wage and industrial grievances. During the week 22 to 26 August O'Neill was trying to shift the aim of the Black Country miners' strike in Oldbury and Dudley toward the Charter. On 26 August O'Neill addressed one of the meetings of miners at Cradely and was arrested afterwards. At this meeting O'Neill declared that 'wages were not the main point, but the whole system was corrupt. The House of Commons was rotten...But the most important thing of all was that they had no voice in the representation of the country, and no good would be effected till they had the right of sending members to Parliament.'⁶⁶ O'Neill supported the parallel ulterior measure of a refusal to pay taxes, and told the Cradely meeting that he would not pay any taxes. When arrested on 26 August he had fifty to sixty handbills in his pocket signed by himself and the Committee of the Christian Chartist Church at Birmingham, declaring '...Passive resistance on our part is not only a right but a sacred duty. We resolve not to obey the government by serving them in any capacity. We resolve not to recognise them as our Government. We therefore refuse to pay all taxes.'⁶⁷ Most attention and debate in the historiography has focused on the third strategy. However the Chartist activists themselves put most effort into the first two strategies as they knew that the miners were primarily interested in the settlement of their own industrial grievances.

When attempting to change the nature of the Black Country strike and create a strike for the Charter in Birmingham the local Chartist activists were acting in response to the news of the strike for the Charter in the Northwest. For example in Birmingham George White's call for a strike for the Charter was made in response to the news of the strike for the Charter in the Northwest. White told a meeting in Birmingham on 15 August that 'the people in the north were out and were determined not to work again until they got their rights, and why not the people of Birmingham do the same? If they would but be united they would soon let the government see they were determined to have their rights.'⁶⁸

⁶⁶ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 31 August 1842

⁶⁷ *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 12, 19 August 1843; *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 31 August 1842

⁶⁸ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 31 August 1842

Birmingham did not strike although the large meeting in Birmingham organised by George White on 23 August voted for the Charter. Briggs argued that there was less class tension present in Birmingham than in, for example Manchester, due to the small-scale nature of the workshops there with no sharp distinction between master and journeyman. Behagg has questioned this and suggested that there was growing class tension in the small workshops with increased intensity of exploitation and decreasing opportunities for journeymen to become masters.⁶⁹ But lack of class tension is irrelevant to explaining why the Birmingham workers did not strike, given that the strike for the Charter in the Midlands was aimed at the government rather than the masters (although the miners' strike was aimed at the masters). Reasons other than the absence or presence of class tension may provide better explanations for why the Birmingham workers did not strike. Firstly in large cities with a wide range of trades it was more difficult to organise a strike due to problems of communication, as was seen in Leeds, Sheffield and even in Manchester where the force of the strike came from the surrounding industrial towns. This contrasts with towns such as Nottingham, Loughborough and Leicester which were smaller and more dominated by one or two industries. Secondly, as in Leeds, a very heavy military presence, including artillery, was stationed in Birmingham in order to deter a strike, and may have successfully done so.

In the Black Country the miners did not change the aim of their strike to the Charter and Birmingham did not strike. Barnsby and Challinor suggested that the Black Country miners were striking at least in part for the Charter while Griffin denied any support for the Charter as the aim of the strike among the miners.⁷⁰ All the evidence suggests that the Black Country miners received support from the Chartists organising their meetings and unifying their four shillings wage demand, but the miners were not prepared to strike for the Charter itself. The strike was also too strongly associated with miners' grievances in the Black Country and Shropshire for other trades to join in on any scale though some hardware workers were forced to stop work due to lack of coal for fuel. Of the fifty-five indicted at the Special Commission from the Black Country, if we exclude

⁶⁹ A. Briggs, 'The Local Background' and 'National Bearings', in A. Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), 1-28, 288-303; C. Behagg, 'An Alliance with the Middle Class', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 59-86

⁷⁰ R. Challinor and B. Ripley, *The Miners' Association: A Trade Union in the age of the Chartists* (London, 1968), 1-44; G. Barnsby, C. Griffin and R. Challinor, 'Letters', *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* nos. 19, 20, 22-25, 27 (1969-73); G. Barnsby, *The Working Class Movement in the Black Country 1750-1867* (Wolverhampton, 1977), 78-117

O'Neill and Linney, there were forty-seven miners, two tailors, one ropemaker, one puddler, and one shingler; thus a massive 85.5% were miners.⁷¹ However this should not be used to detract from the political nature of the strike in the East Midlands and in Potteries from 15 August. The Black Country miners' strike was generally peaceful in nature, although more violent than in the East Midlands. In the Black Country and Shropshire miners occasionally used violence against strikebreakers and the police, though violence against persons was relatively isolated even here. The greater level of violence in the Black Country and Shropshire was a result of the industrial nature of the separate strike by miners over their own wage grievances. However George White's bodyguard threw a policeman in the canal after they had escaped from the police breaking up his 23 August meeting and White's friends had thrown stones at the police.⁷²

The agitation for a strike for the Charter in the Black Country, Birmingham and surrounding areas was organised by local Chartist activists not by trade societies. Only in Coventry was there a trades delegate meeting, and this had no practical consequences. There was a meeting of trades delegates in the Chartist rooms in Coventry to discuss whether to turn out for the Charter, following the strike of some Coventry ribbon weavers over wages. Nevertheless no strike among the trades was decided upon by the Coventry trade delegate meeting. No strike took place in Coventry apart from the ribbon weavers who struck over wages; although the Bedworth miners did march into Coventry on at least one day and held meetings in the morning and evening which were addressed by Coventry Chartist leaders including William Taunton the Congregationalist Sunday school preacher and manager of the co-operative store who cautioned them to be peaceable. The miners on strike outside Coventry at Bedworth were organised by a local Chartist orator named Holmes.⁷³

⁷¹ PRO PCOM 2/401, County Prison Staffordshire Sheriff's Gaol Register, 1842

⁷² *Northern Star*, 8 April 1843

⁷³ *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842; PRO HO 45/261A, ff. 17-18, Lord Aylesford to HO, Bedworth, 17 August 1842, f. 24, placard announcing public meeting in Coventry, 17 August 1842; P. Searby, *Coventry Politics in the Age of the Chartists 1836-1848* (London, 1964), 16-19

Middle Class Radicals and the Strike in the Midlands

In the Midlands there was a significant level of sympathy for the strike for the Charter among the middle class Complete Suffrage radicals. The middle class suffrage radicals were wary of possible clashes with the military and civil authorities that the strike might and indeed did lead to, but were still able to consider co-operation by a possible tax revolt if full, fair and free representation was not conceded. This built on previous attempts at co-operation during the spring and summer of 1842. Chartists, albeit mainly from the 'new move' and middle class Leaguers and suffrage radicals had come together at the Complete Suffrage Conference at Birmingham in April 1842. In July at the ACLL London conference some Leaguers hoped that the Black Country miners' strike could be used to exact both repeal and the Charter by bringing all other forms of industry to a halt for lack of fuel. One group which included the Ridgeways of the Potteries and the Rev. William Stokes of West Bromwich hoped for a new movement with an alliance of Joseph Hume, Feargus O'Connor and Joseph Sturge and more vigorous tactics, perhaps associated with the call for closing the factories made at the conference by one of the conference delegates from London. Joseph Sturge's Nottingham election contest with John Walter, proprietor of *The Times*, at the beginning of August 1842 was another significant move towards greater co-operation between Chartists and middle class suffrage radicals. Chartist leaders including Feargus O'Connor, P. M. McDouall, E. P. Mead, Thomas Clark, John West and Thomas Cooper supported Sturge's campaign at Nottingham only a few days before the strike began in Southeast Lancashire. There were also attempts at co-operation in the Potteries, based on joint opposition to the New Poor Law among the Chartists and the middle class radicals the Ridgeways, though these did not get far. However in Wolverhampton Leaguers and Chartists stood on the same platform to declare in favour of the six points in February 1842. There was a strong Complete Suffrage Association in Leicester, though Cooper's disruptive influence prevented co-operation. The ACLL was in the doldrums at this time. A similar situation existed in the Midlands to that in Manchester in the first half of 1842 where prominent Leaguers were joining the Complete Suffrage movement in the belief that the Chartist or Complete Suffrage platforms were gaining public support at the expense of the League.⁷⁴

⁷⁴ *Nonconformist*, 3 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 5 March, 6, 13 August 1842; *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 18 February 1842; *North Staffordshire Mercury*, 9, 16, 23 July 1842; Thomas Beggs, *History of the Nottingham Election* (Nottingham, 1842), 1-60; Norman McCord, *The Anti-Corn Law League* (London, 1968), 120-1

The strongest support among the middle classes came from Joseph Sturge, the Quaker corn factor and 'moral radical' in Birmingham and other leaders of the NCSU.⁷⁵ Sturge was acquainted with the idea of a general strike as he and Baptist minister William Knibb had encouraged reports that a general strike of Negro apprentices would take place in Jamaica in 1838 while engaged in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery movement.⁷⁶ Nevertheless the general strike did not appear to Sturge to be the best tactic in 1842 entailing as it already had the risk of clashes with the military and police and the spilling of blood. Sturgite co-operation with the strike took the form of a call for the parallel 'ulterior measure' of a tax revolt unless the Queen dismissed her ministers and installed those who would enact the six points.

The NCSU leadership met in their Birmingham rooms daily between 20 August and 25 August apart from Sunday, with two more meetings on 29 and 30 August. Those present at some or all of the NCSU meetings were Joseph Sturge, his brother Charles Sturge, Henry Vincent the former Chartist orator, the middle class Nottingham radical Thomas Beggs, and John Collins the 'new move' Chartist friend of Lovett who was now running the Birmingham Christian Chartist Church with O'Neill. Sturge, Vincent and others also tried to attend O'Neill's public meeting in Birmingham on 22 August. Sturge had concerted measures with the Christian Chartists in the tradition, identified by Briggs but doubted by Behagg, of co-operation between the middle and working class radicals in Birmingham. O'Neill's placard advertising his public meeting had hinted that Sturge and Henry Vincent would appear.⁷⁷

The main contribution of the Complete Suffragists was to attempt, not very successfully, to drum up middle class support for a 'full, fair and free representation', to put pressure on the government, and to moderate the strikers' actions, by issuing addresses to the middle and working classes, a Memorial to the Queen and a circular advertising a conference of reformers of all shades of opinion which was to take place

⁷⁵ A. Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge and the Moral Radical Party in Early Victorian Britain* (London, 1987), 46-131; A. Tyrrell, 'Personality in Politics: the National Complete Suffrage Union and Pressure Group Politics in Early Victorian Britain', *Journal of Religious History*, 12, 4 (1983), 382-400; G. Cole, *Chartist Portraits* (London, 1965), 163-186; A. Wilson, 'The Suffrage Movement', in P. Hollis (ed.), *Pressure from Without* (London, 1974), 83-93

⁷⁶ A. Tyrrell, *Joseph Sturge and the Moral Radical Party in Early Victorian Britain* (London, 1987), 81

⁷⁷ *Nonconformist*, 24 August 1842; Minutes of the NCSU Council, Birmingham City Library, MSS 129666-8, 20-30 August 1842

on 7 September in Birmingham. These addresses were widely inserted in the liberal press in the Midlands. The Memorial called on the Queen to dismiss her ministers and appoint those who would obtain for the people a full, fair and free representation. The Memorial stated that if this was long withheld the result would be a complete union of the middle and working classes who would then after meetings and discussion by their representatives renounce their allegiance to the government and then would resolve not to obey, would refuse to serve as officials of the government, in the army, navy or police, and would abstain from articles of consumption which yielded a revenue to the state. Most importantly they would withhold taxes in a campaign of passive resistance. The Memorial did not suggest this would be done immediately, rather it would be the result if the right to a full, fair and free representation of the people continued to be withheld much longer, and presumably was intended to be decided on at the Conference called for 7 September.⁷⁸

The NCSU address 'to the middle and franchised classes' called on them to support a full fair and free representation and to give a peaceable expression of their sentiments in favour of the political enfranchisement of the working classes.⁷⁹ The address to the 'working and unenfranchised classes' called on them to support the conference called for 7 September, and further to follow peaceful conduct to win over the middle classes, who could constitutionally help them as they were the enfranchised classes, and so capable of controlling the parliament. Alone it would be impossible for the working classes to gain their ends, but associated with the middle classes, the government could not long resist their moral, peaceful agitation. The NCSU address went on to request the working classes to join the Sturgites in establishing universal suffrage and the other points of parliamentary reform in the minds of the middle classes, by 'resigning all hopeless contests, engaging in every peaceful effort, urging all moral means'.⁸⁰ Despite co-operation with O'Neill and the Christian Chartists, this final wording in the address to the working classes suggests that Sturge and the middle class Complete Suffrage leaders were actually hinting that the workers should end the strike, at least where violence was likely to break out, evidence of an important difference between the middle and working class radicals, as O'Neill was fully in support of the strike. The

⁷⁸ NCSU, *To Victoria, Queen of Great Britain* (Birmingham, 1842), 1-21

⁷⁹ NCSU, *Address of the Council to the Middle and Franchised Classes* (Birmingham, 1842), 1-11

⁸⁰ NCSU, *Address of the Council to the Working and Unenfranchised Classes* (Birmingham, 1842), 1-9

circular was forwarded to all local correspondents of the NCSU calling upon them to hold public meetings in their towns and localities for electing delegates to a conference of the middle and working classes to be held in Birmingham on 7 September, 'for the purpose of devising a specific course of conduct in accordance with the principles and rules of the union to be pursued by the friends of the people's rights under the peculiar crisis in which the country is now placed'. It was intended to sit for just one or two days to decide on united strategy and presumably to decide on whether to initiate the tax revolt.⁸¹

The most active support outside Birmingham came from the Nottingham Sturgites. Co-operation in Nottingham between Chartists and middle class suffrage radicals continued with a joint meeting of the Nottingham Chartists and Sturgites on 26 August to elect delegates to the 7 September conference.⁸² But the proposed conference was cancelled on 30 August by a meeting of the council of the NCSU. Sturge, Vincent, Collins and Beggs were ahead of other members of complete suffrage party. Three members of the Council had resigned because they thought the Council was acting precipitately. Edward Miall, editor of *The Nonconformist*, the usual mouth piece of the NCSU, considered the conference unwise, the strike had clearly failed by the 30 August, the government was seen to remain unshaken, and mass arrests had taken place. On the previous Friday Arthur O'Neill, who had been associated with the Sturgites during the strike, was arrested, acting as a warning to the Council that they were at risk of getting their fingers burnt.⁸³ Signs of middle class co-operation had also been present in Leicestershire and the Potteries. The Leicestershire middle classes gave provisions to the strikers. The Leaguers John and William Ridgeway in the Potteries mounted the platform with the Chartists on 16 August in favour of a revision of the New Poor Law. Among the middle classes more generally liberal newspaper editorials revealed sympathy over the distress but not for the strike itself. There was far more sympathy for the miners' strike than for the strike for the Charter. Many among the middle classes felt

⁸¹ *Nonconformist*, 24 August 1842

⁸² *Nonconformist*, 31 August 1842

⁸³ Minutes of the NCSU Council, Birmingham City Library, MSS 129666-8, 29, 30 August 1842; *Nonconformist*, 31 August 1842

that the miners had real grievances over butty and truck.⁸⁴

Ideology and Concept of the General Strike in the Midlands

The Midlands miners' strike was a strike to force the masters to rescind wage reductions, and also to limit work hours and get rid of various oppressive injustices such as truck and the fraudulent weighing of coal. As such it was aimed at the masters not at the government, and remained aimed at the masters despite the efforts of the Chartist activists to try to turn the miners' strike into a strike against the government. But the strike for the Charter in the Midlands, in contrast to the miners' strike, was clearly aimed at the government and Parliament which had been corrupted by the aristocracy and its parasites. It was to bring pressure on the government to enact the Charter. The government was blamed for the distress, which had made a strike for the Charter necessary, as class legislation had emanated from a government in which the people were not represented so producing the New Poor Law, no repeal of the Corn Laws, no factory legislation, no wages regulations, no laws against frame rents, high taxes, and unjust expensive wars in China and Afghanistan. Thus the address of the Nottingham Chartists presented to the magistrates on 19 August could claim that the strike had been provoked by 'a departure of the government from the principles of justice and morality, that instead of our laws promoting peace and being respected as based upon justice, they have emanated from the most corrupt, arrogant and selfish principles by which mankind have ever been governed.'⁸⁵

The enactment of the Charter would remove distress by bringing good laws, equal justice and a part in government for the people. Wages were low because workingmen's property, their labour, was not protected by the law. A Parliament elected under the Charter would remedy distress by providing minimum wages legislation, ending the New Poor Law, continuing outdoor relief whenever necessary, legally abolishing frame rents, providing fixed wages scales, factory legislation, taxing machinery, and legislating to maintain the quality of goods being produced to end cut ups and shoddy work. Taxes would be reduced and there would be an end to expensive, aggressive

⁸⁴ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842; 'First Report of the Midland Mining Commission', *PP* (1843), XIII, appendix, 3-6

⁸⁵ PRO HO 45/254, ff. 15-16, Nottingham address, 19 August 1842

foreign wars. The strategy behind the strike was that a united public opinion as expressed in the strike would force Parliament to enact the Six Points and then under the Charter an honest government would be elected. Thus the Chartist address published in Hanley and distributed around the Derbyshire collieries in late August argued ‘You say you wish for good laws, equal justice, and a part in the government; this you will never get, till you get the People’s Charter...Coal must not be got any more till you get the Charter, and the Charter has got an honest government...a good government chosen by the *whole* people, for the good of the *whole*. A government that will give labour protection, and make honest industry happy...’⁸⁶

The traditional enemies of the people were criticised in the strike for the Charter in the Midlands. The corrupt government, the aristocracy, the army, the established Church were all criticised, as was the corruption of the House of Commons by the aristocracy. The traditional language of radicalism was present in the strike. The aristocracy had taken over and corrupted the people’s House of Commons, so it no longer represented the people.⁸⁷ Thus Arthur O’Neill could ask at the meeting near Dudley on 26 August ‘What was the House of Commons composed of? Lawyers, did they care for the people? Of cut-throat gentlemen, the paid military, did they care for the people? Of fox hunting gentleman, did they care for the people?’ O’Neill considered the ‘government and the governed as in one large room with an air pump. When the pump was first applied the inconvenience was not generally felt. At last someone near the window felt a want of air, but on going to the window he found the Duke of Wellington with his great sword, ready to prevent him from opening it. He then went to another window and found the Archbishop of Canterbury keeping out the air with his surplice. He went to another window and a lawyer stopped it with this wig.’⁸⁸ It was the ‘rotten House of Commons by which they were oppressed. All those interests which were represented in the government were well off: the army, the navy, the clergy, the East India Company, the landed interest were all represented in the government, and therefore they were well off, but the working classes were not represented in the Government, and therefore they were badly off.’⁸⁹ The large capitalists, the ‘Cotton Lord’ Manchester mill owners

⁸⁶ PRO HO 45/244, ff. 54-55, Derby magistrates to HO, 31 August 1842

⁸⁷ G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983) 90-179; G Stedman Jones, ‘The Language of Chartism’, in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982) 3-58

⁸⁸ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 31 August 1842

⁸⁹ *Coventry Herald and Observer*, 19 August 1842

whom the Midlands Chartists believed had started the strike, could be added to these older enemies of the people.

Some hostility to manufacturers was present in strike for the Charter in the Midlands but not hostility to the middle classes in general. Hostility was shown towards the large Southeast Lancashire capitalist mill owners. They were criticised by Chartist activists in the Midlands, but this criticism was based not on their role in production but rather on political, legal and moral grounds. The Lancashire manufacturers, particularly the Bayley Brothers, the League members whom the Chartist activists argued had started the strike, were attacked in moral terms. Firstly because their wage reductions took place at a time when trade was improving. Secondly they were criticised in moral terms because the Bayleys' wages reductions were seen as part of a League plot to use the working classes for their own purposes. Clark in Nottingham on 15 August attacked the ACLL which he accused of starting the strike. But he said that now the people should strike and stay out for political power. The masters had, in one definition, left the people in 1832 when they were enfranchised, so they were now benefiting from class legislation. The problem was rooted in law and political power, the working man was at a disadvantage but that was to be remedied by enfranchisement so that they could also obtain legal protection for their property, their labour. Clark speaking at Nottingham declared that all the people wanted, and what they were determined to have, was political power, and until the labour of the working man was protected by the laws, he was completely at the mercy of the manufacturers.⁹⁰

The masters were also criticised for lowering wages in consequence of the income tax forcing the working classes to pay the income tax through wage reductions. Barber and Clark in Nottingham on 15 August and O'Neill in Warwickshire on 13 August attributed the strike to the recently introduced income tax. Yet in this criticism it was really the government rather than the masters who were seen as the original source of the problem. Barber in Nottingham describing the income tax as oppressive, and now that the strike had been started they should stay out until they got the Charter.⁹¹ Similarly in Leicester the unnamed Chartist delegate from South Staffordshire who spoke on 17 August attributed the intended reduction of wages to an attempt on the part

⁹⁰ *Nottingham Mercury*, 19 August 1842

⁹¹ *Nottingham Mercury*, 19 August 1842

of the middle class to throw the income tax from their own shoulders onto the working class. Yet he went on to advise the assembly that if they made a strike at all they should not make it against their masters but make it ‘a general strike for their rights and liberties.’⁹² They saw the income tax not as a pay-off for getting rid of tariff duties in Peel’s budget, but rather as a means of paying for unjust foreign wars against the Chinese and Afghans, thus the government not the masters was ultimately to blame although the masters were greedily getting workmen to pay for the income tax through reductions. For O’Neill ‘Sir Robert Peel was a man of the most callous heart, and he with the Duke of Wellington, for the purpose of butchering the poor Chinese and Indians, must levy an income tax. Was this tax paid by the workmen? Not directly, it was put on the masters, and as they had to pay seven pence in the pound for income tax, they took six pence a day off the wages of the workmen, and so made a large profit by it.’⁹³

Despite this moral criticism of the larger capitalists and distrust of the Leaguers’ motives most of the Midlands Chartist activists did hope for co-operation with the portion of the middle classes attached to suffrage reform. The strike was not aimed against the middle classes. The Chartist activists hoped that the middle classes would contribute provisions and that the manufacturers would themselves shut their factories and warehouses without the need for a turnout. The fourth and sixth resolutions passed at Loughborough on 19 August, requesting the ‘wealthy classes’ to form a committee to advise on the best means of supplying the wants of the people, calling for a deputation to be appointed to wait upon the manufacturers and masters to request them to cease to give out any more work, and requesting their co-operation in devising the means of supplying the wants of the people, ~~are~~ evidence of the desire for middle class co-operation.⁹⁴ The Nottingham Chartists’ address to the ‘magistrates, gentleman and tradesman of Nottingham’ demonstrated the desire of the Chartists for the co-operation of the middle classes, declaring that they hoped that ‘you, as men, as citizens, as philanthropists and Christians, will assist us in our glorious and patriotic undertaking...to render your assistance, by example and influence and help those who are suffering every privation in these endeavours to obtain permanent peace and

⁹² *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

⁹³ *Coventry Herald and Observer*, 19 August 1842

⁹⁴ PRO HO 45/250, ff. 93-94, Loughborough resolutions, 19 August 1842

prosperity - master manufacturers, we earnestly hope that you will close your mills and warehouses...with your assistance success is certain.⁹⁵ Even Thomas Cooper in his poster issued on his return to Leicester after the Manchester NCA Conference called for middle class support of the strike urging the shopkeepers to provide credit to the strikers following recent union of efforts when the Chartists supported Joseph Sturge at the Nottingham election.⁹⁶ The force of Cooper's message may have been somewhat reduced by the fact that earlier in the summer Cooper and his Shakespearean Chartists had disrupted an important Leicester Complete Suffrage Association meeting at which Henry Vincent was speaking. The Chartist activists made clear their belief that the enactment of the Charter through the strike was not a class measure intended to benefit only the working classes. Rather it would be in the interests of the whole people. The Nottingham address supported its call for the middle classes to help them carry out the strike with the argument that 'as it is for the good of all, it should be supported by all.'⁹⁷

The traditional radical argument that no allegiance was owed to the Government as Parliament had become corrupted by the aristocracy was present in the strike for the Charter.⁹⁸ The government was a usurped government as the people were no longer represented by the Commons which had become dominated by the aristocracy and its parasites. The peaceful general strike of the whole people was a renunciation of allegiance to unnerve the government and Parliament and force it by a united display of public opinion to enact the Charter. For O'Neill the people 'had no voice in the representation of the country, and no good would be effected till they had the right of sending members to Parliament. For his part he had declared, and now declared again, that he owed no allegiance to the government, for it was a usurped government.'⁹⁹

In the East Midlands the Chartist strike leaders were not hoping to manoeuvre the government into repression to justify defensive violence. Their strategy was to make a moral pressure display of united public opinion through the strike which would bring about a loss of confidence on the part of the government and Parliament who would

⁹⁵ PRO HO 45/254, ff. 15-16, Nottingham address, 19 August 1842

⁹⁶ PRO HO 45/250, f. 112, Cooper's Leicester poster, 22 August 1842

⁹⁷ PRO HO 45/254, ff. 15-16, Nottingham address, 19 August 1842

⁹⁸ I. Prothero, 'William Benbow and the Concept of the General strike', *Past and Present*, 63 (1974), 132-170

⁹⁹ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 31 August 1842

then accept the Charter, much as they believed had happened in 1832. We can see this idea of united public opinion being essential in Barber's speech at Nottingham on 15 August, 'If the horse knew its own strength it would not suffer itself to be rode by a lad; so if the people knew their strength and would but unite, they would not be kept out of their rights, they could obtain them without having recourse to violence.'¹⁰⁰ They stressed that there must be a united public opinion which the government could not withstand, in the words of the Staffordshire Chartist delegate at Leicester on 17 August, 'to show their tyrants that they could act well and decorously, that they had gained knowledge, and knowing that knowledge was power, they were determined to use it.'¹⁰¹

Almost all the Chartist activists in the East Midlands declared from the platforms that the strike was to be a peaceful, legal, constitutional move. There were very few threats of violence and the language of menace was largely absent. There were almost no calls to arm to resist the authorities in case of repression. The third resolution passed at Loughborough on 19 August recommended all persons to keep within the law and declared that all persons failing to do so would be considered 'enemies of the holy cause.' Likewise the Nottingham address declared that the strikers should not only refrain from any appeal to physical force and violence, but also maintain the public peace and hold inviolable the rights of property.¹⁰² At the Derby meeting on 16 August Moss exhorted the people to adhere to the motto of the Chartists 'peace, law and order' and pointed to a general cessation from work as a 'safe, peaceable and practical mode' of obtaining the Charter. At the same meeting West exhorted the people to be firm but peaceable in their determination to obtain the Charter.¹⁰³ Barber at Nottingham on 15 August when urging the people not to go to work until the Charter was the law of the land discountenanced any attempt at physical force.¹⁰⁴ Duffey at the Leicester meeting on 17 August warned that there were to be no outbreaks or riots, it was of no advantage to them to destroy property, 'they had a right legally, constitutionally and peaceably to destroy their own slavery, and to strike the rivets from the chains which bound them.'¹⁰⁵ This call for the strike to be completely peaceful was not completely universal even in

¹⁰⁰ *Nottingham Mercury*, 19 August 1842

¹⁰¹ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

¹⁰² PRO HO 45/254, ff. 15-16, Nottingham address, 19 August 1842

¹⁰³ *Derby Reporter*, 18 August 1842

¹⁰⁴ *Nottingham Mercury*, 19 August 1842

¹⁰⁵ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

the East Midlands. The constitutional stance of calling for arming in self-defence against tyranny in case the police or military attacked them was talked of at the meeting in Leicester on 19 August after an attack by the police. Nevertheless the Chartist activists in the East Midlands were generally consistent in declaring that the strike was to be peaceful. This was true not only of those with a long term commitment to peaceful measures, but also those who in 1839 and 1840 had used the constitutional language of menace, talked of defensive violence against tyranny, asserted the right to bear arms in self defence, or even prepared to use violence, as in the case of Duffey who had been jailed for his part in the attempted Sheffield armed uprising in 1840.

In the Potteries and Black Country not all the Chartist activists were so equally committed to a completely peaceful strike though the majority were. Thomas Cooper was certainly ambivalent in his speeches in the Potteries providing an inflammatory sermon on the text 'Thou shalt do no murder' on Sunday 14 August which enflamed the crowd. Even so the next day he reproved the crowd for demolishing houses and while in the Potteries did not actually call on the people to fight, made use of the slogan 'peace, law and order', and ended with cautions against violence, keeping just within the law if possible. However at the Manchester NCA Conference Cooper had been far less ambivalent and was one of most violent delegates, expressing the idea that a general strike must provoke a physical contest with the authorities and declared that in the Potteries they were ready to fight. However from the report of the trial rather than Cooper's own account it appears that Cooper placed the stress on putting on a bold front to show that they were prepared to fight, the essence of constitutional forcible intimidation. Certainly Cooper did not approve of the destruction of property whatever may have been his feelings about a possible confrontation with the troops.¹⁰⁶ John Richards however was firmly committed to a peaceful strike for the Charter in the Potteries. In the Black Country George White took a hard line, with threats at meetings to beat the police. However O'Neill in the Black Country insisted that the strike was to be entirely peaceful declaring himself to be a Christian and a man of peace. O'Neill constantly urged peaceful behaviour, even urging the 22 August meeting to disperse when it was clear that the police would otherwise break it up and it would lead to a clash. The Black Country Chartist activists Joseph Linney and Samuel Cook who were

¹⁰⁶ *Reports of State Trials 1839-43*, New Series, vol. 4 (London, 1892), 954; Thomas Cooper, *Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1873), 189-192

concerned mainly in maintaining the miners' wage strike also exhorted the men to be peaceable and the generally peaceful nature of the miners' strike in the Black Country was considered by the middle class press to be due to the influence of O'Neill, Linney and Cook.¹⁰⁷

In the strike the justification of the right to take part in government and the justification of universal suffrage was derived from a number of sources. There was a strong religious emphasis on Christian equity and the unchristian actions of the present government in contrast to the Christian government that would replace it after the Charter had been enacted. We can see this Christian element not only in the Christian Chartist O'Neill's speeches. The Nottingham address called for the support of the middle classes as Christians and philanthropists. The third Loughborough resolution described the strike as 'the holy cause'. An address to the colliers calling on them to strike for the Charter distributed throughout the Derbyshire and other mining districts in the second half of August in attempt to turn the East Midlands miners' strike into a strike for the Charter had a strong religious emphasis. It was pitched at miners, many of whom were Methodists, arguing that the unchristian government was destroying the Chinese and that the Charter would produce a Christian government.¹⁰⁸ In addition the justification from natural right was articulated in the strike in the language of a nation willing itself to be free.¹⁰⁹ Thus the poster issued by the Birmingham Christian Chartist Church calling on the people of Birmingham to attend the 22 August meeting stated that 'the nation's voice declares, in the loudest tones, the noble struggle must now be made. The days of tyranny are numbered...' The French Revolution principle, derived from natural rights, that a nation can be free simply by declaring itself to be free was present in the words 'stand forward in the nation's moral battle and declare that our country shall now be free.'¹¹⁰

Most powerful however was the historical justification from the ancient constitution and constitutional rights derived from England's past.¹¹¹ There was a strong patriotic

¹⁰⁷ *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 31 August 1842

¹⁰⁸ PRO HO 45/244, f. 56, Address to the Colliers, 31 August 1842

¹⁰⁹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), 84-110

¹¹⁰ *Birmingham Journal*, 27 August 1842

¹¹¹ J. Belchem, 'Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform in Early Nineteenth Century England', *Social History*, 6 (1981), 1-35; J. Epstein, "Our Real Constitution": Trial Defence and

emphasis on the rights of freeborn Englishmen. These different justifications were blended in an eclectic way in the strike. But when in dire need it was the argument from the historical English constitution which prevailed. After the 22 August meeting had been declared illegal and disrupted, O'Neill issued another placard declaring that they no longer owed allegiance due to the unconstitutional actions of the government banning the meeting to memorialise the Queen. In this extreme situation the resort was to the constitution and the historical rights of Englishmen to discuss their grievances in public meetings and to complain. The government in contravention of the constitution had prevented the meeting, through the magistrates, using the threat of physical force from the police to enforce its unconstitutional proceedings. O'Neill went on to declare that 'if such an encroachment on the rights of Englishmen is submitted to, there will be no freedom for any class. The ruling power has taken away the just and constitutional rights of the people, and circumstances have now arisen in which the government has no rightful claim to our allegiance.'¹¹²

The language of class was articulated in the strike in the Midlands. There was a working class identity present in the Midlands strike which was the result of a mixture of political, economic, and social exploitation. An economically class based identity was present in the strike in the shared experience of low wages and deprivation. There was a sense of unity of manual work present in the strike. These shared experiences could constitute the basis of class-consciousness. However this does not need to imply that class conflict was present. This working class identity present was not only economically based but also politically based on exclusion from the elective franchise. However class was not the only identity expressed in the Midlands strike. Other collective identities articulated in speeches and resolutions during the strike in the East Midlands, Potteries and Black Country were those of the people, the nation and religion. Nevertheless other identities such as the people, nation and religion were often used in a way more or less reducible to a working class identity; 'the people' or 'the nation' were

'Radical Memory in the Age of Revolution', in J. Vernon, *Re-reading the Constitution* (Cambridge, 1996), 22-51

¹¹² *Birmingham Journal*, 27 August 1842; PRO HO 45/261, f. 65, Placard issued by the Committee of the Christian Chartist Church, 22 August 1842

often equated in the same speech or resolution with the ‘working classes’ or contrasted with the ‘middle classes’.¹¹³

Defeat of the Strike in the Midlands

The strike for the Charter in the East Midlands was defeated by the local authorities making use of the special constables with assistance from the military. In accordance with the Royal Proclamation against unlawful assemblages the magistrates banned Chartist public meetings, essential for the organisation of the strike, and special constables and military were used to disperse them.¹¹⁴ For example the Derby magistrates prevented a public meeting at Holbrook Moor on 22 August, which was to precede a turnout procession into Derby, by occupying the field with hundreds of special constables, yeomanry and dragoons.¹¹⁵ In Leicester on 19 August at the ‘Battle of Mowmaker Hill’ the magistrates and police dispersed 1500 persons at Belgrave who were attempting to hold a public meeting and in the evening a meeting of 12,000 people was dispersed.¹¹⁶ Arrests often accompanied the dispersal of meetings. For example at the ‘Battle of Mapperly Plains’ outside Nottingham on 23 August 375 turnouts mainly from the industrial villages were arrested by the county police assisted by the military and although most were released over the next few days the mass arrest took the heart out of the strike with the men first in Nottingham and then in the industrial villages gradually returning to work.¹¹⁷ No more public meetings took place in Leicester after prisoners were brought over from Loughborough on the night of 22 August although many remained on strike especially in the surrounding industrial villages until August 27.¹¹⁸

The turnout processions in the East Midlands, without which the strike could not maintain itself, were also declared illegal and the military and special constables were

¹¹³ *Nottingham Mercury*, 19, 26 August 1842; *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 31 August 1842; *Birmingham Journal*, 27 August 1842; *North Staffordshire Mercury*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20, 27 August, 1842

¹¹⁴ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20, 27 August 1842

¹¹⁵ PRO HO 45/244, ff. 44-45, Mayor of Derby to HO, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842

¹¹⁶ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842; PRO HO 45/250, ff. 108-109, Mayor of Leicester to HO, 22 August 1842

¹¹⁷ PRO HO 45/254, ff. 36-37, Mayor of Nottingham to HO, 24 August 1842; *Nottingham Review*, 2 September 1842; *Nottingham Mercury*, 19, 26 August 1842

¹¹⁸ PRO HO 45/250, ff. 108-109, Mayor of Leicester to HO, 22 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842

used to break them up. For example on 22 August special constables dispersed a procession in Loughborough itself and one which tried to go from Loughborough to Mountsorrel to turn out the framework knitters there with five men being arrested.¹¹⁹ These tactics led on 25 August to the whole of the working men in Loughborough with few exceptions returning to their labour though the men in the villages surrounding Loughborough stayed out until 27 August.¹²⁰ On 22 August the Derby magistrates prevented the turnout procession to Derby by ordering the cavalry to gallop among the people forcing them to retreat. The defeat of this crucial procession into Derby crippled the strike in South Derbyshire.¹²¹ In Nottingham patrols of police under the direction of the magistrates attempted to interrupt the progress of the turnout processions.¹²² In the East Midlands, with the help of troops, the local authorities never completely lost control of the situation, partly because the strike for the Charter appeared later there so the authorities were better prepared and partly because it was far more peaceful in nature than the strike in the Potteries and Black Country.

In the Potteries, which was the first district in the Midlands to experience the strike for the Charter, the local authorities at first lost control. Home Secretary Sir James Graham was very concerned about the Potteries outbreak.¹²³ It was only the intervention of the regular military which enabled a reassertion of authority. The military had been withdrawn in early August allowing the miners' strike in the Potteries to restart. The forces available on 15 August were completely inadequate to disperse the crowds. Bailey Rose, the stipendiary magistrate, virtually abandoned the district to the crowds on the night of 15 August. The authorities reasserted control on 16 August when the military under Major Powys fired into a crowd of over 8000 people in Burslem Market Place, killing at least one person, and the cavalry roughly cleared the Market Place and streets. This effectively put an end to the strike for the Charter and the presence of large numbers of military in the district deterred any more turnout processions or meetings

¹¹⁹ *Leicestershire Mercury*, 27 August 1842; *Nottingham Mercury*, 26 August 1842

¹²⁰ *Nottingham Review*, 2 September 1842

¹²¹ *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842

¹²² PRO HO 45/254, ff. 13-15, Mayor of Nottingham to HO, 19 August 1842

¹²³ Sir James Graham Papers, Cambridge University Library, Bundle 52A, Sir J. Graham to the Queen, 16 August 1842

from taking place after Tuesday 16 August although the return to work did not take place until the following Monday or later.¹²⁴

Sir James Graham felt more reassured from 19 August although the planned Birmingham meetings called by O'Neill and White for 22 and 23 August were causes of concern nationally.¹²⁵ The Birmingham Police Commissioner's force was increased in size; the Mayor and magistrates of Birmingham banned public meetings; the Dragoon Guards were reinforced with extra infantry, cavalry and two cannons; the military pensioners and special constables were called out; and the grounds where the meetings of O'Neill and White were to take place were occupied with police in advance.¹²⁶ O'Neill called on his meeting to disperse when it became clear that otherwise the police would be used to break it up and over the following week the special constables dispersed a number of meetings called by George White and made great efforts to arrest him.¹²⁷ In the Black Country the police and yeomanry were used to protect miners who wanted to work, to prevent forcible intimidation and in the later stages of the strike to disperse large assemblies. However the authorities showed some sympathy to the miners. Sir James Graham and Sir Robert Peel both held the masters responsible for the strike to some extent for reducing wages at a time of improvement in trade. Peel and Graham were both especially sympathetic to the miners' grievances and realised that they suffered from real injustices. While the strike was still in progress Peel suggested to Graham that a commission should be set up to enquire into the miners' grievances which resulted in the Midland Mining Commission report condemning the truck and butty systems and other injustices.¹²⁸ Lord Powis in Shropshire was privately sympathetic to the miners' grievances and exerted pressure on the coal masters to remedy them. In the Black Country a number of the middle classes tried to arrange a mediating conference between the coal masters and men in September although the coal masters proved reluctant to compromise.¹²⁹

¹²⁴ Old Potter (Charles Shaw), *When I was a Child* (Stoke, 1903), 169-171; PRO HO 45/260, f. 271, Major Powys to HO, 16 August 1842; *North Staffordshire Mercury*, 20 August 1842

¹²⁵ Sir James Graham Papers, Bundle 52A, Sir J. Graham to the Queen, 19 August 1842

¹²⁶ PRO HO 45/261, ff. 49-57, Police Commissioner Burgess to HO, Birmingham, 20 August 1842

¹²⁷ *Birmingham Journal*, 27 August 1842

¹²⁸ Sir James Graham Papers, Bundle 53A, Sir R. Peel to Sir J. Graham, 30 August 1842; 'First Report of the Midland Mining Commission', *PP* (1843), XIII

¹²⁹ PRO HO 45/258, ff. 59-61, Lord Powis to HO, 24 August 1842; 'First Report of the Midland Mining Commission', *PP* (1843), XIII, appendix, 11-12

The magistrates further defeated the strike by arresting the Chartist activists who were leading it thus removing the strike leadership. At Loughborough John Skevington was arrested and tried on 20 August for his part in the Friday evening meeting and bound over with recognisances and sureties. A warrant was also put out for Charles Jarret of Loughborough and he gave himself up on 25 August and was tried next day.¹³⁰ In the Potteries John Richards was arrested. William Ellis was arrested in Glasgow, where he had escaped following the shootings in Burslem Market Place, having been marked down for a charge of High Treason. Thomas Cooper was arrested after his return to Leicester. In Birmingham and the Black Country Arthur O'Neill was arrested on 26 August. George White was also arrested the same day after having evaded the police for a week. Joseph Linney of Bilston and Samuel Cook of Dudley, who had continued to help organise the strike over miners' grievances, were also arrested. Where warrants were issued but the activists escaped this was just as effective in removing the Chartist leaders of the strike. In Nottingham warrants were out for the arrest of Thomas Clark and E. P. Mead, who both escaped, thus removing two of the main strike leaders.¹³¹

This was followed up by the magistrates making difficulties over accepting Chartist sympathisers as sureties for bail thus keeping the activists in prison for some time although they had not been tried so that they could not take any further part in the strike. The magistrates made difficulties over accepting John Skevington's recognisances and he was taken in custody to Leicester until Monday when his sureties were finally accepted, thus taking him out of action over a crucial weekend. In the Black Country the magistrates refused to accept radicals as sureties for bail for White and O'Neill who were thus kept in prison for a number of weeks until the Black Country miners' strike had collapsed.¹³²

In conclusion the strike for the People's Charter in the Midlands was an attempt by local Chartist activists to revive the 'ulterior measures' of the Chartist mass platform agitation in the face of the generally cautious policy of the national leadership, following the news of the strike in Manchester. It was the putting into practice of the

¹³⁰ PRO HO 45/250, ff. 91-100, W. M. Philips to HO, 20 August 1842; *Leicestershire Mercury*, 27 August 1842

¹³¹ PRO HO 41/17, HO to Major Powys, 18 August 1842; *Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 31 August 1842; PRO ASSI 6/6, Calendar of Prisoners Stafford Special Commission, 1 October 1842

¹³² *Leicestershire Mercury*, 27 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 12 November 1842

abandoned 1839 general strike or 'sacred month', but this time by the activists in the localities rather than by the national leadership. In 1839 the localities had been unprepared for the 'sacred month' and the National Convention had thus cancelled it. However in August 1842 local Chartist activists themselves attempted the National Holiday after hearing the news of the strike in the Northwest. In the Midlands the strikes were not simply a spontaneous reaction to the news of the strike in Manchester. The strike for the People's Charter in these places was announced and organised at public meetings by Chartist activists. The example of the strike in the Northwest had shown it was possible to get a widespread general strike overcoming the obvious reluctance to leave off work if it seemed likely others would not follow. The strike for the Charter in the Midlands was organised by local Chartist activists not by trade societies. The highly political and organised nature of the strike outside the Northwest has been obscured to some extent because the miners' strike over wage grievances was going on earlier and simultaneously in the Midlands with Chartists helping to organise it. The strike in the East Midlands was from the start a strike for the Charter. It was in no way spontaneous, being launched by the local Chartist activists in response to the news from Manchester, with co-ordination from the Chartist delegates meeting at Loughborough. East Midlands Chartist activists proposed, built up support for, and then launched the strike for the Charter from the local platforms at the public meetings in the towns between 15 August and 19 August. The speakers at these public meetings were all Chartist activists. From the earliest of these meetings resolutions were passed stating that a strike would take place at the end of the week and that the aim would be the Charter. The resolutions put by the Chartist activists from the platforms at the public meetings in the East Midlands were for a strike for the People's Charter. This contrasts with the strike in the Black Country and Potteries where the miners' strike was of far greater significance than the miners' wage strike in the East Midlands.

As we have seen, there were two strike movements going on in the Black Country and Potteries. Firstly the miners' strike which began over miners' wage reductions and secondly the strike for the Charter which was launched in the Potteries but failed to take place in the Black Country. In the Black Country and the Potteries Chartist activists had helped to organise the miners' wage strike in June and July. In the Potteries and the Black Country these Chartist activists attempted to change the nature and extend the already existing miners' industrial strike in response to the news of the Chartist strike in

Manchester. In the Potteries the Chartist activists did change the aim of strike and extended it to the potters though the strike atypically degenerated immediately into serious destruction of property. This was unsuccessful in the Black Country and Birmingham. In the Black Country Chartist activists pursued three strategies. Firstly to continue the Black Country miners' strike in order to immobilise industry by lack of fuel throughout the Midlands to force other trades to leave work. Secondly to launch a strike for the Charter in Birmingham among all the working classes. Thirdly to transform the Black Country miners' strike into a strike for the Charter as well as for wages. Debate in the historiography has focused on the third strategy but the Chartist activists concentrated on the first two strategies as they realised that the miners were among the least receptive of the working classes to the Chartist argument. Birmingham did not strike and the Black Country miners never changed their aim to the Charter. The strike was too associated with miners' grievances in the Black Country, Warwickshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire for other trades to join in.

While the Midlands miners' wage strike was aimed at the masters, the strike for the Charter in the Midlands was designed to bring pressure on the government to enact the Charter. The government was blamed for distress, which had made a strike for the Charter necessary as class legislation had emanated from a government in which the people were not represented. The Charter would remove distress by providing fair laws, equal justice, a role in government for the people, and would protect their property, that is their labour, like all other forms of property. The strategy behind the strike was that a united public opinion as expressed in the strike would force Parliament to enact the Charter and then an honest government would be elected. The traditional enemies of the people were criticised in the strike for the Charter. The corrupt government, the aristocracy, the army, the established Church, and the corruption of the House of Commons by the aristocracy were all criticised. The master manufacturers were criticised for lowering wages in consequence of the income tax and for provoking a strike in the Northwest to secure the repeal of the Corn Laws at the expense of the workers. But the Chartist activists in the Midlands hoped for the co-operation of the industrious middle classes in the strike. The Chartist activists believed that the enactment of the Charter through the strike was not a class measure intended to benefit only the working classes. The traditional radical argument that no allegiance was owed to the Government as the aristocracy had corrupted Parliament was used. In general the

Chartist strike leaders were not hoping to manoeuvre the government into repression to justify defensive violence. They hoped that the united moral pressure of public opinion as demonstrated in the strike would destroy the nerve of the government and Parliament who would then have to agree to the Charter. Almost all the Chartist activists in the East Midlands declared that the strike was to be a peaceful, legal, and constitutional move. In the Black Country and Potteries not all the Chartist activists were committed to a peaceful strike but the majority were. The strike was generally peaceful in the East Midlands where the aim of the strike was clearly for the Charter though the activists had not got complete control over the rank and file. But this contrasts with the serious destruction of property and violence in the Potteries where the strike for the Charter had less firm roots. The strike for the Charter in the Midlands was successfully defeated by the magistrates banning and dispersing public strike meetings and turnout processions with the help of the special constables, yeomanry and regular military. There was therefore no failure of nerve which might have helped perpetuate strike action.

CHAPTER THREE

THE STRIKE FOR THE CHARTER IN YORKSHIRE

In Yorkshire the 1842 strike for the Charter took place throughout the West Riding textile district stretching from the borders of Lancashire in the west to Leeds in the east, and from the Huddersfield neighbourhood in the south to the Skipton neighbourhood in the north. In addition there were meetings at Barnsley and Sheffield further south in the West Riding. The strike in the West Riding was organised and led by local Chartist activists from the local platforms after receiving the news of the strike for the Charter in the Northwest. Operatives from Lancashire went on procession to Todmorden and Huddersfield on Friday 12 and Saturday 13 August. Organisation by the local Yorkshire Chartist activists began on 12 August, the strike was launched from local platforms in Bradford, Halifax and Dewsbury from Monday 15 August, and the enactment of the Charter was the aim from the start. Turnout processions pulled the boiler plugs and cut the dams of mills and brought out both hand and mill workers, artisans and labourers in Bradford, Halifax, Dewsbury, the outskirts of Leeds, Skipton, Keighley and the industrial villages surrounding the towns. The return to work took place from Thursday 18 August in the large towns with the surrounding districts on strike for about one week longer. The Charter remained the aim of the strike throughout.

The strike in Yorkshire has been curiously neglected in the historiography. It has received far less attention from historians than has the strike in the Northwest. Brief narrative accounts of the strike in Bradford, Halifax and Leeds have been provided by Wright, Dalby and Webster, and Harrison. When examining the strike in the Leeds neighbourhood Harrison ignored the political demands of the strikers and attributed the strike to hunger. Webster suggested that the strike in Halifax was merely over wages rather than for the Charter. However Wright was more willing to recognise Chartist leadership and Chartist aims in the strike in Bradford. In general monographs on popular radicalism and Chartism the strike in Yorkshire is normally neglected and often cursorily portrayed as being simply spread by the turnouts from the Northwest. Personal recollections of the strike are also available in the nineteenth century autobiographies and oral histories of Francis Grundy, Benjamin Wilson, Joseph Lawson and Frank Peel.

In these personal recollections the intimate connection made by the strikers between political rights and protection for the labour, between the Charter and wages, was more widely recognised than has been the case in the historiography.¹

No previous attempt has been made to look at the strike in the West Riding as a whole rather than in individual towns in isolation. The political nature of the strike and whether its aim was the Charter has been largely ignored for most of the West Riding. The role which the local Chartist activists played in organising the strike and their links with the strike in the Northwest have been similarly neglected. No attention has been given to the popular conception of the strike in Yorkshire and the ideology that was articulated by the Yorkshire strikers. The chapter will examine these issues amongst others. The importance of the strike for the Charter in Yorkshire will be emphasised furthering the argument that the 1842 strike was the highpoint, in terms of its threat to the state, of the Chartist movement.

Industrial and Political Background

Textiles, including factory and domestic production, was the dominant industry in the West Riding. In 1841 at least 40% of all males over twenty-years in Halifax parish and 51% in the Horton area near Bradford were factory operatives or domestic hand-workers. In Leeds 37% of the entire workforce were employed in textiles in 1841.² Halifax parish and town was an area of mixed industries with seventy-one cotton mills, sixty-three woollen mills, eighty worsted mills, and seven silk mills, employing at least 13579 hands. It was a market for wool and worsteds.³ Bradford parish and town was the centre of the worsted industry with 153 mills in 1838 of which 142 were worsted mills. In Bradford parish at least 11,675 were employed in textile factories in 1838. Bradford

¹ G. R. Dalby, 'The Chartist Movement in Halifax and District', *Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society* (1956), 99-101; E. Webster, 'Chartism in the Calder Valley', *Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society*, vol. 2., new series (1994), 62-65; D. G. Wright, *The Chartist Risings in Bradford* (Bradford, 1987), 27-37; J. F. C. Harrison, 'Chartism in Leeds', in A. Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), 90-91; D. Wright, *Popular Radicalism* (London, 1988), 128; Joseph Lawson, *Progress in Pudsey* (Stanningley, 1887); F. H. Grundy, *Pictures of the Past* (London, 1879), 95-105; Frank Peel, *The Risings of the Luddites, Chartists and Plug Drawers* (Heckmondwike, 1895), 329-345; Frank Peel, *Spen Valley, Past and Present* (Heckmondwike, 1893), 324-5; Benjamin Wilson, 'The Struggles of an Old Chartist', in D. Vincent (ed.), *Testaments of Radicalism* (London, 1973), 199-203

² '1841 Census Occupations Abstract', *PP* (1844), vol. xxvii, 405; D. Fraser, *A History of Modern Leeds* (Manchester, 1980), 156

³ 'Returns Relating to Factories', *PP* (1839), XLII, 274-288; 'Reports From Assistant Handloom Commissioners', *PP* (1840), XXIII, 527

was the chief market for worsteds. Huddersfield parish and township specialised in woollens with 106 mills in 1838, of which 100 were woollen mills, employing at least 3428 hands. Huddersfield was the market for fancy woollens. Leeds was the commercial centre and market for the wool trade although Leeds town and parish had 106 woollen mills, thirteen worsted mills, forty-four flax mills and two silk mills in 1838 employing 18,432 hands. Dewsbury parish and town specialised in woollen manufacture with twenty-nine mills in 1838, including twenty-five woollen mills, with 1527 hands. Dewsbury was the market for blankets. Keighley and Bingley parishes concentrated mainly in worsted mills although each had some cotton mills. There were in Keighley forty-three mills employing 2323 hands and twenty-three mills in Bingley employing 1777 hands. Batley, Birstal and Calverley parishes concentrated mainly on woollen mills although there were also some worsted mills in Calverley and Birstal. Batley Parish had twenty-one woollen mills with 1332 hands, Birstal had forty-four mills with 2213 hands and Calverley had twenty-five mills with 2109 hands.⁴ The number of mills can be taken as approximately accurate.⁵ In 1838 the average sizes of woollen and worsted steam-powered factories and water-powered mills were far smaller than the size of Lancashire cotton factories. In 1841 57% of Lancashire cotton factories employed more than one hundred hands and 13% employed more than four hundred hands.⁶ In contrast Yorkshire woollen mills employed an average of only forty-eight hands, worsted mills an average of only seventy-six hands and Yorkshire cotton mills an average of eighty-two hands.⁷ Briggs argued that in towns with smaller units of production there was less class conflict between masters and men than in towns with larger units of production. This might suggest that there would be less class conflict in the West Riding towns than in the Southeast Lancashire cotton towns. West Riding woollen and worsted mills and factories were certainly on average far smaller in size than cotton mills in Lancashire. However Behagg has disputed Briggs' postulate arguing persuasively instead that there was a significant amount of class conflict in the

⁴ 'Returns Relating to Factories', *PP* (1839), XLII, 274-288; 'Reports From Assistant Handloom Commissioners', *PP* (1840), XXIII, 527

⁵ D. T. Jenkins, 'The Validity of the Factory Returns 1833-50', *Textile History*, IV (1973)

⁶ V. A. C. Gatrell, 'Labour, Power and Size of Firms in the Lancashire Cotton Industry', *Economic History Review*, XXX (1977), 98, Table 1b

⁷ 'Returns Relating to Factories', *PP* (1839), XLII, 293

small units of production. The increased intensity of work and declining opportunities of journeymen workers to become masters produced tension between masters and men.⁸

In the West Riding adult male workers were a small minority in the factories particularly in worsteds. In 1838 in the worsted mills only 6.9% of the hands were adult males. 17.8% were adult females, 19.3% were males under twenty-one years and a massive 56% were females under twenty-one years. Adult male workers were also a small minority in the West Riding cotton mills where only 17.2% of the hands were adult males. 19.3% were adult females, 25.3% were males under twenty-one years and 38.2% were females under twenty-one years. In West Riding woollen mills in 1838 of the hands employed: 32.6% were adult males, 7.6% were adult females, 35.5% were males under twenty-one years, and 24.3% were females under twenty-one years.⁹ The potential for militancy among factory workers was limited, in for example Leeds, where the proportion of women and child workers was high.

In 1842 there were still large numbers of impoverished hand-workers in the woollen, worsted and flax industries of the West Riding. Power loom weaving had made very little advance in woollens and although it had progressed further in the worsted industry there were still large numbers of hand worsted weavers in 1842. Wool combing in the worsted sectors was still largely unmechanised.¹⁰ These impoverished textile hand-workers formed a very large proportion of the working populations in the industrial villages and out townships of the West Riding. In 1839 there were about 1800 handlooms in Keighley, about 1600 in Bingley, about 1200 handlooms in Haworth, and 1768 handlooms in Horton in 1840. There were at least 13844 worsted handlooms in a ten-mile radius of Bradford.¹¹ In the clothing district around Leeds, that is the borough and the clothing villages in a ten-mile radius, there were at least 1029 woollen handlooms in 1839.¹² The great number of remaining hand textile workers and the relatively lower proportion of factory workers than in Lancashire was of significance. It

⁸ A. Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), 1-7; C. Behagg, 'An Alliance with the Middle Class', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds.), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 59-86

⁹ 'Returns Relating to Factories', *PP* (1839), XLII, 275

¹⁰ M. T. Wild, 'The Yorkshire Wool Textile Industry' in G. J. Jenkins (ed.), *The Wool Textile Industry in Britain* (London, 1972), 185-234; P. Hudson, *The Genesis of Industrial Capital: A Study of the West Riding Wool Textile Industry* (Cambridge, 1986), 41-45; T. Koditschek, *Class Formation and Urban Industrial Society: Bradford 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1990), 351-365

¹¹ 'Reports From Assistant Handloom Commissioners', *PP* (1840), XXIII, 558, 587

¹² 'Reports From Assistant Handloom Commissioners', *PP* (1840), XXIII, 528

meant there were thousands of hand workers with no hope of future improvement from mechanisation, whose only hope of a better future lay in legislation and political change, and so the Charter. In comparison factory workers might look forward to increased prosperity resulting from further mechanisation.

The heavy dependence of the West Riding on textiles meant that the general depression in all branches of the industry in 1842 caused widespread suffering. In the opinion of R. J. Saunders, the Factory Inspector, the distress of the 'labouring classes' in the manufacturing districts in the first half of 1842 was 'great and unprecedented' though until recently it had not been as bad in the West Riding as in Lancashire or Glasgow. In the West Riding there was a general depression in all branches of manufacture, only flax had been exempt, but by Autumn 1842 flax was also suffering in the general depression. Cotton was the worst affected branch of trade.¹³ The wool industry was also in a very bad condition. The worsted industry was suffering badly though not as badly as wool or cotton. In the worsted trade at Bradford wages were falling and several worsted manufactures were working short time or only using part of their machinery. Hand woolcombers and handloom weavers in Bradford were suffering from very serious unemployment. The wool trade in Leeds was bad and this had a knock on effect on other trades. Distress was severe in Halifax with 8531 persons receiving outdoor relief in the quarter ending 25 June compared to 3704 in 1838. Unemployment and partial employment was affecting, amongst others, the hand loom weavers, with the Ripponden Chartist Association blaming this in their district on Ackroyd's introduction of power looms.¹⁴

The West Riding artisans had first become involved in radicalism under the impetus of the French Revolution with the forming of the Sheffield Constitutional Society in 1791, composed in the main of small masters and journeymen artisans, calling for universal suffrage, annual Parliaments and equal electoral districts. The 'Black Lamp' agitation came to light in 1801 and in 1811/12 the West Riding was one of the centres of Luddism, mixing industrial and political grievances. After the end of the Napoleonic Wars the West Riding was a centre of the revived constitutional mass platform agitation under the leadership of Henry 'Orator' Hunt, committed to universal suffrage, vote by

¹³ 'Factory Inspectors Reports', *PP* (1842), XII, 473; *Bradford Observer*, 4 August 1842

¹⁴ *Bradford Observer*, 7 July, 4 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 6 August 1842

ballot, and annual elections. Attempted armed risings had taken place near Huddersfield at Folly Hall in 1817 to coincide with the Pentridge uprising and at Grange Moor near Barnsley in 1820 to coincide with the strike and uprising in Glasgow. The towns of the West Riding had provided strong support for the Reform Bill agitation, with the working class radicals of Yorkshire being gravely disappointed by the failure of the middle classes to help them gain their political rights. In 1830s the West Riding was a centre of the War of the Unstamped, the Ten Hour movement and then of the Anti-Poor Law agitation. Many of the Chartist activists had been active in the Factory and Anti-Poor Law movements before these merged into the Chartist movement. The West Riding was a stronghold of Feargus O'Connor, the most important national leader of Chartism, and until at least 1840 it had a strong tradition of physical force Chartism. After the failure of the attempted armed risings in Yorkshire in January 1840 at Bradford, Sheffield, Barnsley and Dewsbury, following Parliament's rejection in 1839 of the first national petition, West Riding Chartists concentrated on organisation in the shape of the National Charter Association (NCA). After Lancashire the West Riding towns were the strongest centres of support for the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL) and by the summer of 1842 Joseph Sturge's National Complete Suffrage Union (NCSU) was building up support. There were always radicals ready to make a cross class alliance such as the flax mill owner William Garth Marshall at Leeds and Henry Hodgson, a Chartist activist and leader of the strike in Bradford, who gravitated towards the Complete Suffrage movement.¹⁵

Chartism was flourishing in the West Riding in early August 1842 despite Parliament's rejection of the second Nation Petition in May. There were frequent meetings of NCA localities and districts, Chartist camp meetings, other public meetings, Chartist sermons and Chartist lectures. The NCA organisation of districts and localities had grown strong in the West Riding by August 1842.¹⁶ The town Chartist associations were strong and

¹⁵ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), 163-4; J. T. Ward, *The Factory Movement* (London, 1962), 1-253; S. Weaver, *John Fielden and the Politics of Popular Radicalism* (Oxford, 1987), 1-320; John Knott, *Popular Opposition to the 1834 Poor Law* (London, 1985), 1-276; N. Edsall, *The Anti-Poor Law Movement 1834-44* (Manchester, 1971), 45-231; D. Thompson, *The Chartists* (London, 1986), 1-119; J. Epstein, *The Lion of Freedom* (London, 1984), 138-262; M. I. Thomis and P. Holt, *Threats of Revolution in Britain, 1789-1848* (London, 1977), 1-99; A. Peacock, *Bradford Chartist 1838-40* (York, 1969), 9-46; D. G. Wright, *The Chartist Risings in Bradford* (Bradford, 1987), 4-11; G. R. Dalby, 'The Chartist Movement in Halifax and District', *Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society* (1956), 99

¹⁶ G. R. Dalby, 'The Chartist Movement in Halifax and District', *Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society* (1956), 99

active in Halifax, Bradford, Huddersfield, Sheffield and Leeds. Meetings of the town associations were held at least once a week. NCA branches were strong in the surrounding industrial villages of the West Riding such as Horton. The large towns such as Halifax formed the centres of NCA districts which were vigorous and holding at last monthly meetings with delegates from the Chartist Associations in the surrounding industrial villages.¹⁷ Chartist lecturers were busy in the West Riding in June, July and early August 1842. Chartist camp meetings were a weekly occurrence throughout the West Riding. Many open-air public meetings were held each week, particularly on Sundays, in the large towns and surrounding industrial villages when activists explained Chartist principles. Chartist sermons for Samuel Holberry, who had been imprisoned for his part in the Sheffield rising of 1840 and had died in June 1842 due to the harshness of his imprisonment, were popular in July and early August. The local NCA localities in the West Riding maintained communications with each other by correspondence and in person.¹⁸

Local support for Chartism is demonstrated by the enthusiastic response to Feargus O'Connor's lecture tour in the West Riding in July.¹⁹ The large number of Yorkshire people who signed the second National Petition for the Charter in early 1842 suggests strong support for Chartism. There were 36,000 signatures from the Halifax area and 26,000 from the Bradford area.²⁰ The numbers who supported Chartism were far greater than the formal membership of the NCA however new members were being enrolled in the NCA at this time.²¹ The Chartists were providing leadership for the working classes in their communities in the summer of 1842. For example at Halifax in June a meeting of the unemployed was held in the Chartist Rooms to consider how to relieve distress and of course to insist that the Charter was the remedy.²² The chapter will show that the Chartist activists continued to provide this leadership during the strike.

¹⁷ *Northern Star*, 18 June, 6 August 1842

¹⁸ *Northern Star*, 18 June, 6 August 1842

¹⁹ *Bradford Observer*, 14, 28 July 1842

²⁰ E. Webster, 'Chartism in the Calder Valley', *Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society*, vol. 2., new series, (1994), 61; D. G. Wright, *The Chartist Risings in Bradford* (Bradford, 1987), 28

²¹ *Northern Star*, 6 August 1842

²² *Northern Star*, 18 June 1842

Origins, Aims and Leadership

There was no long-term plan for a strike in Yorkshire. The manufacturer and Leaguer Edward Ackroyd warned Sir Robert Peel in late July that the purpose of a Chartist meeting on Blackstone Edge on 17 July with 15,000 Chartists present from both Lancashire and Yorkshire and banners displayed bearing words such as 'bread or blood' was to consider whether to resort to violent measures for the gaining of the Charter.²³ However in fact this was merely a joint Lancashire and Yorkshire Chartist camp meeting.²⁴ Nevertheless there was shorter term advance planning of the strike in Yorkshire by local West Riding Chartist activists. The West Riding activists, following the success of the Southeast Lancashire Chartist activists in bringing large numbers out on strike for the Charter, attempted from local platforms to revive the general strike or 'sacred month' ulterior measure. Local Chartists and others were well aware of strikes and demonstrations in other parts of the country due to the extensive reporting which the strikes received in the local press and delegates were sent to the Yorkshire towns from turnout meetings at Rochdale and Todmorden on 12 August. Yorkshire Chartists can be seen to have planned a strike in the West Riding from the time they knew of the strike for the Charter in Lancashire. They were involved in the Manchester trades conferences on 12 August before the Lancashire turnouts had gone further than to turn out Todmorden on the borders of Yorkshire and Lancashire. The Chartists of Bradford had been holding regular meetings from 10 August onwards after hearing the news of the strike in Lancashire and they sent Henry Hodgson, a leading local Chartist and woolcomber, on a deputation to Manchester.²⁵ Hodgson was present in Manchester at the conference of the 'various trades and mill-hands' on the morning of 12 August, which described itself as being composed of 'delegates representing various trades of Manchester and its vicinity, with delegates from various parts of Lancashire and Yorkshire', and which passed two resolutions, the first attacking class legislation and declaring the Charter to be the remedy, and the second calling for a general strike for the Charter. Hodgson was also present at the conference of the 'mechanics, engineers, millwrights, moulders and smiths', held on the afternoon of 12 August in Manchester,

²³ *Bradford Observer*, 28 July 1842

²⁴ *Northern Star*, 6 August 1842

²⁵ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

where Hodgson declared that, 'the people of Bradford will not strike for wages' but 'they are quite willing to strike for the Charter.'²⁶

The organising of the strike by local Chartist activists as an ulterior measure of the constitutional mass platform agitation from local platforms was carried out between 12 and 15 August. On 13 August at Bradford and Halifax and on 15 August at Dewsbury placards were posted up and the bellmen announced Chartist public meetings to take into consideration what steps should be taken. The local Chartist leaders met privately to organise the public meetings.²⁷ Six important public meetings were held at which the strike for the Charter was advocated: two meetings in Bradford on Sunday 14 August followed by one the next morning, one in Halifax on the morning of 15 August, and two in Dewsbury on the evening of 15 August and the morning of 16 August.²⁸ The strike was actually launched by the speakers from the meetings at Bradford and Halifax on the morning of the 15 August and at Dewsbury on the morning of the 16 August. The Bradford operatives struck and marched to Halifax turning out the mills on the way. They were met at Halifax by the Halifax people and by the turnouts from Todmorden and Hebden Bridge who had marched to Halifax, which was turned out.²⁹

The eight named speakers at the six meetings were all local Chartist leaders. At Bradford the five speakers were James Ibbotson, cap maker, John W. Smyth, shoemaker, George Fletcher, woolcomber, John Arran, newsagent, and Henry Hodgson, woolcomber. All were present or past officers of the Bradford NCA locality.³⁰ At Halifax the speaker was Benjamin Rushton of Ovenden, a fancy hand-loom weaver and former Methodist New Connection preacher, who had been involved in radicalism since 1816, was active in the Anti-Poor Law and Factory movements, and was a strong O'Connorite. At Dewsbury the two speakers were the Chartist activist James Henry Dewhirst of Bradford, and Harland Coulter from York, who was engaged as a Chartist

²⁶ *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842

²⁷ *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1842; *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

²⁸ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 15 January 1842; *Wakefield Journal*, 19 August 1842

²⁹ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 15 January 1842

³⁰ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 15 January 1842

lecturer at Dewsbury.³¹

In the Northwest strike Mather and Sykes had argued firstly that local Chartists provided leadership for the strike at its inception but did not try to impose the aim of the Charter, and secondly that the aim for the Charter came from the grassroots strikers a few days after the strike had begun rather than from the local Chartist leaders who were supposedly more concerned with a wage strike.³² This situation did not arise in the West Riding because the strike in Yorkshire was for the Charter from the start without the few days hiatus which Mather believed occurred in Lancashire and all the local Chartist strike leaders in Yorkshire were firmly for the Charter as the aim of the strike from the start. The eight named Yorkshire Chartist speakers all advocated the Charter as the aim of the strike at the six meetings in Bradford, Halifax and Dewsbury; and the resolutions they proposed were all for a strike with the principal aim of the Charter. Indeed the placards announcing the meeting at Bradford also contained the two resolutions passed at the conferences in Manchester on 12 August.³³ The resolutions proposed by the Chartists activists at the public meetings at Bradford on 14 August and on the morning of 15 August were for a strike for the Charter. The resolutions proposed by Rushton at the Halifax meeting on the morning of 15 August were for a strike with the principal aim of the Charter and also the wages of 1840.³⁴

It is therefore misguided to view the strike in Yorkshire simply as spread by turnout processions from Lancashire. The Yorkshire Chartists were themselves crucial for starting the strike in Yorkshire. It was the news of the strike for the Charter in Lancashire rather than the actual presence of turnouts from Lancashire which was of most importance. It is true that there was a deliberate attempt to spread the strike from Lancashire into the West Riding with the Lancashire turnouts taking the strike from Rochdale to adjacent parts of the West Riding on 12 August and delegates were sent to the Yorkshire towns to get support for the strike.³⁵ However it was only in Todmorden

³¹ *Wakefield Journal*, 19 August 1842; *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

³² F. C. Mather, 'The General Strike of 1842', in R. Quinault and J. Stevenson (eds.), *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1974), 121; R. Fyson, 'The Crisis of 1842', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds.), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 195-217

³³ *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1842; *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

³⁴ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842; *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1842

³⁵ *Sheffield Iris*, 16 August 1842; *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

and Huddersfield that the arrival of the Lancashire turnouts, rather than the activities of local Chartist activists, started the strike. Turnout processions entered Todmorden on 12 August from Lancashire and the mills turned out to welcome them, many of them having already stopped work beforehand having heard news that the Lancashire turnouts were going to arrive. Nevertheless the Todmorden people themselves quickly took up the strike. After the Lancashire turnouts had left on Friday the Todmorden people themselves held a meeting in the evening and passed a resolution to meet on Saturday morning to turn out the mills at Hebden Bridge, Cragg and Mytholmroyd. The local Chartist leader Robert Brooke took over the leadership of the strike later in the week.³⁶ In Huddersfield the strike was brought in by the turnouts from Lancashire though the turnouts had also picked up people from Yorkshire as the procession went along.³⁷

The demand by the leaders for the Charter to be the aim of the strike continued throughout the strike. For example the Bradford activists who marched to Keighley with the turnouts insisted on the Charter being the aim when they spoke to the turnouts on 16 August.³⁸ After the mills at Dewholme were turned out on the same day, Joshua Shaw, a Chartist activist and a woolcomber from Thornton, declared that there must be no more work done and it was now a political movement for the attainment of the Charter.³⁹ It is true that there was some division among the local Chartist leaders in Yorkshire. But this was not division over whether the aim of the strike should be for wages or the Charter. Rather it was division over whether there should be a strike at all. The only towns in which the Chartist activists did not support the strike were Sheffield, Leeds and Huddersfield. In Huddersfield this was probably due to the presence of two delegates from Ashton who came with the Lancashire turnouts and were committed to the strike being merely for wages. The delegates to the NCA Manchester Conference from Leeds and Huddersfield also failed to support the strike at the Conference. On 17 August the Chartist delegate from Huddersfield told the Manchester NCA Conference that Huddersfield was in a state of confusion and the local Chartists did not wish to connect themselves with the strike. The Leeds Chartist delegate told the Conference that he

³⁶ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

³⁷ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

³⁸ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

³⁹ PRO ASSI 45/66, Deposition of Henry Foster of Dewholme, 22 August 1842

represented 80,000 people at Leeds and the feelings would be against the strike.⁴⁰ Large public meetings were held by the Chartists in Sheffield from 15 August onwards however the local Chartist activists were divided over whether to call a strike. George Julian Harney, who was based in Sheffield as *Northern Star* correspondent and newsagent and was leader of the Sheffield O'Connorite Chartists at the time, Samuel Parkes, and Richard Otley of Sheffield had attended the NCA National Conference Manchester. But on their return to Sheffield they used their influence to oppose a strike in Sheffield.⁴¹ The absence of turnouts from other areas proved a disincentive to strike in Sheffield. At a meeting on 19 August Harney advised against a strike for the Charter but agreed that the question should be decided at the public meeting which was to be held on 22 August. By that time the strike was already almost over in Yorkshire and those local Chartist activists in Sheffield who still thought 'that the most rational way to obtain the Charter was by an universal cessation from labour' were defeated by Harney.⁴² He argued that he was for a strike for the Charter if it could be general, but it clearly was not general in the country or even in Yorkshire, and he also argued it could not be peaceful when many did not want to be turned out.

There was strong support for the Charter as well as better wages as the aim of the strike among the rank and file strikers not just among the activists. Certainly the Huddersfield magistrates were not aware of any disputes between masters and men as to wages.⁴³ For example on 16 August when 5000 men from Bradford stopped the mills at Keighley the turnouts told all the masters that they could never start their mills again till the Charter becomes the law of the land.⁴⁴ The grassroots support for the Charter as well as wages can be seen at Bradford on 16 August during the attack on Horsfall's mill when several of the crowd rushed up to the magistrate present and declared 'the question was not about wages, it was about the Charter, the Charter they wanted and the Charter they would have.'⁴⁵ On 16 August the Bradford Magistrates reported that the streets were filled with large masses of people who declared that they would never return home until

⁴⁰ *British Statesman*, 8 October 1842; *Northern Star*, 5 February 1842, 30 April 1842

⁴¹ *Sheffield Iris*, 23 August 1842; A. R. Schøyen, *The Chartist Challenge: George Julian Harney* (London, 1958), 1-198

⁴² *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842; *Sheffield Iris*, 23 August 1842

⁴³ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 161-3, Huddersfield magistrates to HO, 17 August 1842

⁴⁴ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

⁴⁵ *Halifax Guardian*, 10 September 1842

the People's Charter was obtained.⁴⁶ At Haigh's mill in Halifax John Hodgson was one of those who drew the plugs and when asked by the mill-owner whether he was satisfied he replied 'No, we will have the People's Charter before we are satisfied.'⁴⁷ Certainly in the Factory Inspector R. J. Saunders' opinion wage rates were not a pressing matter of dispute between masters and men though there had been reductions in several places. However unemployment and short time had been a cause of suffering.⁴⁸ There was also strong support for the Charter as well as wages to be aim of a potential strike among the rank and file in Barnsley. At a meeting near Barnsley on the evening of Sunday 14 August reports of the strike were read out from the third edition of the *Northern Star* of Saturday 13 August.⁴⁹ The crowd cheered and applauded vigorously when the reports were read which named the Charter as the aim of the strikers in Lancashire.⁵⁰

The votes in favour of resolutions calling for the Charter to be the aim of the strike and the large attendances at meetings also suggests that there was strong support for the Charter to be the aim among the rank and file strikers. At Bradford on 14 August the 20,000 present at the afternoon meeting passed the resolution in favour of a strike for the Charter. The resolutions for a strike for the Charter at Bradford on the morning of 15 August were adopted unanimously by the 8000 to 10,000 present and it was the people at this meeting who formed into a procession to march to Halifax. Thus the strikers themselves as well as their leaders were supporting the Charter as the aim of the strike.⁵¹ The morning meeting in Halifax on 15 August was interrupted by the magistrates before resolutions were put; however at a reconvened meeting in the early afternoon on Skircoat Moor in Halifax the 10,000 to 15,000 present unanimously passed resolutions not to return to work until the People's Charter became the law of the land and until wages were advanced to their 1840 standard.⁵²

The miners' activity in the West Riding as in the Midlands was to a large extent separate from the rest of the general strike. By 16 August the *Sheffield Iris* editor thought that there were arrangements in the mining districts for a 'general strike' of

⁴⁶ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 89-92, Bradford magistrates to HO, 16 August 1842

⁴⁷ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

⁴⁸ 'Factory Inspectors Reports', *PP* (1843), XXVII, 248

⁴⁹ *Sheffield Iris*, 16 August 1842

⁵⁰ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

⁵¹ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

⁵² *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

miners throughout England.⁵³ Certainly as early as 1 August between 500 and 800 colliers from Halifax and the neighbouring towns and mining districts met in Halifax. The discussion centred on miners' wage grievances. They resolved to form a miners general union throughout England and raise a fund for a general strike of miners so as to bring all machinery requiring coal to a standstill, and they also passed a resolution in favour of the Charter though not linking this explicitly with the call for a general strike. However a later meeting of colliers at Wakefield on 15 August resolved not to go on strike. Handbills for this meeting given out on the Saturday and Sunday did not mention a strike and stated the purpose of the meeting was to consider ways of amending the distressed state of the miners. A power struggle took place in the meeting between those who wanted to confine the discussion to ways of improving miners wages without resort to a general strike or bringing up political questions, and those who wanted political discussion about a strike, but the latter lost. Nevertheless at the end of the Wakefield meeting there was an attempt to begin a miners' strike, perhaps for the Charter, though the strike did not in fact begin in Wakefield until later in the week.⁵⁴

The miners who struck were more concerned with their own wage grievances. Yet the third resolution passed by the Halifax miners on 1 August declared that 'not only is it needful for us to unite as fellow workmen, but as fellow men, not only to protect our own interests as labourers but to gain our rights as freemen by causing the People's Charter to be made the law of the land.'⁵⁵ At the Wakefield colliers' meeting on 15 August many miners wanted to raise political questions and there was a power struggle at the start over who was to be chairman; an 'Old Radical', John Autey, was narrowly defeated. The majority wanted to confine the meeting to wages and not call a strike and instead persuade the masters to give the miners better wages. However even they claimed that they wanted equal rights like the Chartists and that colliers' issues were just a particular part of equal rights.⁵⁶ A minority of miners remained in favour of a strike for the Charter and when the meeting ended three or four men addressed those

⁵³ *Sheffield Iris*, 16 August 1842

⁵⁴ *Northern Star*, 6 August 1842; *Halifax Guardian*, 6 August 1842; *Wakefield Journal*, 19 August 1842

⁵⁵ *Northern Star*, 6 August 1842; R. Challinor and B. Ripley, *The Miners' Association: A Trade Union in the age of the Chartists* (London, 1968), 24-43

⁵⁶ *Wakefield Journal*, 19 August 1842; *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1842; *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

who remained and a resolution was passed that 'the persons present at the meeting should not work any more until the Charter becomes the law of the land.'⁵⁷

The only serious ambiguity over whether the strike was to be for the Charter, apart from among the miners, was in the border area of Yorkshire before the strike had extended far into Yorkshire and here it was the local Lancashire strike leaders who brought in this element of ambiguity over aims. The strike in Todmorden had a wages appearance to start with but this was due to the influence of the Lancashire turnouts and their leaders. The resolutions passed by the Lancashire turnouts on 12 August when they arrived in Todmorden were for the wages of 1840, that females having children should cease to use machinery, and for the ten hours bill. Later on when the Todmorden local Chartist leader Robert Brooke took charge the strike became clearly for the Charter in Todmorden. The mixed Lancashire and Yorkshire turnouts who arrived in Huddersfield on the afternoon of 13 August held a meeting and the speakers, who were from Lancashire, wanted to confine the strike to wages, and some of the Lancashire speakers even complained 'of the men of Huddersfield, because they would not assist them for anything less than the Charter, from a conviction that it was useless to go for better wages, whilst labour was unprotected.' This was the influence of two of the delegates who had been dispatched from Ashton, who were committed to a strike merely for wages, and who had arrived with the Lancashire turnouts. However the Huddersfield people present and perhaps the rank and file Lancashire turnouts at the meeting made it clear that their aim was to be the Charter. When one of the crowd put the question of the Charter to the meeting instantly everyone voted in favour of the Charter being the aim of the strike.⁵⁸

Unlike their role in Lancashire the trade societies in the West Riding failed to provide any leadership for the strike. This is not surprising as unions were far weaker in Yorkshire than Lancashire and while individual trade unionists were often radicals there had been no general movement of the trades, such as they were, in the West Riding towns forming themselves into localities of the NCA as had happened in Manchester. There were attempts by the operatives and local Chartist activists to encourage the trade societies of Leeds and Sheffield to convene delegates meetings in parallel with the trade

⁵⁷ *Northern Star*, 6 August 1842; *Halifax Guardian*, 6 August 1842; *Wakefield Journal*, 19 August 1842

⁵⁸ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

delegates meeting in Lancashire but the trades proved unwilling to provide any leadership. A meeting of 4000 operatives at Hunslet Moor near Leeds on 16 August passed resolutions to support the agitation for the People's Charter and a committee was appointed to ask the trade societies of Leeds to call a trades delegate meeting for Thursday in the Chartists' room in Leeds to decide what steps ought to be taken.⁵⁹ However the Leeds trade societies did not convene a delegate meeting. In Sheffield on 15 August a meeting in Paradise Square made a public request to the trade societies of Sheffield to convene a trades delegate meeting to call for a strike. But the individual trades were unenthusiastic. Only the pocket blade forgers, shoemakers, spring knife cutters, table blade forgers and table knife cutters showed any enthusiasm; but they did not call for a strike, and merely held a meeting on 17 August which issued a placard announcing a public meeting for 22 August to 'take into consideration the present state of the country'. However the secretaries of the Sheffield Trade Unions issued a counter placard denying their Unions' involvement in the calling of the meeting and when the meeting took place as already described the trade societies failed to take any part in it.⁶⁰ Nevertheless in Leeds and Sheffield the lukewarmness of the Chartist activists, together with the dominance of woman and children in the Leeds factories, would seem to be an important reason for the relative failure of the strike to take hold in both towns.

There is no evidence for an ACLL plot to provoke a strike in Yorkshire by wage reductions. There were no sudden wage reductions immediately pending the strike though wage reductions had taken place gradually.⁶¹ The Manufacturer Cowling Ackroyd in Great Horton near Bradford did make a wage reduction on Monday 15 August but the local Chartist leaders had already decided to initiate a strike by then and Cowling Ackroyd was a prominent Tory.⁶² There was however a feeling among the Yorkshire Chartist local leaders that the ACLL masters had deliberately provoked the strike in Lancashire by their reductions. Henry Hodgson at Bradford on 15 August claimed that he thought the League 'was not displeased with the movement.' Benjamin Rushton at Halifax on the same day also made it clear that he thought the League

⁵⁹ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

⁶⁰ *Sheffield Iris*, 23 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842

⁶¹ J. W. Croker, 'Anti Corn Law Agitation', *Quarterly Review*, VLXXI, December (1842), 244-314; G. Kitson Clark, 'Hunger and Politics in 1842', *Journal of Modern History*, XXV (1953), 349-373

⁶² T. Koditschek, *Class Formation and Urban Industrial Society: Bradford 1750-1850* (Cambridge, 1990), 145

masters in Lancashire had deliberately reduced the wages of their workmen in the hope that the workmen would strike in order to scare the government into repealing the Corn Laws. Rushton also reminded his audience that the ACLL lecturer James Acland had told O'Connor at a meeting in Halifax in July that the League intended to lock out their men.⁶³ The *Sheffield Iris* editor reported on 16 August that his correspondents had told him that at every meeting it was said 'the Anti-Corn law League have caused us to make this movement, but it is our own fault if we do not get more than they think, we will have the Charter, and not be deceived by the middle classes in this question as on the Reform Bill'.⁶⁴ The Yorkshire Chartist activists agreed with the Ashton activists that the wage reductions in the Ashton area had been a deliberate attempt to start the strike for the repeal of the Corn Laws, and were determined that the strike should be for the Charter rather than to gain Corn Law repeal.

Extent, Duration, Participation and Organisation of the Strike

The timing of the strike in Yorkshire was different from the strike in Lancashire in that it was only from 15 August that the strike really got underway. In contrast the strike in Lancashire began on 8 August. This was of significance for the authorities' response as will be seen later. The strike in the West Riding was of a far shorter duration than the strike in Lancashire or the Midlands. The opinion of R. J. Saunders, the West Riding Factory Inspector, was that individual mills in individual towns were closed for only three and half days at most and this appears to be a roughly correct estimate at least for the Bradford, Halifax and the Leeds districts. The strike can be said to have been 'general' in the West Riding textile area in that it affected to some extent all the significant townships and industrial villages. Agricultural workers (although one farmer was listed in the prisoners from Cleckheaton), transport workers, and servants were the only significant groups of the working people to be unaffected. In many areas shops were closed or partially closed due to the disturbances for periods of time. In Bradford town itself the strike lasted four days from 15 August with most of the mills in the town reopening on 19 August. In Halifax the strike lasted for three days in the town itself from 15 to 17 August with most of the mills in the town reopening on 18 August. The strike never became fully general in Bradford or Halifax although the vast majority of

⁶³ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

⁶⁴ *Sheffield Iris*, 16 August 1842

factories and businesses were closed in Halifax on 15 August and in both towns on 16 and 17 August. The strike in Huddersfield lasted for five days from 13 August with the mills in the town reopening on 18 August and all the town's mills were closed during this period. Many of the mills and factories in the industrial villages in the neighbourhoods of Bradford, Halifax and Huddersfield remained closed for some days after the factories in the towns themselves had reopened. The strike in the neighbourhood of Leeds lasted for three days from 16 to 18 August.⁶⁵ The strike in Dewsbury lasted a total of five days beginning on 16 August and ending with the reopening of the mills on 22 August. At Keighley the strike lasted for three days from 16 August. Several mills in Keighley reopened on 19 August and almost all were at work on 20 August. However the strike in Keighley had been almost completely general with all business being ended and the whole population wandering the streets. In Dewsbury the strike was general with the exception of the agricultural workers and corn mills. On 18 August the magistrates of Dewsbury reported to the Home Office that there was 'a stoppage of trade and business of every kind except for the operations of the harvest which are permitted to proceed as usual.'⁶⁶

In the West Riding the strike was not confined merely to the mills where people used water or steam driven machines. Workshops and collieries as well as mills were turned out. Textile handworkers, colliers and artisans took part in the strike as well as factory workers. A sample composed of one-hundred and fifty-nine prisoners arrested during the strike in Halifax, Bradford, and Leeds has been analysed (Prisoners arrested at Halifax on 15 August; prisoners arrested in Bradford and the surrounding district and examined at Bradford on 24 August; and prisoners arrested for their part in the strike in the Leeds borough and surrounding villages on 17 August).⁶⁷ By far the largest occupational group were hand-combers followed by weavers. Handcombers made up 25.6% of the sample of those arrested and 17.5% were weavers who did not say whether they were hand or power loom weavers. Most appear to have been handloom weavers from the industrial villages around Halifax, Leeds and Bradford. This suggests that the

⁶⁵ 'Factory Inspectors Reports', *PP* (1842), XII; *Northern Star*, 20, 27 August 1842; PRO HO 45/264, ff. 214-6, Mayor of Leeds to HO, 19 August 1842, ff. 221-2, Halifax magistrates to HO, 19 August 1842, ff. 223-5, Bradford magistrates to HO, 19 August 1842

⁶⁶ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 204-207, Dewsbury magistrates to HO, 18 August 1842, ff. 219-220, 226-227, Keighley magistrates to HO, 19, 20 August 1842

⁶⁷ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Bradford Observer*, 23 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842

impoverished hand workers played a crucial role in the strike. Nevertheless many of the better-paid factory operatives were clearly also involved as they often enthusiastically joined the turnouts. We cannot be sure that all the weavers were handloom weavers as they did not give details. At least some of those arrested definitely were factory workers, including two spinners, two piecers and three mill-hands arrested. It was shown at the start of this chapter that women and children formed the vast majority of the factory workforce, particularly in worsteds, and so it is not surprising that male hand workers should take the lead in spreading the strike. In fact the occupations of those arrested in the strike seems typical of the membership of the NCA in the West Riding. For example the Great Horton NCA locality membership book lists one hundred and eleven recruits between 1840 and 1842 of whom forty-nine were weavers and thirty-six were woolcombers.⁶⁸ The third largest occupational group was colliers making up 13.8% of the samples, though fifteen of these came from the small Leeds sample. The fourth largest group in the sample were labourers making up 6.3%, followed by tailors making up 3.1%. Nationally artisans were of importance in popular radicalism. The large numbers of impoverished proletarianised hand workers involved in the strike might suggest that distress and the desire for better wages was an important motivation. However hand weavers and hand woolcombers formed a very large part of the occupational groups in the industrial villages around Halifax and Bradford so it is not surprising that they form so many of those arrested and does not mean that the strike should be seen simply as a blind result of distress. Although their distress was an important element in the strike this in itself is not evidence that the strike was simply a wages issue as they could still see political reasons for their problems which the Charter would solve. In fact artisans were also present in the sample of those arrested. For example the sample from Halifax, Bradford and Leeds included five tailors, two mechanics, two smiths, a shoemaker, a joiner, a wire drawer, a sawyer, a moulder and a cooper. It is also clear that many well-paid workers were enthusiastic as well as impoverished handworkers. For example at Sowerby Bridge on 15 August very highly paid skilled workers enforced the turn out of the men in the Navigation Warehouse on Rochdale canal. These were skilled highly paid workers from Bates' Foundry and mechanics from Walton's firm in Sowerby Bridge. The workers at Bates' earned 30 shillings a week and had no reduction in wages for two years.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ D. G. Wright, *Popular Radicalism* (London, 1986), 145

⁶⁹ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

There was enthusiastic support for the strike in most of the townships and industrial villages of the West Riding textile area. Relatively large numbers were involved in the meetings and turnout processions, although the figures cannot be relied upon as completely accurate and different newspaper reports disagreed as to the size of meetings. At the meeting at Bradford Moor on 14 August up to 20,000 were present and from about 6000 to 10,000 were present at the 15 August morning meeting outside the Oddfellows Hall. 4000 to 5000 locals were present at the meeting in Halifax early in the morning on 15 August and in the afternoon meeting on Skircoat Moor about 15,000 people were present. At the meeting at Dewsbury on Tuesday evening between 20,000 and 30,000 were present. At Huddersfield on 15 August early in the morning about 8000 to 10,000 were present. At Leeds on the afternoon of 16 August about 3000 to 4000 were present at a meeting on Hunslet Moor. About 25,000 people entered Halifax on the morning of 15 August from Bradford and Todmorden. These included a procession of about 4000 from Bradford with an additional 1000 Bradford people in groups, a procession of 6000 men and 4000 women in the procession from Todmorden, and an additional 10,000 people from Todmorden in groups. 5000 Bradford people entered Keighley on 16 August, and 10,000 to 12,000 people had previously split off to go back to Bradford. On 16 August 4000 to 5000 turnouts came from Huddersfield on the way to Dewsbury.⁷⁰

Some towns and villages did not come out on strike unless turned out by men from other towns. But in most cases they seem to have come out willingly when turned out. At Huddersfield for example the postmaster at first thought that the Huddersfield operatives did not want to go on strike when the Lancashire strikers arrived. However he quickly realised that the Huddersfield operatives did give their blessing to the strike although they were not active in joining the actual processions to begin with.⁷¹ Nevertheless there was some opposition to the strike by the working classes and much of this seems to have been due to the belief that the strike was a League ploy either to gain Corn Law repeal or to discredit the Chartist. Many also feared to commit themselves unless the strike was fully national. The strong military presence in many

⁷⁰ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842; *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1842; *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842; *Wakefield Journal*, 19 August 1842

⁷¹ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 49-54, Huddersfield postmaster to Colonel Maberly, 14 August 1842; *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1842

towns also inhibited action. In some cases there was a more active hostility to the strike among the workers. On 13 August there was reported to be hostility to the strike among the people of Hebden Bridge and Cragg Dale. This seems to have been partly due to the fact that the turnouts had made forcible requisitions from working peoples homes. There may also have been regional resentment at being told what to do by Lancashire people present among the turnouts.⁷² It is clear that some factory operatives at least were against the strike. On 17 August the Huddersfield magistrates reported that some workmen in the mills had voluntarily enrolled themselves as special constables.⁷³ The 'well disposed' operatives were sworn in as special constables by the Dewsbury magistrates.⁷⁴ A few employers enrolled their operatives en-masse as special constables. There may well have been an element of coercion in at least some of these cases because it was often the masters who were also magistrates who swore in their workmen. Although many of the factory operatives who were turned out came out willingly there were instances where the factory operatives resisted the turn out, were turned out unwillingly or refused to join the processions after they had been turned out. For example on Monday morning when the Halifax men turned out the mills on their way to meet the Todmorden turnouts the men among the turned out mill operatives refused to join the procession and the female factory workers were coerced into joining the march. There were cases of workmen defending their mills against attack. In many of these cases there was a Magistrate, special constables or military on the scene which may have made the workpeople hesitant to show their true loyalties. For example at Horsfall's in Bradford the operatives only closed the gates after a magistrate had arrived.⁷⁵ At Dewsbury the magistrates reported to the Home Office that the operatives were turned out 'generally against their will', though they qualified this by suggesting that the presence of outsiders and the example of the strike in Lancashire had subsequently influenced the men of Dewsbury to favour the strike.⁷⁶ The reluctance of some of the factory workers, who had employment and were relatively well paid, to join in a movement to help all the working classes including the impoverished handloom weavers and hand-combers might seem to suggest that the strike was not a display of

⁷² *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

⁷³ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 161-3, Huddersfield magistrates to HO, 17 August 1842

⁷⁴ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 204-7, Dewsbury magistrate to HO, 18 August 1842

⁷⁵ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

⁷⁶ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 133-5, Dewsbury magistrate to HO, 16 August 1842, ff. 204-7, Dewsbury magistrate to HO, 18 August 1842

working class-consciousness; however this is not the case because when considering the reluctance of some factory operatives to turn out it must be remembered that the majority of factory workers were women and children. In worsted factories in particular adult males were a very small fraction of the factory workforce.

The residential details of prisoners arrested suggest that it was local West Riding people rather than turnouts from Lancashire who composed the bulk of the turnout processions in Yorkshire. Of the seventeen men arrested in Halifax on 15 August none came from outside Yorkshire and all came from the Halifax neighbourhood, the Calder Valley area or from the Bradford neighbourhood. This suggests that the so called 'Lancashire turnouts' who visited Halifax on 15 August in fact had swelled to their huge size by the addition of Yorkshire people in the Calder Valley area before they arrived in Halifax, and in fact many of the Lancashire people who had marched to Todmorden had no doubt retired back to Lancashire. All twenty-seven arrested at Huddersfield were local people.⁷⁷ All the twenty-four men arrested for their part in the strike in the Leeds borough and the surrounding villages on 17 August came from the Leeds neighbourhood. It was reported from Todmorden at the start of the strike in Yorkshire that the Lancashire turnouts hoped to carry the strike to Leeds. However when the strike in the Leeds neighbourhood did take place it was the work of local people.⁷⁸

Middle class support for the strike appears to have been small. However at least some members of the radical middle classes were sympathetic to the strike. The Todmorden radical manufacturer and Oldham MP John Fielden, a prominent figure in the Anti-Poor Law and Factory movements, expressed sympathy for a strike for a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, and although he did not provide any active leadership, he closed his mills when the crowds approached, refused the magistrates' offer of protection for his mills, and kept his mills closed until 29 August.⁷⁹ The editorials of some liberal radical newspapers such as the *Bradford Observer*, which had been supporting Complete Suffrage in the months prior to the strike, also showed some sympathy with the strikers blaming the strike on economic distress caused by the government's refusal to repeal

⁷⁷ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20, 27 August 1842

⁷⁸ *Northern Star*, 20, 27 August 1842

⁷⁹ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842; S. Weaver, *John Fielden and the Politics of Popular Radicalism* (Oxford, 1987), 1-217

the Corn laws. However Edward Baines' Whig *Leeds Mercury* strongly condemned the strikers and called on the government to put them down with force if necessary.⁸⁰ The samples of those arrested include only two shopkeepers and one farmer from the middle classes. Shopkeepers often closed their shops but this was normally due to the disturbed state of towns and villages rather than sympathetic action. For example at Sowerby Bridge on 15 August the shops immediately closed as the turnouts passed through the town.⁸¹ Shopkeepers were enrolled as special constables. For example in Halifax on 14 August the magistrates enrolled shopkeepers while they were attending Church and chapel. There are numerous reports of manufactures closing their mills when news of the turnouts arrived but before they actually came, for example at Sowerby Bridge, however this normally appears to have been done to avoid potential damage. The marchers were often given bread from shops and small sums of money from both shops and manufacturers but this seems often to have been given from the fear of something worse though there does appear to have been some sympathy with the distressed condition of many of the strikers. Some middle class people attended the meetings which preceded the strike, for example on Sunday at Bradford Moor, however they appear to have been there out of curiosity.

Dorothy Thompson and Jutta Schwarzkopf have stressed the important part women played in the strikes.⁸² The evidence from the West Riding suggests that Thompson was correct to stress the importance of woman due to the nature of the strike as a community based movement. Women played an active part in the strike in Yorkshire in the processions, crowds and clashes with the military. There were thousands of women and girls among the turnouts who entered Halifax on 15 August, marching four abreast in the centre of the procession from the Todmorden, Hebden Bridge, Sowerby Bridge and Luddenden foot. On 15 August at Halifax when the procession was confronted by the military as it tried to enter town the women tried to shame the soldiers into letting them pass by going right up to their horses and saying such things as 'You would not hurt a woman, would you?' and 'We didn't come here for bayonets, we came here for bread.'⁸³ It was the women who appear to have been important on the night of 15

⁸⁰ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842; *Leeds Mercury*, 20 August 1842

⁸¹ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

⁸² D. Thompson, *The Chartists* (London, 1986), 127; J. Schwarzkopf, *Women in the Chartist Movement* (London, 1991), 1-337

⁸³ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

August in persuading the men to attempt a rescue of the prisoners when the military were due to escort them through Salterhebble to Elland railway station on 16 August. Women took part in the attack itself by carrying stones to the place of ambush and throwing them along with the men.⁸⁴ At least one woman was arrested in Bradford though in general the authorities appear to have targeted men for arrest. Adult males were in a minority in the woollen and worsted mills and factories of the West Riding as has been shown. Women and children were necessarily turned out of the mills along with the male workers when the processions visited. Some of these women joined the processions. In other cases, for example at Keighley, the women and children stayed behind in the turned out towns and villages crowding the streets while their men joined the marchers.⁸⁵ They were available to crowd into the public meetings held and at many meetings woman and children were present. The strike was a community-based action where women could take part as known members of the local community and as fellow workers in the mills. The strike concerned distress as well as the Charter, the Charter would bring better wages and food, and so it was easy for women to make a role for themselves in this type of action which concerned the family's living standard as well as its political rights. Nevertheless determined factory masters may have found it physically easier to prevent woman and children factory operatives, in contrast to male factory operatives, from joining the turnouts, especially if they were reassured by the presence of the military.⁸⁶

Chartist leadership of the strike was not confined to its start. The Chartist activists acted as leaders throughout the strike in Yorkshire. For example the three Halifax Chartist activists Isaac Clisset, a frequent lecturer on Chartism at Cleckheaton, John Snowden, a woolcomber, and William Jackson Cockcroft, a weaver, acted as leaders of the crowds and even personally supervised the tapping of the boilers.⁸⁷ The Shipley Chartist activist and blacksmith, Joseph North, personally led the turnouts in Fulneck and Bankhouse.⁸⁸ Joseph Holmes, a Bradford Chartist activist, led turnout crowds.⁸⁹ Throughout the strike it was local Chartist activists who addressed the meetings of the strikers and told them

⁸⁴ F. H. Grundy, *Pictures of the Past* (London, 1879), 103

⁸⁵ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

⁸⁶ D. Thompson, *The Chartists* (London, 1986), 120-151

⁸⁷ PRO HO ASSI 45/66, Depositions of Joseph Berry, John Broadbent and James Marsden, 14 November 1842; *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

⁸⁸ Joseph Lawson, *Progress in Pudsey*, (Stanningley, 1887), 149-152

⁸⁹ *Bradford Observer*, 25 August 1842

where to go on turnout marches. For example at Dewsbury on 16, 17 and 18 August the Chartist activists James Henry Dewhirst from Bradford, William Sheldrake, a shoemaker, Gliss, and Coulter addressed early morning meetings of the turnouts, then led the turnouts on their march, and held evening meetings on their return.⁹⁰

The organisation of the strike in the West Riding was relatively sophisticated. The meetings between strike leaders and turnouts which took place throughout the strike in Yorkshire before the strikers set off on their marches, after mills had been turned out, and on their return to their own towns were an essential part of the strike organisation. At these meetings the leaders briefed the turnouts on which villages and townships they would march to in order to turn out the mills and when they would next meet.⁹¹ For example at Keighley after the mills had been turned out by the Bradford marchers on 16 August the local Chartist strike leaders held a meeting to decide where to march to next. The strike organisation itself was based on democratic principles with resolutions and amendments at these meetings being adopted. The leaders gave out instructions at meetings on the routes the turnouts would take. However these were not simply orders and would be confirmed by votes for resolutions. For example at the meeting at Keighley an amendment 'that the procession move to Haworth and remain there during the night and proceed to Bradford in the morning' was proposed against the original resolution 'that the whole now move by way of Collingworth and Wilsden to Bradford' though the original resolution was carried. Meetings continued to be held at Halifax for example on the morning of 16 August when it was resolved to turn out the neighbouring areas and then meet again in the afternoon when the turnouts from other towns were expected to arrive.⁹²

The strikers in the different towns and villages in Yorkshire were in communication with each other, and with the turnouts from Lancashire who had entered Yorkshire, and were thus able to co-ordinate their activities to some extent. Emissaries, scouts, messengers and carrier pigeons were sent by the strikers from one town to another in order to communicate news and co-ordinate activities.⁹³ The magistrates at Skipton

⁹⁰ *Wakefield Journal*, 19 August 1842; PRO HO 45/264, ff. 204-207, Dewsbury magistrate to HO, 18 August 1842

⁹¹ *Wakefield Journal*, 19 August 1842

⁹² *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

⁹³ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

reported on Thursday 18 August that the strikers had friends in every village to report the movements of the military.⁹⁴ Messengers were used to try to provide co-ordination between different areas as can be seen at Halifax. On the morning of Tuesday 16 August the leaders held a meeting early in the morning on Skircoat Moor. At this meeting it was resolved that emissaries would be sent to Huddersfield, Todmorden and Bradford to ask the people there to come over to Halifax to help strengthen the turnouts. And it was resolved that another meeting would be held on Skircoat Moor in the afternoon. These messengers were sent off during the meeting. Carrier pigeon expresses were in use by the strikers in Halifax on 15 August in order to communicate with other towns.⁹⁵ The speed at which the strikers were able to communicate by these means is demonstrated by the fact that the news of the attack on the military at Salterhebble on Tuesday reached Barnsley within hours.

There was a direct link between the trades delegate conferences in Manchester and the strike in the West Riding. As we have seen, Henry Hodgson from Bradford had attended the trades conferences held on 12 August at Manchester and had assisted in passing the resolutions to strike for the Charter. At least three of the local Chartists involved in the Yorkshire strike, John Arran, George Fletcher and Robert Brooke, also attended the NCA National Conference in Manchester, having been elected as delegates before the strike began. Henry Hodgson had been elected but does not seem to have attended. They described the opinion in their localities as being strongly in favour of the strike being connected with the Charter.⁹⁶ John Arran was secretary of the NCA Conference and in this role was one of the signers of the NCA Conference Address which approved of the general strike for the Charter while denying that the Chartists had originated it. However Arran had to escape from arrest and could do nothing to further the strike after 17 August. Robert Brooke did however go back to Todmorden and addressed a meeting there on 18 August where he read out the strongly worded NCA Executive address. The mills in Todmorden had been due to go back to work however the reading of the NCA address together with Brooke's talk of support from other areas prolonged the strike in Todmorden.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 188-90, Wilson to HO, Skipton, 18 August 1842

⁹⁵ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

⁹⁶ *British Statesman*, 8 October 1842

⁹⁷ F. O'Connor (ed.), *The Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 143; *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

Local newspapers played a very important part in the organisation of the strike in Yorkshire. The local Yorkshire newspapers carried reports of the strike in Lancashire, the Midlands and Scotland. The third edition of the *Northern Star* published on Saturday 13 August was very important in spreading information on the strike in other areas and in emphasising that in Lancashire it had become a political strike for the Charter. Importantly the *Northern Star* of Saturday 13 August carried reports of the trades delegates meetings in Manchester which had called for a general strike for the Charter.⁹⁸

The actual manner of spreading and enforcing the strike was similar to Lancashire. People from the neighbouring villages would often meet up at the town centre, for example at Dewsbury. Groups of turnouts went on processions from towns or meetings held outside towns, they stopped the mills and factories on their route and then entered other towns. In the West Riding there were many mills scattered along the valleys between towns, such as along the Calder Valley between Todmorden and Halifax, and these valley mills were closed by the turnout marchers as well as the mills in or near towns. Collieries and workshops were also often stopped. As the turnouts proceeded on their march they increased in numbers as they added people from the turned out mills. For example in the turn out between Leeds and Bradford on the morning of Tuesday 16 August the size of the procession increased from at least 6000 at Stanningley to between 8000 and 10,000 at Pudsey due to the numbers the procession had picked up.⁹⁹ The strikers would often say they would come back next day to ensure that the factories remained closed. In Yorkshire there were more water-powered mills than in the Lancashire strike area. This affected the ways the mills had to be stopped. The turnouts drew the boiler plugs and raked out the boiler fires at steam powered factories. At water powered mills they normally cut the milldams or disengaged the gearing mechanism of the waterwheel. In a number of cases mill owners stopped the mills on request or had stopped already when they received news that the strikers were approaching for example at Todmorden.

⁹⁸ *Sheffield Iris*, 16 August 1842

⁹⁹ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

The turnout processions were relatively well organised. A good example is the turnout procession that visited the towns and villages to the north and west of Bradford on Tuesday 16 August turning out Shipley, Bingley and Keighley as well as smaller towns and industrial villages on their route. They had enough organisation not to become disorganised when blocked by the military as they left Bradford going towards Manningham, they were able to switch directions and head in the direction of Frizinghall. On two occasions when the turnouts were at Shipley and Bingley detachments split off from the main body to extend the areas that could be covered by the turnouts. Their good co-ordination is shown by the fact that the detachments were able to meet up with the main body at prearranged places. A third large detachment was sent off from Bingley to go back to Bradford turning out the mills. This third detachment itself split into two parties on one occasion and then regrouped. While the third detachment was going back to Bradford the main body went to Keighley to turn out the mills there and later returned to Bradford by a different route to the third detachment.¹⁰⁰ The strikers were careful to maximise the areas covered by their marches. These tactics were sophisticated considering the large numbers of people involved. Similar good organisation can be seen in Halifax on 15 August when the turnouts managed to unplug the boilers of many mills in the town despite the presence of the military and special constables. The strikers congregated in small parties dispersed throughout the town and when the military and special constables were busy they rapidly rushed into the particular factory they aimed to close and drew the boiler plugs.¹⁰¹

The strike got a firm hold in towns which did not have adequate military forces. In towns without adequate military forces there was a tendency to panic among the magistrates; and these magistrates did not take active measures against the strikers in the first few days of the strike. For example the Huddersfield magistrates on 17 August believed that the mills would start the next day if they could have sufficient military protection and that nothing but the presence of a large military force could 'strike terror among the misguided populace'.¹⁰² Similarly the magistrates acting at Holmfirth felt that 'if the mills decide to start work they will be compelled to give up unless the

¹⁰⁰ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹⁰¹ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

¹⁰² PRO HO 45/264, ff. 161-3, Huddersfield magistrates to HO, 17 August 1842

magistrates have military power.¹⁰³ In general the magistrates did not attempt to read the Riot Act proclamation at the beginning of the strike in those places without military power. At Dewsbury the magistrates informed the Home Office that because they had no civil or military force they could not do anything to stop the turnouts. The magistrates made great use of swearing in special constables. For example over 2000 special constables were sworn in at Halifax during the course of the strike and 1500 special constables were sworn in at Leeds on 15 August alone. However special constables were only really effective when used jointly with the military. In general the magistrates were very reluctant to make use of the specials when not backed up by the military. For example 400 special constables were sworn in at Keighley before the turnouts arrived on 16 August but the magistrates did not think it prudent to use them without military backup.¹⁰⁴ Only strong use of the military could put down the strike.

Ideology in the Strike for the Charter

Stedman Jones in his essays in *The Chartist Experience* and *Languages of Class* in 1982 and 1983 emphasised the political in contrast to the social nature of Chartism. Stedman Jones argued that, at least in terms of the public language used by the Chartists in print, Chartism was only a class based movement in a limited sense. He argued that the Chartists, like earlier radicals, continued to view political monopoly and the state as the source of social evils. According to Stedman Jones there was no move to a socialist ideology identifying the capitalist economic system itself as the source of social evils. Economic unfairness was seen in terms of unfair exchange rather than the result of the relation to the means of production and unfair exchange was rooted in political monopoly. Stedman Jones argued that the Chartists believed in a labour theory of value based on natural rights, that is the natural right to ones property, which precluded socialism. The Chartist ideology remained that of 'the people' against the aristocracy and of the productive against the idle. There was hostility to the middle classes but this was due to their new influence on government due to their enfranchisement in 1832 rather than to their role as capitalists. In practical terms the working classes had now become 'the people.' Although there was now a very close fit between 'the people' and the working classes after 1832 the Chartists' public ideology remained the traditional

¹⁰³ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 139-41, Holmfirth magistrates to HO, 17 August 1842

¹⁰⁴ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 137-8, Keighley magistrates to HO, 16 August 1842

radical ideology of 'Old Corruption', that is that the aristocracy and their placemen had corrupted the House of Commons and lived off taxes, rather than a new class based ideology. He suggested that the Chartists still believed in the political origin of oppression even though big capitalists as well as landowners had become targets of abuse. Stedman Jones argued that the Chartists had a notion of political oppression by the state with the state using legislation such as the 1834 New Poor Law to create a tyranny to enslave the producers. He suggested that radical ideology was the language of a class after 1832 but it was not itself a class language. However, a point which has sometimes been missed, he did not deny the possibility of class-consciousness existing outside of the public printed language of the Chartists.¹⁰⁵ Joyce in *Visions of the People* argued that class was not the dominant identity and that other discourses such as that of 'the people' or the nation were more important. Joyce made the point that there were overlapping and competing discourses rather than a single discourse in the language of the Chartists and workers. Joyce admitted with Stedman Jones that there was an overlap between class and people in 1840s when workers saw themselves as the true people and the notion of 'the people' may have took on class meanings. Both Joyce and Vernon emphasised popular constitutionalism as the master narrative in nineteenth century England. In *Democratic Subjects* Joyce went so far as almost to deny the existence of the 'real' beyond language. However Joyce allowed for the existence of working class-consciousness as an imagined identity based on political exclusion after 1832 while putting most emphasis on a melodramatic narrative of the people.¹⁰⁶

While not denying the existence of a working class consciousness based, as Hewitt suggests in the case of Manchester, on the shared economic experiences of low wage levels, cyclical unemployment, insecurity and a common egalitarian value system, it will be shown that the strike in Yorkshire does support many of Stedman Jones' ideas about the nature of Chartism and working class radicalism.¹⁰⁷ It will be demonstrated that the strikers did see social evils as rooted in political oppression. Where economic oppression was identified by the strikers its cause was seen to be the corruption of the political system. In the strike in Yorkshire when the middle classes were criticised it

¹⁰⁵ G. Stedman Jones, *Languages of Class* (Cambridge, 1983), 90-179; G Stedman Jones, 'The Language of Chartism', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds.), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 3-58

¹⁰⁶ P. Joyce, *Visions of the People* (Cambridge, 1991), 1-20; J. Vernon, *Politics and the People* (Cambridge, 1993), 252; P. Joyce, *Democratic Subjects* (Cambridge, 1994), 154, 161, 193

¹⁰⁷ M. Hewitt, *The Emergence of Stability in Industrial City: Manchester 1832-67* (London, 1996), 46-54

was largely due to their role in the political system rather than in the economic system and the strikers overwhelmingly hoped for the support of the middle classes. The dominant discourse employed in the strike in Yorkshire was that of 'the people' and the traditional radical attack on 'Old Corruption.'

The strike leaders made use in their speeches of the traditional radical ideology of the people against the aristocracy and their hangers on though 'the people' were being defined more or less as the working classes. The idea of the freeborn Englishman and the popular English constitution was strong in the local strike leaders' speeches. For example John Arran identified their oppressors as 'the aristocracy...the priesthood...the money-mongers.' John Arran elaborated further, 'they felt the power of the aristocracy, also the power of the priesthood, whose professions were one thing and its practice another. After all came the money mongers, who take what the others had left; all these things had brought them together; all these things oppressed them; but he hoped they had met to put an end to all these things. It now remained to the meeting to say if such things shall be.'¹⁰⁸ Here we see the traditional radical attack on the aristocracy and their dependants and partners. George Fletcher made the traditional radical attack on the aristocracy who had corrupted Parliament by patronage and jobbery. Fletcher claimed 'we have no House of Commons, we have two Houses of Lords and a Queen.' So the aristocracy had corrupted the political system. Henry Hodgson warned that 'in Lancashire the workmen had declared that before they toil any more they must have their rights as men. They had toiled enough for the aristocracy, it was now that they toiled for themselves.' Again it was the aristocracy who were pointed out as the enemy.¹⁰⁹

In George Fletcher's speech we can see a natural rights view of the role of Parliament deriving from Paine or Locke. Fletcher argued that 'Parliament had separated without doing anything for the relief of the people. Parliament exists for the good of the people, and when it ceases to act for their good the people are absolved from all allegiance to it.' The belief that Parliament was unconstitutional if it did not represent the will and interests of the people is present in John W. Smyth's speech when he declared that 'Parliament had broken up and the members had gone home to their game, leaving the

¹⁰⁸ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹⁰⁹ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

country in such a state, but if Parliament had resolved not to do anything for the good of the people, the people ought to take redress of their grievances into their own hands.¹¹⁰

The local strike leaders attributed all social evils ultimately to the corruption of the political system. For George Fletcher 'class legislation' was 'the fruitful source of all the evils that affect society.' Social ills were being attributed to a political cause. For example the first resolution moved by George Fletcher at Bradford on 15 August and carried unanimously by the large crowd was 'that it is the opinion of the meeting that until class legislation is entirely destroyed, and the principle of united labour is established, the labourer will not be in a position to enjoy the fruits of his own industry.' Here the more inclusive term 'labourer' rather than 'working class' was used. Social ills were attributed to the corrupt political system. The reason why the labourer did not 'enjoy the fruits of his own industry' was due to 'class legislation' not to the economic system itself. The 'principle of united labour' mentioned here is not a reference to trade unions but rather to the unity of all the productive against the unproductive, the aim of those who hoped for success from the constitutional mass platform agitation. Henry Hodgson proposed the resolution, which was unanimously voted for 'that it is the opinion of this meeting that the People's Charter ought to become the law of the land, as it contains the elements of justice and prosperity, and we pledge ourselves never to relinquish our demands until that document becomes a legislative enactment.' Thus the strikers thought justice and prosperity would come through political change rather than a change in the capitalist system. The strike was to end social ills by removing political corruption. For example George Fletcher declared 'It was to effect a change in this system that they had now met. They had met for the purpose of stopping the tears of mothers, the cries of children, and the curses of fathers.' Social ills were the result of political corruption and social ills would be removed by the enactment of the Charter.¹¹¹

Anger against oppression was strong in the speeches of the local strike leaders. This oppression was political, social, and economic, but the strike leaders attributed this oppression to the corrupt political system and the solution was the gaining of their political rights. James Ibbotson commented on the theme of Thomas Cooper's hymn that God never made a slave, this was the work of man. John W. Smyth spoke in terms

¹¹⁰ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹¹¹ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

of the freeborn Englishman. Smyth proclaimed ‘we had been told that Britons never shall be slaves, and that slavery cannot exist in Great Britain. Is that true?’ The crowd then shouted No!’, Smyth continued, ‘then it is a mockery, and those who present it from being true are mockers.’ The speakers at Bradford Moor commented upon ‘the oppression under which the labouring classes had so long been labouring’ and that ‘the present time was thought to be a favourable time for throwing off the burden.’ One speaker pointed to the nearby barracks and commented that the horses there had been saddled for the last eight days, but ‘the working classes had been saddled upwards of twenty years’ but now they were ‘resolved to throw off the saddle.’ This oppression was political, social and economic but the solution was clearly political because in order that the saddle ‘might remain off they had resolved to keep it down in the ditch by placing over it the People’s Charter.¹¹²

It is by no means evident that the wage demand was directed primarily against the middle classes in their role as employers despite Henry Hodgson’s claim that ‘had the many reductions which had been effected of late years been attempted at one fell swoop, the crisis would have come and gone long ere now, but they knew better. But no resistance to such a system had ever been got up so effacious as this one.’ The local Chartist leaders of the strike made it clear that only the possession of political power could guarantee wage rises that would not be reduced again. For Henry Hodgson ‘a strike for higher wages merely, was a shortsighted policy, for though this object might be obtained, another few weeks and the reduction would again be made. The strike should not be for a rise only, but for a guarantee that the rise should not again be reduced, and nothing could guarantee that but the possession of political power by the workmen.’ So the wages issue did not necessarily imply a high presence of economically based class conflict. The strike leaders saw the cause of low wages as being the corrupt political system rather than being inherent in the economic system. All forms of property were protected by law apart from the working man’s labour. The Charter would bring fair laws which would protect the working people’s labour as well as other forms of property. The Charter would bring regulation with the revival of fixed wages rates, a Ten Hour bill to limit the time machinery could be worked, and taxes on machinery to reduce the unfairness of men competing with machinery. Because the local strike leaders held this belief George Fletcher was able to link the corruption of the

¹¹² *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

Commons by the aristocracy with social ills when he explained 'The consequence (of the corruption of the Commons by the Lords) is that those who produce all the wealth of the country were living in wretchedness, for by the most unceasing labour it was impossible in many instances to supply the simplest wants of nature.'¹¹³ So the presence of the wage demand in the strike does not necessarily mean that the strike was an expression of strong economically based class conflict.

It is true that the workers were in wretched economic circumstances and that these bad economic conditions provided much of the impetus for the strike. For example according to Fletcher 'those who make England what it is, the richest of all countries, are clothed in rags and sinking into the grave under the pressure of the severest toil.' There is a sense of exploitation present in anger over low wages and the New Poor Law that forms part of class-consciousness. John Smith considered that 'It was certainly the right of every Englishman to have a fair day's wages for a fair day's work, but it was too true that hundreds in Bradford could not obtain such a right'. Smith went on to claim 'when the New Poor Law was first brought into the house of Lords, one reason assigned for its necessity was that the poor might be prevented from eating the rich. The rich had for along time been eating up the poor, but let the rich take care that the poor, in this respect, do not become their imitators and eat up the rich.' Yet even here the terms used are the 'Englishman, and the 'rich' and 'poor' which are not clearly class conscious distinctions. It was the House of Lords rather than the middle classes who are pointed to as the originators of the New Poor Law.¹¹⁴

There were criticisms of the middle classes made by the local strike leaders. For example Benjamin Rushton calculated that 'every working man made two pounds six shillings per week whilst many were paid with six shillings'. Those who received the rest were 'the aristocracy, the Parsons, the shopocracy and the millocrats.'¹¹⁵ Here the traditional enemies of the people were being joined by the shopocrats and millocrats. So Benjamin Rushton was extending the traditional radical ideology by extending the range of enemies of the people rather than articulating a wholly new class-conscious ideology although he was extending it to take account of economic exploitation. The influence of

¹¹³ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹¹⁴ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹¹⁵ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

‘popular political economy’ and Thomas Hodgskin mediated through the radical press was certainly felt here.¹¹⁶ However crucially the ‘millocrats’ and ‘shopocrats’ were being criticised for their role in exchange rather than production. Although the local strike leaders did criticise the manufacturers they did this in moral terms rather than by actually attacking the capitalist economic system itself. For example Benjamin Rushton described the Leaguers as ‘grasping avaricious tyrants, whose counting house was their church, their desk their altar, their ready reckoner their prayer book, and money their god.’ Even here Rushton used moral language to criticise the middle class Leaguers. Certainly Rushton’s speech does not show opposition to the repeal of the Corn Laws in itself as Rushton describes himself as a Corn Law repealer but ‘he was something more,’ because ‘he wanted other reforms along with it, or else the repeal of the Corn Laws would be of no benefit to them. If the Corn Law repealers would come out for the Charter, they would go with them.’ Henry Hodgson attacked the manufacturers as well as the aristocracy, ‘One reduction after another had taken place in wages, but rather than reduce wages to the starvation point, the manufacturer or whatever he might be, ought to give up his business. It certainly was an anomaly that so much starvation should exist in the midst of so much abundance.’ Again here the criticism of the manufacturer seems to be in moral terms rather than an attack on the capitalist economic system itself.¹¹⁷ Benjamin Rushton at Halifax spoke of the distress of the operatives and called the masters cruel because in Lancashire they had reduced the men’s wages at a time when trade seemed to be improving at last, and that this reduction had been made by the masters in an attempt to obtain the repeal of the Corn Laws.¹¹⁸ Again moral criticism was made use of rather than criticism of the capitalist system itself.

This analysis of the speeches concentrates on the ideological beliefs of the leaders of the strike. The unanimous votes for the resolutions and cheers by the large crowds who attended the meetings however suggests assent among the rank and file with the ideological views expressed by the strike leaders. Nevertheless a more distinctly class-conscious attitude is present in the reports we have of what the crowds were talking about after the meetings. For example after the Bradford Moor meeting on 14 August there was much talk among the people who had attended the meeting of machinery. The

¹¹⁶ N. Thompson, *The Real Rights of Man, Political Economies for the Working Class* (London, 1998), 20-78

¹¹⁷ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹¹⁸ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

reporter of the *Bradford Observer* stated ‘nothing was more common in the assembled groups than the remark, that machinery has compelled the man to wander in idleness, and has harnessed the woman and child to incessant labour; and that the heaviest orders a manufacturer could secure were executed in a few days by the application of machinery.’¹¹⁹ This certainly suggests class-consciousness and even class conflict between the working classes and the manufacturer. Nevertheless the solution to this could still be seen as political and so this limited the amount of class conflict involved and meant that that conflict was primarily political due to the manufacturers’ role in supporting the corrupt political system. The solution to the problem of machinery for many working people, for example supported by the Bradford people at meetings in July, was not a change in the economic system but rather the enactment of the Charter which would enable the implementation of reformist changes such as taxes on machinery, regulation of wages and short-time to limit competition.¹²⁰

A class identity was present in the strike in Yorkshire. It was the result of a mixture of political, economic, and social exploitation. An economic class based identity derived from the shared experience of low wages and deprivation. There was a sense of unity of manual work present in the strike. These shared experiences could constitute the basis of class-consciousness. However this does not need to imply that class conflict was present. We do not need to subscribe to the Marxist view that sees class conflict as necessarily being present where class conciseness exists. There was hostility to the middle classes expressed in the strike, but this was derived to a very great extent from the moral or political rather than the economic role of the middle classes, in supporting the corrupt political system which oppressed the people. For example in *Bradford Observer* in July ‘Rational Chartist’ argued that there was a ‘spirit of distrust between the working and middle classes which often amounts to deep hatred,’ and that it is ‘well known that in the manufacturing districts and to some extent in the agricultural districts a spirit of jealousy exists between the middle and working classes.’ However ‘Rational Chartist’ attributed this to political not economic causes, arguing that it was due to the fact that the working classes had helped the middle classes gain the franchise in 1832 but in 1839 the middle classes had refused to support the working classes in their

¹¹⁹ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹²⁰ *Bradford Observer*, 4 July 1842

struggle to gain universal suffrage.¹²¹ Undoubtedly conflict over wages did produce some class tension. But the fact that ultimately the reason for low wages was the political disenfranchisement of the workers meant that the local leaders of the strike could still hope for co-operation with the industrious middle classes. Class was not the only identity articulated in the strike in Yorkshire. Other collective identities of 'the people', 'the nation' and religion were articulated in speeches and resolutions during the strike in Yorkshire. However in the speeches and resolutions the people or the nation were often equated in the same with the 'working classes' or contrasted with the 'middle classes'.¹²²

Concept of the General Strike

Prothero in his article on William Benbow has argued that in 1831 Benbow conceived of the general strike as a popular radical tactic of the mass platform agitation to pressure the government into enacting universal suffrage rather than as a proto-syndicalist venture. The strike was to use force of numbers to intimidate the government. However Prothero suggested that the 1842 strike was no longer a popular radical strategy but rather it was an industrial proto-syndicalist venture.¹²³ Here it will be argued that Prothero is wrong to suggest that the concept of the general strike held by the Yorkshire Chartist in 1842 differed from Benbow's concept of the strike in 1831. It will be argued that the concept of the general strike which Prothero attributed to William Benbow was still shared by the Yorkshire Chartist strike leaders in 1842. The Yorkshire strike leaders in 1842 do not appear to have mentioned Benbow by name. But in fact in Yorkshire the general strike, as envisioned by the local Yorkshire leaders, had a lot in common with William Benbow's 1831 plan for a 'Grand National Holiday'. The 1842 strike in Yorkshire was not a proto-syndicalist plan and was not based on trade unions. Rather it was a radical mobilisation with the hope that the middle classes would take part as well. It was still viewed as a popular political action even if only the working classes were involved because the working classes were now the excluded people due to

¹²¹ *Bradford Observer*, 28 July 1842

¹²² *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹²³ I. Prothero, 'William Benbow and the Concept of the General Strike', *Past and Present*, 63 (1974), 132-170

the enfranchisement of the middle classes in 1832.¹²⁴ It was much more a classic radical move than in Lancashire where the trade society involvement in the strike was more important. This trade society involvement did not take place in Yorkshire. The workers were involved in the Yorkshire strike as local communities rather than trade societies. Formal trade unionism was far weaker in Yorkshire than in Lancashire with the woolcombers, weavers and spinners finding it impossible to maintain continuous formal unions.¹²⁵ The Sheffield and Leeds trade societies refused to play a similar part in Yorkshire to the trades delegates in Lancashire. In this the concept and practice of the general strike in Yorkshire fits in closely with William Benbow's conception of the strike as a traditional popular radical agitation rather than as a move by trade unions.

The Yorkshire strike leaders insisted that the strike was to be peaceful. For Henry Hodgson, 'This was not a foolish movement as some heretofore had been. It was not a foolish physical force attempt.'¹²⁶ Here the strike was distanced from the openly insurrectionary physical force risings in 1839 and 1840. The term revolutionary or near revolutionary has often been applied to the general strike but the term 'revolution' is often left undefined. The enactment of the People's Charter would have constituted a political revolution and in this sense the general strike can be said to have been seen as a revolutionary move. However if we equate 'revolutionary' with physical force then the general strike is far more ambiguous. The Yorkshire leaders viewed the general strike as a peaceful, constitutional and lawful tactic. At Bradford Moor on 14 August all the speakers explained that the strike would be a 'moral force' move and that they must be peaceable. The speakers told the people 'to be peaceable, to discard every idea of physical force, for it was a moral warfare in which they were engaged, and if they used moral force alone they could not fail to be victorious.'¹²⁷ The leaders of the general strike were relying on the unity and sheer numbers of the people to pressure the government into enacting the Charter without the need for physical force. Only by achieving this unity would the government see that it was hopeless to resist and would have to give in and allow the Charter to become law. For example on 15 August John

¹²⁴ William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* (London, 1832), 1-15; I. Prothero, 'William Benbow and the Concept of the General strike', *Past and Present*, 63 (1974), 132-170

¹²⁵ A. Marsh, *Historical Directory of Trade Unions* (London, 1994), 224-232

¹²⁶ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹²⁷ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

Arran declared that 'if they were all to stand firmly up to their point, they could not fail to carry it. Such a spectacle had never been seen in this country before.'¹²⁸

The division between moral and physical force during the Chartist period were not clear-cut. An important feature of the mass platform strategy was to threaten the use of physical force whether or not it was actually intended to use force.¹²⁹ However as they were in the end relying on sheer numbers to show the government that resistance was useless this pressure of numbers can itself be seen to be straddling the line between moral and physical force. The strike was very close to forcible intimidation which was the traditional strategy of the constitutionalist platform agitation. Nevertheless unless we equate moral force solely with educational tactics it does seem fair to describe the strike, a tactic of unarmed resistance, as a moral force move. Importantly it seems that the 'language of menace', the threat to use violence if peaceful measures did not work, was largely absent from the 1842 strike leaders' speeches. Indeed Prothero may be at fault to suggest that in 1831 Benbow thought that the strike might lead to the necessity of the use of armed resistance by the strikers. In the *Poor Man's Guardian* in 1831 Benbow himself claimed that the 'National Holiday' would lead to the government surrendering 'without resort to anarchy, confusion, revolution or blood' simply by the force of united numbers.¹³⁰ The fact that the leaders in 1842 did not make public appeals to arm suggests that they either saw the strike as a confrontation in which the authorities would not dare to resist the power of public opinion or if the authorities did resist to begin with they would have to give in when middle class public opinion came down on the side of the people in horror at government repression. Popular protest often took the form of a battle for public opinion with the protesters hoping to win over public opinion by showing the authorities to be committing unprovoked act of excessive violence or repression.¹³¹ For example John Arran insisted 'it was the hope of their enemies that they would step beyond the law, but he exhorted them to keep within it...their motto was "peace, law and order" and they should let their enemies be the first to violate that motto...in such times every man ought to be activated with the spirit of a martyr.' Benjamin Rushton at Halifax on 15 entreated the people to be 'peaceable, for the

¹²⁸ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹²⁹ J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England 1700-1870* (London, 1979), 256

¹³⁰ *Poor Man's Guardian*, 1 October 1831, quoted in A. Plummer, 'The General Strike during 100 Years', *Economic History* (1927), 186

¹³¹ J. Stevenson and R. Quinault (eds.), *Popular Protest and Public Order* (London, 1974), 20

bloodhounds were abroad, and nothing would please their enemies better than to see them commit themselves. Then they could use their arguments, indeed their only argument, lead and steal.’¹³²

Clearly the public opinion that the strike leaders wanted to win over was that of the industrious middle classes. The 1842 strike, like Benbow’s concept of the strike in 1831, was not seen as merely a venture of the working classes. It was to be a popular protest of all the industrious classes against the idle.¹³³ John W. Smyth on 15 August asserted ‘It was now the accepted time for the middle classes.’ Henry Hodgson also concluded his speech with the words ‘now was the accepted time for the middle classes.’ It would be wrong to interpret this phrase as a threat to the middle classes. Hodgson himself had in the previous few weeks enrolled in the local branch of Sturge’s NCSU which aimed for unity between the middle and working classes based on ‘Complete Suffrage.’ Hodgson’s words are best interpreted as an invitation to the middle classes to support the working classes in their move to gain the Charter. The general strike was here viewed not as being the preserve of the working classes, but rather as a traditional radical move by the whole people, including the industrious middle classes as well as the working classes. This appeal to public opinion, to the whole of the industrious nation, both middle and working classes, to resist aristocratic government tyranny can be seen in John Arran’s words ‘if military law be declared, will England submit to it? Will England submit to be governed by a faction?’¹³⁴

However as will be shown later the concept of the strike as a moral force venture which was held by most of the local leaders was not fulfilled in practice. There was some division among the local Chartist strike leaders. A minority element among the leadership did view the strike in insurrectionary terms. The local Chartist strike leader Isaac Clisset led the strikers at Cleckheaton on 18 August in an advance against the cavalry when projectiles were thrown knocking some of the military off their horses. William Jackson Cockcroft, a leading ‘physical force’ Chartist at Halifax, was active as

¹³² *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹³³ William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* (London, 1832), 1-15

¹³⁴ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

a leader of the Halifax crowds.¹³⁵ Among the rank and file there was a more physical force concept of the strike than among the majority of the strike leaders.

Religious elements were important in the concept of the 1842 general strike in Yorkshire. This again fits with William Benbow's concept of the 'National Holiday' as a religious event. This can be seen when James Ibbotson asserted on 14 August that 'they had been denounced very unjustly as infidels.' The meeting then sang Thomas Cooper's hymn 'God made everything, but He never made a slave, that was the work of man'.¹³⁶ The morality of the 1842 strike was also emphasised by linking it with teetotalism. G. Bishop the chairman of the Bradford Moor meeting on 14 August insisted that 'the people should abstain from alcohol and not exceed the bounds of Peace, Law and Order'. The call to abstain from alcohol was partly practical to make the movement more effective and prevent unnecessary violence so as to win public opinion over. But it was also to mark out the movement as a deeply moral undertaking.¹³⁷ The religious and moral justification of the strike which was present in the speeches by the leaders at the start continued throughout the strike. The strikers who came from the Todmorden and Hebden Bridge area to Halifax on 15 August sang the One-Hundredth Psalm as they entered Halifax. At the meeting at Halifax on Tuesday morning there was a prayer asking for God to protect the strike and the hymn 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow' was sung.¹³⁸ The presence of women in the marches and meetings contributed to the feeling of the strikers that the strike was a highly moral movement.

The Bradford strike leaders also concurred with Benbow over the need to requisition supplies to support themselves during the strike. For example one speaker at the meeting on Bradford Moor explained 'if it were asked, how were they to subsist? It might be answered that there was plenty in the county, all produced by the working classes. Heaven had sent a plentiful harvest, the world was full of plenty, the warehouses of the country were full of goods of all descriptions, there was no want,

¹³⁵ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; Benjamin Wilson, 'The Struggles of an Old Chartist', in D. Vincent (ed.), *Testaments of Radicalism* (London, 1973), 14

¹³⁶ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842; William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* (London, 1832), 1-15

¹³⁷ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹³⁸ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

only the working classes were miserable, they were in want, but...if they allowed themselves to perish in the midst of such abundance, they would be guilty of suicide.' Henry Hodgson asserted that 'while working out this experiment, they must not starve, that would be suicide.'¹³⁹

Violence in the Strike

In terms of the extent of violence the Chartist leaders' concept of the general strike as a moral force tactic was not completely fulfilled in practice. The Chartist strike leaders who gave the speeches at the start, advocating a peaceful strike, seem not to have had full control over the turnout crowds, and in general did not actually lead the crowds on the turnout processions.¹⁴⁰ Rather those Chartist activists who tended to actually head the crowd on their marchers were often more inclined to advocate force in defence against the authorities. These were the Chartist activists such as Isaac Clisset and William Jackson Cockcroft. Where there was resistance by mill-owners physical force was used. The strikers were prepared to use force when mills were defended, especially on those defended with special constables, though normally only the minimum necessary to gain entry, and there does not seem to have been any serious retaliation against the defenders. For example attacks were made on the Shade mill at Haley Hill in Halifax and on Rouse's mill in Bradford. There were some minor incidents of personal violence during the turning out of the mills. For example one master was pushed to the ground when he tried to resist and another had his fingers broken with a cudgel. Threats were made on occasions, for example, the threat to burn down the mill if it was started again before the order was given. In general the strikers were relying on their strength in numbers, though of course this itself was a form of intimidation, and many of the turned out workers did not have a choice about whether to join the procession or not, for example at Castlefield's mill near Bingley. There was also requisitioning of provisions. For example food and a £40 contribution was levied at Mytholmroyd.¹⁴¹ Near Bradford the strikers asked for food and money from houses. Although force was not used people probably did not have any choice over whether to give or not.

¹³⁹ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842; William Benbow, *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* (London, 1832), 1-15

¹⁴⁰ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

¹⁴¹ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 188-190, Wilson to HO, Skipton, 18 August 1842

Many of the turnouts were armed with bludgeons and sticks though very rarely with old blunderbusses.¹⁴² Violence was not indiscriminate. Where there was violence it was defensive. This suggests that the strike was not a mere hunger question even when the wages of 1840 were demanded. There were numerous incidents of stones being thrown at the military or special constables when they tried to halt the turnouts or took prisoners as at Bowling and Holme Lane End near Bradford on 17 August. Where acts of violence occurred they were normally provoked by the military or special constables. The presence of the military when the strike was being conducted peaceably and lawfully, in the eyes of the strikers, produced exasperation. The taking of prisoners produced similar exasperation among the strikers. The throwing of stones or attempts to release prisoners were normally a result of this exasperation. The worst incident of violence perpetrated by the crowd was the attack on the troops at Salterhebble near Halifax on 16 August. However this attack on the troops who had conveyed the prisoners to Elland railway station was viewed as a justifiable resistance to tyranny and was not the work of a mindless mob. The strikers clearly felt that the strike was constitutional and the authorities had no right to make arrests. On the previous day at the meeting at Skircoat Moor in the afternoon a deputation had been sent from the meeting to the magistrates to request the release of the prisoners that night and it was only after this request had been refused that the attack on the troops who had escorted the prisoners took place. Indeed initially the aim had been to rescue the prisoners but the military had passed to the station before the crowd were prepared for the rescue attempt.¹⁴³

Nevertheless no violence was offered where mills did not put up a resistance. The generally peaceful nature of the strike can be seen very clearly in Huddersfield. The postmaster of Huddersfield described the strike in Huddersfield as an 'insurrection' yet the town was 'without a single act of known violence' and there did not appear to be any likelihood of violence. The town was completely peaceful despite the fact that thousands were standing in the streets and 'no fears of injury to property or persons are entertained so long as no opposition is offered.'¹⁴⁴ In many ways the behaviour of the crowd was a significant advance on the type of eighteenth century and early nineteenth century crowd behaviour identified by E. P. Thompson, Rudé and Stevenson. It was not

¹⁴² Benjamin Wilson, 'The Struggles of an Old Chartist', in D. Vincent (ed.), *Testaments of Radicalism* (London, 1973), 199-203

¹⁴³ F. H. Grundy, *Pictures of the Past* (London, 1879), 95-105

¹⁴⁴ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 49-54, Huddersfield postmaster to Colonel Maberly, 14 August 1842

‘collective bargaining by riot’, because in general the Plug Plot crowds did not destroy property, they simply unplugged the steam boilers which powered the factories or cut the mill dams of water powered mills.¹⁴⁵ In general there was little damage to either property or persons compared to older forms of crowd behaviour which safeguarded persons but not property. Neither were the crowds aiming their protest simply at the masters but rather they were aiming at the government. Thompson when looking at food riots identified them as political in the sense of being outraged at unfairness but stressed that they aimed at the restoration of reciprocities and lost rights rather than directly political aims. The call for the Charter by the rank and file strikers means that the strike must be seen as an advance on the type of behaviour identified by Thompson. Although the strikers probably believed that there had been universal suffrage under the ancient Anglo-Saxon constitution this had supposedly been lost so far back in time as to constitute something more than the restoration of a threatened popular right.

Defeat of the Strike

The strike in Yorkshire did collapse very quickly. By far the most important reason for the rapid collapse of the movement in Yorkshire was the response of the authorities in Bradford, Halifax and Leeds. Bradford and Halifax were the powerhouses of the Yorkshire strike and the early regaining of control of the large towns by the magistrates using the military was a decisive blow to the strike. The strong military presence inhibited action in Leeds. The Bradford, Halifax and Leeds magistrates were active from the start; after hearing of the strike in Lancashire they were able to prepare for a strike in Yorkshire while it was still being planned with magistrates meetings in Bradford and Halifax over the weekend 13 and 14 August to swear in special constables and request extra military support from Leeds and Burnley while the Leeds magistrates called out the Yorkshire Hussars yeomanry. The Bradford and Halifax magistrates were sitting on Monday morning before the start of the meetings that began the strike in their towns. From the start the magistrates intervened though relatively ineffectively to begin with before extra military resources were available. At Halifax the magistrates with special constables interrupted the early morning meetings on Monday. A Bradford

¹⁴⁵ J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances in England 1700-1832* (London, 1992), 144; G. Rudé, *The Crowd in History* (New York, 1964), 195-269; E. P. Thompson, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’, *Past and Present*, 50 (1971), 76-136

magistrate headed the military who followed the Bradford turnouts to Halifax and unsuccessfully tried to prevent them entering Halifax.¹⁴⁶ In Halifax, Bradford and Leeds the strike was fairly rapidly overcome once extra military resources were in place. In Halifax the crowds were fired on by the infantry, charged by the hussars, and arrests were made by the special constables on 15 and 16 August effectively regaining control of Halifax.¹⁴⁷ At Bradford on 16 August the military were used to protect the mills, twenty-eight arrests were made by the special constables and in the evening the Lancers were ordered to clear the street which they did violently. On Wednesday the military force inside the town was increased and the yeomanry and mounted specials under the command of a magistrate chased the turnouts away at Bowling after stones had been thrown at the mounted specials. Once the military were in place in the towns the magistrates, especially at Bradford and Halifax, continued to take firm measures to get the mill owners to start work again. For example on Wednesday evening the Bradford magistrates held a meeting with the master spinners to ask them to start working again in the morning. All agreed except for those on Bradford Moor.¹⁴⁸ On 19 August the magistrates of Halifax issued a placard advising the mill-owners to arm themselves and their workmen and shoot anyone who tried to draw the plugs of their mills if they did not desist.¹⁴⁹

The constant passage of troops through Leeds, the presence of large numbers of troops there, and the large numbers of special constables prevented the strike getting seriously underway in Leeds although the operatives expressed their sympathy with the turnouts in neighbouring industrial villages to the east of Leeds and had held meetings on Hunslet Moor supporting the Charter.¹⁵⁰ The magistrates in Leeds acted very firmly and were determined to prevent the strikers from entering the town itself. Leeds formed a military stronghold throughout the strike with Prince George of Cambridge commanding the regular troops until the arrival of Major General Brotherton from London. On 17 August the Riot Act proclamation was read, artillery pieces were brought into Holbeck and arrests were made. On 18 August the troops and special

¹⁴⁶ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842; PRO HO 45/264, ff. 105-117, Mayor and magistrates of Leeds to HO, 16 August 1842

¹⁴⁷ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

¹⁴⁸ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹⁴⁹ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

¹⁵⁰ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

constables at Leeds dispersed a meeting at Hunslet Moor, made more arrests and effectively ended the strike in Leeds. More troops were also sent to Leeds on 18 August with Major General Brotherton who had been put in command of the West Riding forces.¹⁵¹

By 18 and 19 August the troops in the towns had recovered control of them for the local authorities. Troops had been brought into the towns as soon as they could be spared. The magistrates in their letters to the Home Office made it clear that it was only the presence of the military which had allowed them to regain control of the towns and that the military needed to stay for some time for them to retain control. For example on 17 August, after the arrival of Hussars from York and infantry from Hull, the Bradford magistrates felt that the town was in a much more satisfactory state owing to the presence of additional military force which they hoped was now strong enough to protect the town.¹⁵² And indeed there was no attempt to stop the mills in Bradford itself on the Wednesday due to this increased military presence. On 19 August Major General Brotherton entered Bradford. At Huddersfield it was the increasing of the strength of the military force in the town by the arrival of cavalry and yeomanry on Thursday 18 August that led the magistrates to 'now feel there is sufficient strength to resist if necessary.'¹⁵³

Although the military were able to regain control of the towns and so defeat the strike in the towns very early, the turnouts were still able to operate in the outlying villages and neighbourhoods for a longer period.¹⁵⁴ The magistrates were very reluctant to split up the troops to protect individual mills or to allow the troops to leave town to aid mills in outlying places and villages because this would leave the towns itself unprotected and the turnouts might return.¹⁵⁵ However the heart had gone out of the strike when the towns were back under the control of the authorities and the most of the mills in the country and villages were returning to work early in the week after the strike had broken

¹⁵¹ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

¹⁵² PRO HO 45/264, ff. 157-60, Bradford magistrates to HO, 17 August 1842

¹⁵³ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 181-3, Huddersfield magistrates to HO, 18 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

¹⁵⁴ *Bradford Observer*, 18 August 1842

¹⁵⁵ PRO HO 45/264, ff. 246-9, Tempest to HO, 21 August 1842

out in Yorkshire. By 23 August a great number of the mills in the villages around Bradford as well as the town of Bradford were again at work.

The timing of the strike, the outbreak being a week later than in Lancashire, meant that the Home Office was intervening from the start of the strike with Home Secretary Sir James Graham already aware that there was a serious public order problem in the country. The Cabinet had met and decided upon the Royal Proclamation against unlawful assemblages on Saturday 13 August before the strike had affected much of the West Riding.¹⁵⁶ Graham offered advice and encouragement to the magistrates in the affected towns who were writing to the Home Office daily. Graham urged the magistrates to act with energy to suppress disorder, preserve the public peace and to protect those who wished to work. He urged them to use their full powers for example by preventing the entry of the marchers into their towns. He advised them to strengthen the civil force as far as possible by swearing in special constables. The civil forces should do their utmost to repress disorder and only request troops or more troops if it was necessary.¹⁵⁷ The military were to be actually used in assistance of the civil forces only if 'absolutely necessary', but then they should be used 'without parley'.¹⁵⁸ From the 17 August Lieutenant General Sir Thomas Arbuthnot was given command of the whole of the disturbed districts in the North and Midlands (replacing Sir William Warre who had formally been commander of the whole Northern District) and Brotherton took charge of Yorkshire under Arbuthnot.¹⁵⁹

There were other reasons for the early defeat of the strike. The concept of the general strike as a display of unity, which was held by the local Yorkshire strike leaders, was never tested in practice. There was never united support for the strike among the working people in the West Riding. This meant that the concept of the general strike entertained by the strike leaders in the West Riding was never fulfilled in practice. The people never presented the united front which the Chartist strike leaders had hoped for in order to overwhelm the authorities. The Yorkshire strike leaders had hoped to present

¹⁵⁶ J. T. Ward, *Sir James Graham* (London, 1967), 184-191

¹⁵⁷ PRO HO 41/16, f. 483, HO to magistrates at Huddersfield, 16 August 1842; PRO HO 41/17, f. 27, HO to magistrates at Bradford, 17 August 1842, f. 29, HO to magistrates at Keighley, 17 August 1842, f. 46, HO to Pollard, Halifax, 18 August 1842

¹⁵⁸ PRO HO 41/17, f. 27, HO to magistrates at Huddersfield, 17 August 1842

¹⁵⁹ F. C. Mather, *Public Order in the Age of the Chartists* (Manchester, 1959), 156

such a united and overwhelming front that the authorities would not dare to resist. The strikers seem to have felt confident that the military would not fire on the people and probably hoped that the military would join the people against the authorities. When the military did fire the strikers were shocked and dismayed and normally retired in confusion. They had hoped to bring on a confrontation with the authorities but thought that the authorities would back down without the need for fighting. When it became clear that this was not the case they had neither the arms nor the desire to make a truly insurrectionary uprising.

In many areas people were reluctant to commit themselves to the strike unless it was to be fully national. This feeling stemmed in part from the memories of the 1839 and 1840 risings in Yorkshire. In 1839 and 1840 Sheffield and Bradford Chartists had attempted to stage armed risings and had hoped for support from other parts of Britain, however instead they had risen alone apart from Newport in South Wales. Similarly the Huddersfield and Barnsley men had risen in 1820 at the time of the Radical War in Glasgow but had not received support from other areas. The fear of acting unless the strike was fully general in England clearly inhibited many of the working people. For example at Barnsley the Chartist leader and weaver Frank Mirfield asked the people if they were prepared to give up working if the strike became general and received an affirmative response. The local Barnsley leaders were reluctant to rise alone as they had done in the isolated Grange Moor rising of 1820 and would only strike if they felt the strike was already general. However news arrived on Tuesday that either the strike was not general or turnouts were not going to arrive so there was no strike.¹⁶⁰ The feeling that the strike was not general inhibited action and by 18 August it had become clear that the strike was not general throughout the country with people in Birstal calling the strike 'inconsiderate and sectional.'¹⁶¹

A second important reason for the less than united response to the strike was fear of entrapment in an ACCLL plot. From the start of the strike in Yorkshire there was a belief that the strike had been started in Lancashire by the Leaguers for their own ends. This inhibited support for the strike. At the start of the strike the Lancashire strikers said the Huddersfield people were 'unwilling to be made instruments in the hands of designing

¹⁶⁰ *Halifax Guardian*, 20 August 1842

¹⁶¹ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

knaves for bad purposes.¹⁶² This fear seems to have built up over the week and clearly decreased the enthusiasm for continuing the strike. On 18 August it was reported from Birstal that 'the general opinion here is that this...strike is really a Corn Law League Plot to serve the designs of the Masters, and to throw the Charter cause as much back as possible'. On the same day from Heckmondwike it was reported that the Heckmondwike people were 'opposed to the continuation of the strike as they consider it only a plot of the League.' From Mill Bridge it was reported that the Mill Bridge people said the League was to blame for the strike and the strike could do no good. At Cooper Bridge the people thought that the strike was a 'trick of the League and not calculated to aid the Charter.'¹⁶³ All these places were still on strike on the Thursday though under compulsion from turnouts from other towns. There was material to fuel the suspicions of the Yorkshire people. Many of the local Yorkshire papers carried the opinion that the strike in Lancashire was a League plot. In Yorkshire itself a number of masters had closed their factories just before the turnouts arrived, for example at Keighley, and many or most masters did not resist when the turnouts arrived for example in Bradford. *There were* rumours that the Leaguers had provided money, for example at Hebden Bridge on 13 August, though in fact this money seems to have come from requisitions.

An important element in the explanation for the rapid collapse of the strike was a side effect of the strike being far more political right from the start in Yorkshire and the lack of a clear matter of pending wages reductions. When it became clear that the authorities would not just give in and that the troops would fire, it was obviously going to be impossible to use the strike to gain the Charter. The fact that there were no immediate reductions in wages to combat and that the Charter had always been the primary aim of the strike in Yorkshire, though of course people expected the Charter to bring better social conditions, meant there was not the underlying wages grievance to continue the strike after the Charter clearly was not going to be obtained. This was in contrast to Lancashire where the power-loom weavers in particular continued a strike for wages into September.

¹⁶² *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

¹⁶³ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

The failure of the Trades Delegates Conference in Manchester and the NCA national leadership to provide leadership for the strike in Yorkshire was also important for the failure of the strike. The fact that no follow up came from the NCA Executive Meeting or the NCA National Conference which had both been sitting in Manchester on 16 and 17 August was a demoralising blow. A strong address in favour of the strike was published in the name of the NCA Executive on 17 August and a milder address in favour of the strike was issued by the NCA National Conference but the national leadership did nothing active to support the strike due to divisions and the fact that they were in imminent danger of arrest or were actually arrested after the Executive address had been issued. The hostility of the *Northern Star* to the strike on Saturday 20 August killed off any hopes over the weekend that O'Connor, despite his strong following in Yorkshire, would lead the strike.¹⁶⁴

The failure of the strike to be a truly united action meant that the aspirations on which it was based could not be fulfilled. The strike was not followed by serious repression, although troops remained in the towns. There was not the imposition of tyranny and middle class opinion was not brought over to the side of the people as hoped for by some of the Chartist strike leaders. The failure of the general strike for the Charter in the West Riding, together with its failure in the Northwest and the Midlands, helps explain why Chartism went into sharp decline after 1842. The failure of the strike showed that the ultimate ulterior measure of the popular radical platform agitation had failed.

In conclusion the strike in the West Riding of Yorkshire was neither a spontaneous outbreak nor simply spread by the turnouts from the Northwest. Instead this chapter has demonstrated that the strike was planned by local Yorkshire Chartist activists after receiving news of the strike in the Northwest. The Chartists activists organised and began the strike from the local platforms in the Yorkshire towns and made its aim the enactment of the People's Charter from the start. The local Chartist activists in the West Riding of Yorkshire, as in the Midlands, attempted from local platforms particularly in Bradford, Halifax and Dewsbury to revive the general strike 'ulterior measure' of the mass platform agitation following the success of the Lancashire Chartist activists in bringing large numbers out on strike for the Charter in the context of the reluctance of the national Chartist leadership to propose decisive 'ulterior measures' from the national

¹⁶⁴ *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

platform after the rejection of the 1842 National Petition. Once the local Yorkshire Chartist activists knew of the strike in Lancashire they deliberately attempted to work up a strike in Yorkshire and they provided the leadership and organised the strike. At the public meetings before the strike broke out the local Chartists called for a strike which in many towns began immediately after these meetings. In Yorkshire, unlike in Lancashire, trade societies did not provide any leadership for the strike. The strike was not simply brought over from Lancashire by the Lancashire strikers except at Todmorden and Huddersfield. The enactment of the People's Charter was the primary aim of the strike in Yorkshire. Yorkshire Chartists were present at the early Manchester trades meetings insisting that the aim of the national strike should be the Charter. The strike in Yorkshire did not share that hiatus identified by Mather and Sykes in Lancashire when wages were supposed to be the main aim at the start of the strike. Sykes' and Mather's suggestion that the demand for the Charter came from the grass roots strikers rather than from the local Chartist activists does not apply to Yorkshire. The local Chartist activists in Yorkshire made the Charter the aim of the strike at meetings before the strike broke out. Unlike in Lancashire, there was no division between the Chartist activists over whether the strike was to be for the Charter or higher wages. Where there was division among the Chartist activists it was over whether or not to strike. But all were agreed that if there was to be a strike it should be for the Charter rather than wages. There was very strong support for the Charter among the grass roots strikers. The strike was of far shorter duration than in Lancashire and the Midlands. While artisans and factory workers themselves took part in the strike it was domestic hand-weavers and hand-combers who formed the largest occupational groups among the active strikers.

The strike in Yorkshire does support many of Stedman Jones' ideas about the nature of Chartism and working class radicalism. The strikers did see social evils as rooted in political oppression. Where economic oppression was identified by the strikers its cause was seen to be the corruption of the political system. During the strike when the middle classes were criticised it was largely due to their role in the political system rather than in the economic system and the strikers overwhelmingly hoped for the support of the middle classes. The dominant discourse employed in the strike was popular constitutionalism and the traditional radical ideology of attacking 'Old Corruption.' In Yorkshire the strike was not seen as a proto-syndicalist strategy involving trade unions.

Most of the leaders of the general strike in Yorkshire viewed it as a popular radical strategy of the mass platform agitation. They intended the strike to be a peaceful display of public opinion. They believed the government would have to give way to the peaceful resistance of a united people. But in practice this peaceful concept of the strike held by the leaders was not shared by all of the rank and file. The strike was very extensive in the West Riding and as far as the West Riding is concerned Sykes was unsound in his judgement that the strike in the Northwest failed because it did not receive an adequate response outside the Northwest. The strike in the West Riding could not however be sustained in the face of the vigorous use of the military and civil forces, the failure to gain a complete and simultaneous turnout, internal weaknesses including the widespread belief that the strike was an ACLL ploy to discredit Chartism, and the disillusionment resulting from the failure of the strike for the Charter in the Northwest.

CHAPTER FOUR

SCOTLAND AND THE STRIKE FOR THE CHARTER

The Dunfermline Chartists described the cessation from labour for the People's Charter in Dunfermline as the 'grand scheme for political regeneration.'¹ This is an appropriate description for the strike for the Charter in the east of Scotland in 1842. In Scotland, as in the English Midlands, a miners' strike over industrial grievances began first followed by the strike for the Charter. The strike among the miners was almost general affecting Lanarkshire, Ayrshire, the Lothians, Stirlingshire, Dumbartonshire, West Fife and Clackmannanshire. The Lanarkshire coal and iron miners at Glasgow, Coatbridge and Airdrie struck on August 1 followed shortly afterwards by colliers and miners in other districts. The miners did not return to work until November in some cases. The miners' struck over their own wage and industrial grievances although there was some convergence with the strike for the Charter at times. The strike for the Charter itself was confined to the eastern woollen and flax-linen textile districts of Scotland including West Fife, Clackmannanshire and Forfarshire lasting for only a few days in the second half of August. The aim of the strike in these areas, as expressed in resolutions, addresses and speeches, was the enactment of the People's Charter. In addition there were resolutions at meetings in favour of a strike for the Charter in Aberdeen in the northeast and Greenock in the west, though no strike took place. In West Fife, Clackmannanshire and Dundee the originators of the strike for the Charter were Chartist activists, as were the leaders in the attempted strikes at Aberdeen and Greenock. Important Chartist public meetings also took place in Edinburgh and Glasgow although the Chartist activists in these two cities decided against advocating a strike on tactical grounds.

The most recent overview of the 1842 strikes as they affected Scotland is Young's in *The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class*. Young presents three arguments about the strike in Scotland. Firstly he sees the strike for the Charter as originating with and led by the trades. Even in Dundee Young goes only so far as to admit that the Chartists created a climate of opinion in which the trades then decided to take action. Secondly Young minimises the role of local Chartist activists in bringing forward the Charter as

¹ *Fifeshire Journal*, 8 December 1842

aim and argues that Chartist activists actually used their weight to prevent a strike or prevent existing strikes from being given the aim of the Charter. Young's view of cautious Chartist leaders holding back and moderating a trade union movement eager to strike has been supported in the case of Aberdeen by Duncan. The meeting of the Dundee trades conference was highlighted by Young to stress the importance of the trades in the Scottish strike. Thus a picture of the Scottish strike has emerged bearing some similarities to that presented for Lancashire with a strong leadership role coming from the trades. Thirdly the miners' strike and the strike for the Charter in Scotland were collapsed into each other by Young and Duncan partly because of the increasingly apparent role of Chartist led trade unionism among the Lanarkshire miners.² The chapter will contest Young's and Duncan's version of the strike in Scotland. The chapter will examine the origins, leadership, aims, organisation, concept and ideology of the strike in Scotland.

Political and Industrial Background

The labouring classes and middle classes in Scotland had first become involved in political radicalism under the impetus of the French Revolution in the early 1790s. The Scottish radical society 'The Friends of the People' had a much lower entry subscription and more radical demands than its English namesake. Conventions or anti-Parliaments were held in Edinburgh in 1792 and 1793 followed by the trial and transportation of the leading Scottish radicals Thomas Muir and Thomas Fyshe Palmer and of the London Corresponding Society delegates Joseph Gerrald and Maurice Margarot. However repression and loyalist reaction destroyed the radical societies. Despite the failed conspiracy by a former government spy to capture Edinburgh castle in 1794 and the activities of republican United Scotsmen in the late 1790s the movement overwhelmingly took a constitutional and peaceful form. After the end of the Napoleonic wars the constitutional mass platform agitation was initiated with the setting up of Hampden societies following Major John Cartwright's tours. This was largely a

² J. D. Young, *The rousing of the Scottish Working Class* (London, 1979), 90-94; R. Duncan, 'Chartism in Aberdeen', in T. Brotherton (ed.), *Covenant, Charter, and Party: Traditions of Revolt and Protest in Modern Scottish History* (Aberdeen, 1989), 78-91; R. Duncan, 'Artisans and Proletarians: Chartism and Working Class Allegiance in Aberdeen', *Northern Scotland*, IV (1981), 51-67; R. Duncan, *Conflict and Crisis: Monkland Miners and the General Strike of 1842* (Airdrie, 1982), 1-30; A. Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners* (Edinburgh, 1979), 1-354; G. Wilson, 'The Strike Policy of the Miners of the West of Scotland 1842-74', in I. MacDougall (ed.), *Essays in Scottish Labour History* (Edinburgh, 1978), 29-64

British movement in Scotland and was committed to universal suffrage, vote by ballot, and annual elections rather than to any form of Scottish independence. The working classes took a more prominent part in the post war agitation than in that of the 1790s. The constitutional mass platform rather than insurrection typified post war radical activity. An outstanding exception was the Glasgow 'Radical War' and 'Battle of Bonnymuir' in 1820 involving a general strike of 60,000 textile workers in Glasgow and isolated armed uprisings which were planned to coincide with insurrections in England. The treason trials which followed ended this phase of the post-war radical movement however those executed, including Baird and Hardie, became martyrs for the Scottish Chartists. The revived radical societies in Scotland provided strong support for the Reform Bill agitation in 1831 and 1832 and the working class radicals in Scotland in the 1830s were increasingly disappointed by the failure of the middle classes to help them gain their political rights and by the failure of the Whigs to introduce further reforms.³

This disappointment, together with the failure of the factory movement to gain a ten hours bill and the failure of trade unions to protect workers, led to the birth of the Chartist movement. In 1838 the trial and transportation of the leaders of the Glasgow cotton spinners following the cotton spinners' strike was an important element in the creation of the Chartist movement further demonstrating to the working classes that only the gaining of political power would bring them justice. In contrast to England the New Poor Law was not an issue in Scotland, as the able-bodied unemployed had not previously been allowed relief, however the gross inadequacy of poor relief was a major source of radical discontent in the 1830s. The Chartist movement was officially launched at a monster public meeting in Glasgow on 21 May 1838, organised by the Glasgow trades, where the National Petition and the People's Charter were formally introduced by delegates from the Birmingham Political Union and the London Working Men's Association. The possibility of a peaceful general strike by both working and middle classes to force the government to enact the Charter was raised by Thomas Attwood at the meeting. Chartism rapidly spread among the working classes throughout

³ A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty* (Harvard, 1979), 282-315; P. B. Ellis and S. Mac A'Ghobhainn, *The Scottish Insurrection of 1820* (London, 1970), 1-374; F. K. Donnelly, 'The Scottish Rising of 1820: A Reinterpretation', *Scottish Tradition*, VI (1976), 24-7; J. Belchem, 'Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform in Early Nineteenth Century England', *Social History*, 6

the English speaking Lowlands however it never penetrated the Gaelic speaking Highlands. The Scottish Chartist societies did not join the National Charter Association (NCA) before 1842 and instead had their own national organisation with the Universal Suffrage Central Committee based in Glasgow which in early 1842 was changed to a regional federation. Feargus O'Connor's *Northern Star* was the main Chartist newspaper in Scotland, but there was also a number of Scottish Chartist newspapers, most of which collapsed during the depression in the first half of 1842. Scottish Chartism has traditionally been viewed as particularly 'moral force' in nature largely due to the strength of the Christian Chartist Churches in Scotland, to a gross exaggeration of the influence of Rev. Patrick Brewster the 'unconditional obedience' Chartist leader in Paisley, and to the fact that there was no rising in Scotland in 1839, though of course there were no risings in most parts of England either. However it has become increasing clear that Scottish Chartism was in the mainstream with the movement in England with similar support for Feargus O'Connor and similar attitudes to 'moral force' and 'physical force'. Feeling against the Corn Laws was widespread among both the working and middle classes in Scotland. Scotland was the Anti-Corn Law League's (ACLL) greatest region of support outside Lancashire, Cheshire and Yorkshire. The Scottish working classes radicals were almost universally committed to the repeal of the Corn Laws though this did not necessarily translate into support for the League. With the deepening economic recession in the first half of 1842 a large proportion of the radical middle classes in Scotland became increasingly receptive to the Complete Suffrage movement believing that free trade would only be granted by Parliament following organic constitutional reform. Indeed Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen and Paisley were some of the strongest centres of support for the Complete Suffrage movement.⁴

(1981), 1-35; W. Hamish Fraser, *Scottish Popular Politics, from Radicalism to Labour* (Edinburgh, 2000), 1-47

⁴ A. Wilson, *The Chartist Movement in Scotland* (New York, 1970), 22-41, 101-113; L. C. Wright, *Scottish Chartism* (Edinburgh, 1953), 94-129; J. D. Young, *The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class* (London, 1979), 41-71; T. Clarke, 'Early Chartism in Scotland' in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Conflict and Stability in Scottish Society, 1700-1850* (Edinburgh, 1990), 106-121; W. Hamish Fraser, *Conflict and Class: Scottish Workers 1700-1838* (Edinburgh, 1988), 1-192; W. Hamish Fraser, 'The Scottish Context of Chartism', in T. Brosterstone (ed.), *Covenant, Charter, and Party: Traditions of Revolt and Protest in Modern Scottish History* (Aberdeen, 1989), 63-73; P. Pickering and A. Tyrrell, *The People's Bread* (Leicester, 2000), 48-66; W. Hamish Fraser, *Scottish Popular Politics, from Radicalism to Labour* (Edinburgh, 2000), 48-70

The main districts of Chartist strength in Scotland were also centres of the textile industry. The district around Glasgow was the centre of Scotland's cotton industry. Clackmannanshire was an important region of the woollen industry. Dundee, West Fife and Aberdeen were centres of the flax-linen industry. Handloom weaving continued to dominate in the Clackmannanshire woollen manufacturing, and also in the linen industry, particularly in West Fife, with thousands of handloom weavers who could hope for improvement only from political change rather than industrial advances. By 1842 power loom weaving however had progressed rapidly in the cotton industry around Glasgow; with the employment of women and children in the powerloom factories creating a more docile workforce who were less likely to actively begin a political strike. The male cotton spinners were heavily unionised and a relatively well paid group. However they had recently suffered the major catastrophe of the trial and transportation of their leaders and were fearful of further persecution by the authorities and Sheriff Alison. Mining was an important industry particularly in Lanarkshire, Ayrshire, West Fife, Clackmannanshire, the Lothians, Stirlingshire and Renfrewshire. Although the miners were noted, along with agricultural labourers, as a group which was not generally receptive to Chartism, Chartist-led trade unionism had grown among the Lanarkshire miners by 1842. In the first half of 1842 the Scottish textile industry was in the throes of a serious economic depression under which the inadequate system of poor relief for the unemployed and partly employed came apart at the seams.⁵

Origins and Leadership of the Strike for the Charter

The strike for the People's Charter in Scotland was limited in geographical extent and time; nevertheless it was not insignificant. The strike for the Charter was confined to the woollen and flax-linen textile districts of West Fife, Clackmannanshire and Forfarshire although there were also attempts to start a strike for the Charter in Aberdeen and Greenock. There is no evidence for prior planning of a strike for the Charter in Scotland having taken place before the beginning of the strike in Lancashire. However planning took place among local Chartists as soon as news reached them of the strike

⁵ Peter Carmichael, *Dundee Textile History 1790-1885 from the Papers of Peter Carmichael* (Edinburgh, 1969), 1-278; Peter Chalmers, *Historical and Statistical Account of Dunfermline* (Edinburgh, 1844), vol. 1, 1-592; William Gibson, *Reminiscences of Dollar, Tillicoultry, and other Districts* (Edinburgh, 1883), 1-239; *New Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1845), vol. IX, 886-890, vol. XI, 24-29; 'Census

for the Charter in England. In Forfarshire, West Fife, Clackmannanshire, Greenock and Aberdeen the local Chartists were deeply interested in the news of the strike in Lancashire and the trades delegates meetings in Manchester. At public meetings the NCA executive address and reports of the proceedings of the *Great Trades Delegate Conference* at Manchester were read out.⁶ The news of the strike for the Charter in England was the stimulus for the Scottish Chartists to act, and in the intervening period between hearing of the outbreak of the English strike and the start of the strike in Scotland they prepared for a strike in their districts. Already by 20 August Lord Duncan in Forfarshire was reporting that if the strike succeeded in Dundee there were preparations for Forfar, Arbroath, Montrose, Kirriemuir in Forfarshire and nearby Blairgowrie in Perthshire to act in concert with Dundee.⁷

In Dundee in Forfarshire preparations for the strike began with a meeting of the Democratic Society on Thursday 16 August followed by further meetings and the strike itself took place from Monday 22 to Wednesday 24 August after the meeting of a trades conference on Friday 19 August and public meetings over the weekend. An attempt to get up a strike by Chartists and delegates in the Forfarshire town of Montrose was a failure and lasted only one day, 22 August. Despite meetings declaring for a strike for the Charter in Forfar itself no strike took place. The Dundee strike had ended on 24 August with the arrest of the Chartist strike leaders and the failure of the march to Forfar to spread the strike throughout Forfarshire. The most sustained strike for the Charter took place in West Fife where the strike for the Charter began on 23 August and was officially declared to be at an end by votes of the inhabitants and the declaration of the Cessation from Labour Committee on 30 August, the date on which it had been planned to consider whether to continue the strike if it had become national, though a miners strike over miners' grievances continued long after this. In Clackmannanshire resolutions for a general strike beginning in one week if information had been received that the rest of the country would act likewise were passed on 13, 16 and 22 August. Meetings of textile workers and colliers were held on 13 and 16 August at Coalsnaughton and a Correspondence and Strike Committee was formed by the local Chartists. The Clackmannanshire Chartists had found there was no national response to

'Occupations Abstract', *PP* (1844), vol. xxvii; R. Mitchison, 'Scotland 1750-1850', in F. M. L. Thompson, *The Cambridge Social History of Britain* (Cambridge, 1993), vol. 1, 155-207

⁶ *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842

⁷ PRO HO 45/266, ff. 100-101, Lord Duncan to Sir J. Graham, 20 August 1842

their final resolutions on 22 August; they had been handicapped by uncertainty over how far the strike was national in the rest of the country and by an unwillingness to commit themselves until they were sure it was national. Although the Clackmannanshire miners certainly did strike for six weeks no sustained general strike for the Charter among the other trades, apart from sporadic strikes among the handloom weavers, ultimately took place in Clackmannanshire. By the start of September the strike for the Charter in Scotland had collapsed. Chartist initiatives at Greenock and Aberdeen came too late after the political strike had already been defeated in England. Important meetings also took place in Edinburgh and Glasgow though the Chartist Associations in these two cities decided against advocating a strike on tactical grounds, as did Patrick Brewster's 'unconditional obedience' Chartist in Paisley.⁸

The aim of the strike, in Clackmannanshire, West Fife centred on Dunfermline, and Forfarshire centred on Dundee, as expressed in resolutions, addresses, and speeches, was the enactment of the People's Charter. In addition the resolutions at the meetings were in favour of a strike for the Charter in Aberdeen in the northeast and Greenock in the west, though no strike took place. The aim of the strike in Dundee was declared to be the enactment of the Charter from 19 August at the Dundee trades conference, at public meetings on over the weekend on 20 and 21 August, and at meetings during the strike itself on 22, 23, and 24 August. The resolutions passed at the Clackmannanshire meeting on 13 August and confirmed on 16 August were for a general strike for the Charter beginning within a week if the strike was to be national throughout England and Scotland and on 22 August the resolution passed was that a general strike for the Charter should begin immediately on receipt of accredited information that the other manufacturing districts in the Kingdom would act with the same determination. In West Fife in and around Dunfermline the aim of the strike was declared to be the Charter by resolutions passed in Dunfermline at public meetings on 23 August and at meetings throughout the strike.⁹

⁸ *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 20, 27 August, 3 September 1842; *British Statesman*, 27 August, 3, 10 September 1842; *Fifeshire Journal*, 25, 30 August, 1 September 1842; *Dundee Warder*, 23, 30 August 1842; 'Report of the Commissioners...into the State of the Population in the Mining Districts', *PP* (1844), vol. 16, 49

⁹ *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 20, 27 August 1842; *British Statesman*, 27 August, 3, 10 September 1842; *Fifeshire Journal*, 25 August, 1 September 1842; *Dundee Warder*, 23, 30 August 1842

In terms of the numbers involved the strike for the Charter in Scotland was not general. The important industrial region around Glasgow, the artisans of Edinburgh, and agricultural workers did not strike. However the strike for the Charter did become truly general affecting all types of workers in West Fife between 23 and 30 August; with at least 30,000 workers on strike in the Dunfermline district. Almost all artisans and working master artisans as well as the weavers and miners had ceased work in Dunfermline itself as well as the surrounding areas. The only exceptions were the butchers and bakers, who had been excepted by the Cessation from Labour Committee, and the reapers in the fields.¹⁰ Large numbers of textile workers and colliers attended the meetings in Clackmannanshire, for example over 4000 were present at the meeting on 22 August at Devonside near Coalsnaughton. There were reports of the strike being general at times in mid-August in many Clackmannanshire towns, with the woollen hand loom weavers appearing to have struck sporadically while awaiting news of whether the strike was national. In Dundee 4000 attended the strike meeting on the morning of 23 August, and the procession around the factories started with 2000 and increased in size as several of the factories turned out. That the numbers were not larger may in part be explained by the enrolment of the most trusted workers and the manufacturers as special constables and the refusal of the Chartists to do more than send in a delegation of eight to ask the factories to turn out. Although the occupational composition of the strikers in Dundee is not completely clear it appears that handloom weavers formed the core of the Dundee strike as in the Dunfermline strike, although numbers of factory operatives certainly joined the strike in Dundee once it was underway.¹¹

The originators and leaders of the strike for the Charter in West Fife, Clackmannanshire and Dundee were Chartist activists, as were the leaders in the attempted strikes at Aberdeen and Greenock. The local Chartist activists in eastern Scotland, like those in the West Riding of Yorkshire, the English Midlands, and South Wales, attempted to revive the 'sacred month' 'ulterior measure' of the platform agitation from local platforms after the Lancashire Chartist activists had shown that it was possible to get large numbers to strike for the Charter. In Clackmannanshire it was local Chartist activists who called for a general strike for the Charter. Members of the West Midland District of

¹⁰ *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 3 September 1842

¹¹ *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842; *Dundee Warden*, 23, 30 August 1842

Scotland Chartist organisation centred at Coalsnaughten took the lead. Thomas Hall and Thomas Roberts, respectively Treasurer and Secretary of the Scottish West Midland Chartist District, were members of the correspondence and strike committee at Coalsnaughten. John Russell, a Clackmannanshire Chartist who had welcomed O'Connor to the region in 1841, was Chairman of the Correspondence and Strike Committee.¹² The most active leaders in the strike in West Fife and Dunfermline were the Chartist activists Thomas Morrison, Andrew Henderson and Andrew Flemming. Morrison, the secretary of the Dunfermline Cessation from labour Committee, was a master shoemaker, shop owner, and the leading local Chartist as well as being a magistrate. He was a keen *Corn Law* repealer and firm advocate of 'moral force'. Henderson, the Chairman of the Cessation from Labour Committee, was a weaver and owner of property in Dunfermline. Flemming, who took a prominent part in the strike meetings, was a weaver.¹³ At Dundee it was the Council of the Democratic Society and other local Chartist activists who were the key figures in organising an attempted general strike for the Charter from 16 August. Important Chartist leaders of the strike in Dundee were John Duncan, Chartist preacher at the Chartist church and a shoemaker, and John Mitchell who had been a delegate to the January Scottish Chartist Conference. Hugh Ross, a tailor, acted as chairman at the strike meetings at Dundee. John Penny, a mechanic whose father was founder of old Dundee Political Union was involved. Thomas Anderson, a leading Chartist activist and a flax dresser, was an important figure in pushing the Dundee trades delegates conference to declare for a strike for the Charter. However two other Chartist activists, Isaac Peterkin who had been a member of^{the} January conference but was going over to Sturgites, and Alexander Sime, a former Chartist preacher who was also going over to Sturgites, though in favour of a general strike in principle, were unsure of how much national support it had and were concerned about lack of preparation. At Forfar it was the local Chartist activists who organised a strike meeting on 22 August.¹⁴ At Greenock it was the members of the Chartist Church and the Universal Suffrage Association, especially Thomson the Chartist preacher, George Robertson, Robert Burrell and Joseph M'Lean, who called on the Greenock trades to

¹² *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842; *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 6 November, 11 December 1841, 25 June 1842

¹³ *Fifeshire Journal*, 1 September 1842; *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 3 September 1842; Alexander Stewart, *Reminiscences of Dunfermline Sixty Years Ago* (Edinburgh, 1886), 115-118

¹⁴ *Dundee Warter*, 23, 30 August 1842; William Kidd, *Memoranda of the Chartist Agitation in Dundee* (Dundee, 1889), 21-71

meet, issued an address to the Trades of Scotland, and attempted to get support for a strike involving the Glasgow trades at a meeting in Glasgow. At Aberdeen it was James M'Pherson, Alexander Henry, John Troup, James Shirron and David Wright, all activists of the Aberdeen Northern District Charter Union, who organised public meetings and issued addresses in favour of a potential strike for the Charter.¹⁵

In Scotland's two largest cities, Glasgow and Edinburgh, the Chartist activists made a tactical decision not to call for a strike based on the opinion that the violence that had arisen in the English strikes and in the miners' strike would lose rather than gain public opinion for the Chartists. Most were not against a general strike for the Charter on principle but decided that it was not a good means of mobilising public opinion in the circumstances because the people, being unprepared in not having stored up provisions or saved money, would have to steal to get food, which would lead to violence and so result in the loss of public opinion for their cause. Important public meetings called by the local Chartist leaders took place at Edinburgh on 22 August and at Glasgow on 27 August. The Edinburgh Chartist leaders had met before the meeting and agreed on the resolutions beforehand. They blamed the strike on the ACLL for reductions which put the workmen in terrible want, made worse by the fact that they knew there was a political cause to their distress. They also put the blame on the government for refusing relief. They argued that the ACLL masters started the strike but then hid, the Chartists did not start the strike, but once on strike they admitted that the Chartists put forward the Charter as the aim. They were against a strike in the present circumstances as the people were not prepared materially, though they were not against a strike in principle. Robert Lowery declared that he would support a strike if the people prepared by building up resources in terms of money and food which they might easily do by refraining from whiskey and tobacco for three months. But in the present circumstances they would have to either steal or starve, and stealing would bring them into confrontation with military, which would lose them the public opinion they felt they had built up in the first half of 1842.¹⁶

The Glasgow Chartist leaders, who provided the nearest equivalent to a national leadership for the Chartist movement in Scotland, also advised against a strike on

¹⁵ *British Statesman*, 6 August, 3, 10 September 1842

¹⁶ *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842

grounds of lack of preparations though some of them declared that they were disappointed that no strike for the Charter had taken place in Glasgow. Since the Glasgow trades union leaders had set their faces against a strike and the strike was already virtually over in England, the Glasgow Chartists were not in a position to advise in favour of a strike in Glasgow despite urgings by delegates from the Manchester NCA conference including William Beesley.¹⁷ However the meetings in Glasgow and Edinburgh did endorse the alternative ulterior measure advocated in May by the General Convention held in London following Parliament's refusal to consider the second National Petition of memorialising the Queen to dismiss her ministers and appoint those who would enact the Charter as called for by the signatures to the National Petition. They also protested at the unconstitutional interference with the right to public meeting which had occurred in England.¹⁸

There was no strike in Paisley near Glasgow, a cotton-weaving district suffering particularly severely from the industrial depression, apart from a strike for wages by a few female power loom weavers. Clarke suggested that the absence of strong unionism in Paisley and the presence of large numbers of impoverished handloom weavers may be explanations for the failure to strike in Paisley.¹⁹ However neither was formal unionism in the West Fife linen industry strong, and handloom weavers were the mainstay of the political strike in, for example, West Fife and Yorkshire. Clarke mistakenly believed that political radicalism was the preserve of factory operatives and that traditional hand workers were conservative. Rather it seems that the absolute state of degradation of the Paisley weavers, far worse than the condition of the weavers in West Fife or Yorkshire, may have made them too abject to strike. Those who have completely given up hope of improvement rarely take part in 'revolutionary' action, in contrast to those who may be impoverished but still have hope for change. The division within the Paisley Chartists between O'Connorites and the Rev. Patrick Brewster's 'unconditional obedience' party who were strongly in favour of a middle class alliance and against any use or threat of force was also significant in inhibiting a Chartist call for a strike. The simple fact that Brewster favoured a middle class alliance and was against force did not in itself prevent a call for a strike for the Charter as, after all, Thomas

¹⁷ *British Statesman*, 3 September 1842

¹⁸ *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842

¹⁹ T. Clarke and T. Dickson, 'Class and Class-Consciousness, Paisley 1770-1850', in T. Dickson (ed.), *Capital and Class in Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1982), 8-60

Morrison in Dunfermline belonged to the same party as Brewster. However the Brewster party in Paisley did use its influence to caution against a strike at public meetings arguing that the violence which had arisen in the strike in England would make a middle and working class radical alliance more difficult to obtain.²⁰

The Miners' Strike in Scotland

In August 1842 there were in fact two separate strike movements taking place in Scotland. As in the English Midlands, a miners' strike over miners' industrial grievances began first, followed by the strike for the Charter. The miners' strike lasted far longer than did the strike for the Charter in Scotland and was far more extensive. The Lanarkshire coal and iron miners at Glasgow, Coatbridge and Airdrie struck on 1 August. Colliers and miners in the rest of Lanarkshire, Mid-Lothian, East Lothian, Ayr, Stevenston, Kilmarnock and Kilwinning in Ayrshire, Campsie and Falkirk in Stirlingshire, Kirkintilloch in Dumbartonshire and Johnstone in Renfrewshire came out on strike between 15 August and the beginning of September often at the prompting of miner's delegates from Coatbridge and Airdrie. In addition the colliers and miners in West Fife and Clackmannanshire who had come out with the strike for the Charter continued out as part of the miners' ^{strike the} after ^{the} strike for the Charter had failed. The Glasgow area miners were the first to return to work in September following settlement of their grievances by the masters. Elsewhere the colliers and miners remained out until October, November and early December. In some cases the miners were ejected from their tied houses and Irish labourers from Glasgow brought in to replace them. However many, including the Airdrie and Coatbridge colliers who returned to work in the first two weeks of October, were granted their demands by the masters, although these were in many cases rescinded in December leading to fresh strikes.²¹

The miners' strike did become general among the miners of Scotland in terms of almost all miners being on strike. Almost all the 10,000 or so colliers and miners in Lanarkshire, the 2500 or so colliers and miners in Ayrshire, the 750 or so colliers and

²⁰ *Paisley Advertiser*, 10 September 1842; *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 1 October 1842

²¹ *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 6, 13, 20 August, 17 September 1842; *Northern Star*, 13 August, 8 October, 5, 19 November 1842; *Scotsman*, 24 August 1842; *Paisley Advertiser*, 20, 27 August 1842; *Nonconformist*, 21 September 1842; *British Statesman*, 1, 22 October 1842; 'Report of the Commissioners...into the State

miners in Clackmannanshire, the 2000 or so coal miners in Fife, the 900 or so coal miners in Renfrewshire, and the 1800 or so miners in the Lothians were on strike.²² In addition the colliers of Campsie and Falkirk in Stirlingshire and Kirkintilloch in Dumbartonshire had struck. In many areas, such as the Lanarkshire coal area around Hilltown, Airdrie and Coatbridge, the numerical dominance of the colliers and their families meant that the strike did approach being a general strike. Contemporaries were fully aware of the large number of women and children dependent on the colliers.

The miners' strike in Scotland, in contrast to the Chartist strike, was largely for redress of industrial grievances. The main exceptions were the colliers of West Fife and Clackmannanshire who came out for the Charter with the Chartist strike in their areas; but they too continued the strike for redress of miners' industrial grievances once the strike for the Charter had failed. The miners came out for their own particular grievances over wages paid per day, the truck shop system, the unfair weighing of the coal they dug up, and various unfair practices by the coal masters rather than for the Charter. The common demand was four shillings wages per day and fair weighing and this demand was maintained by the miners throughout the strike. But some support for the Charter was also present in the miners' strike from the start. The miners in Lanarkshire gave support for the Charter in their resolutions at the start of the strike although this was not made the aim of the strike. At one of the initial meetings in Airdrie in early August where the demands were for the redress of the miners' wages and weight grievances there was also a resolution passed to agitate for the Charter. Archibald Alison, the Sheriff of Lanarkshire, thought that there was a strong Chartist nature to the miners strike early in August. This was due to the leadership of the strike by leaders of the Coal Miners Chartist Association.²³ For a time around August 17, the time when the political strike in England was at its height, the miners' strike in Scotland did begin to temporarily take on the aim of the Charter as the call for a strike for the Charter spread from Clackmannanshire. At a meeting of 3000 miners at Airdrie on August 17 the Chartist activist Thomas Roberts came as delegate from the Clackmannanshire Chartists and successfully recommended that they make their strike

of the Population in the Mining Districts', *PP* (1844), vol. 16, 49; *Times*, 25 October, 8 November 1842; PRO HO 45/266, ff. 123-125, Lord Eglinton to Sir J. Graham, 7 December 1842

²² 'Census Occupations Abstract', *PP* (1844), vol. xxvii

²³ *Northern Star*, 13 August 1842; *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 20 August 1842; PRO HO 45/266, f. 13, A. Alison to Sir J. Graham, 8 August 1842

for a higher end than merely wages and adopt the resolutions adopted at the meetings in Clackmannanshire. A fourth resolution was also passed declaring that they would strike until the Charter became the law of land if the other trades in Lanarkshire and other parts of Great Britain did likewise and that they would send notice to all towns and villages in Great Britain. Some of the local Airdrie Chartists together with John M'Lay, a Chartist activist and miner, and Roberts, on the same day held a meeting of the inhabitants and trades of Airdrie with 4500 present who passed the same resolutions and formed a committee to put them into effect agreeing to send notices to the *Northern Star* and the *British Statesman* embodying the fourth resolution and to communicate with Glasgow and other places in the vicinity. The same resolutions were passed at a meeting at Coatbridge. Resolutions for the Charter were also passed by the Campsie and area miners at Dugaldstone Wood near Milngrave in Lanarkshire on Wednesday 17 August though this was merely to agitate for the Charter and the aim of their strike was four shillings wages per day. A general meeting of the Glasgow district colliers held at Dalmarnock on Friday 19 August unanimously agreed to the Coalsnaughton resolutions.²⁴ However these resolutions to make the aim of the miners' strike the Charter were dropped by the end of August and the miners' strike in Lanarkshire, Renfrewshire, Ayrshire, Mid-Lothian, East Lothian, Stirlingshire, Dumbartonshire, Fife and Clackmannanshire was continued for redress of their own industrial grievances.

The leadership of the miners' strike in Scotland came from within the miners themselves and, apart from in Lanarkshire, did not include known Chartist activists. West Fife and Clackmannanshire were special exceptions as here the miners and colliers joined the strike for the Charter under Chartist leadership; but then continued the strike for miners' wages under their own leadership. However in Lanarkshire it was the leaders of the Coal Miners Chartist Association (which after being founded at the very start of 1842 had developed eastern and western districts and was fulfilling a trade union as well as political role and had briefly run a *Miners and Colliers Journal* which had made the miners aware of their common grievances), particularly John M'Lay, secretary of the Airdrie and Coatbridge miners, who organised the miners' strike in Lanarkshire from 1 August.²⁵ By Monday 15 and Tuesday 16 August delegates from Airdrie had

²⁴ *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842; *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 20 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842

²⁵ *Northern Star*, 29 January, 12, 19 February, 12 March, 16 July, 6, 13 August 1842; *British Statesman*, 13 August 1842

managed to extend the strike over miners' grievances or at least the threat to strike to all the Scottish mining areas by sending delegates to the miners in Mid-Lothian, East-Lothian, Stirlingshire, Renfrewshire, Fife and Ayrshire. Given that the Lanarkshire miners at that point then began to pass resolutions calling for a general strike for the Charter if it was to be national it might seem that there was a plan from the start by the Airdrie and Coatbridge miners to create a strike for the Charter among the whole of the miners of Scotland. However this appears not to have been the case because the impetus for the Lanarkshire miners to pass resolutions for the Charter as the aim on August 17 came from the Clackmannanshire Chartists.²⁶ Despite the involvement of the Coal Miners Chartist Association leaders and the calls for the Charter around the August 17 it seems best to view the Scottish miners' strike as part of a national strike movement among the miners of Britain.

Organisation of the Strike for the Charter

The guiding role in the Scottish strike for the Charter came from Chartist Cessation from Labour Committees rather than from a trades delegate conference. In Scotland the nearest equivalents to the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference were not trades conferences; but rather were the Chartist led Cessation from Labour and Correspondence Committees in Clackmannanshire and West Fife, which directed the strike once it had started as well as issuing addresses and receiving communications. They were a crucial organisational feature of the Scottish strike. For example in Dunfermline during the week of the general strike the district was divided into quarters by Morrison with a committee member for each who received subscriptions and dispersed relief. The most active members of the Dunfermline committee were the local Chartist leaders Morrison and Henderson. Most of these activities by the Chartists to begin, extend, and maintain the strike also involved public meetings. Public meetings which took a democratic form with resolutions were essential for all the forms of activity and organisation. For example public meetings continued in Dunfermline throughout the strike with the Chartist strike leaders reporting on the progress of the strike.²⁷

²⁶ *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842

²⁷ *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 3 September 1842; *Fifeshire Journal*, 1 September 1842

The local Chartist activists attempted to begin, extend and maintain the strike for the Charter by the passing of resolutions and addresses at public meetings calling for a general strike for the Charter and sending them around the country. Addresses calling for a general strike for the Charter were sent to Scottish and some English towns from Alva, Alloa, Coalsnaughten and Dunfermline. The Clackmannanshire resolutions of 13 and 16 August for a general strike for the Charter throughout Britain were sent to different parts of the country with Glasgow receiving a copy from Alloa by 20 August.²⁸ On 22 August when the Clackmannanshire weavers and miners agreed to make a general strike for the Charter immediately on receipt of information that the other manufacturing districts in Britain would do the same the Clackmannanshire strike committee agreed to issue an address to all other towns especially the large manufacturing towns of Scotland calling on them to communicate their decisions to the committee.²⁹ The Clackmannanshire Chartists even sent their address and an appeal to the Northumberland and Durham miners to Newcastle-upon-Tyne however the pits in County Durham turned out for merely one day over wages and a strike by shipwrights from Shields was also over wages.³⁰ From Dunfermline the Chartist strike leaders sent letters containing their resolutions to all the towns of Scotland and many in England including Dundee, Glasgow, Manchester, and to Ebenezer Elliot the Corn Law Rhymer in Sheffield, who belatedly replied after the strike was well over. At a public meeting on Thursday 25 August at Dunfermline the Chartist leaders read replies from Tillicoultry, Airdrie and quite a few places in Fife including Kirkcaldy. However the fact that the strike was over in England limited the response. Correspondence committees were also set up at Aberdeen on 3 September by the Chartists and at Kirkcaldy on 27 August by the Chartist activists Hunter and Todd though these were inactive as the strike had already collapsed nationally.³¹

The leaders of the strike for the Charter also tried to spread the strike in their local areas by sending out delegates. The Dundee Chartist activists made use of delegates to attempt to spread the strike for the Charter throughout Forfarshire including Montrose,

²⁸ *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 20 August 1842

²⁹ *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842; *Newcastle Chronicle*, 27 August, 3 September 1842

³⁰ *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842; *Newcastle Chronicle*, 27 August, 3 September 1842; *Northern Star*; *The Times*, 1 September 1842; D. J. Rowe, 'Some Aspects of Chartism on Tyneside', *International Review of Social History*, XVI, 1 (1971), 17-39; W. H. Maehl, 'Chartist Disturbances in Northeastern England', *International Review of Social History*, VIII, 3 (1963), 389-414

³¹ *Fifeshire Journal*, 25 August, 1 September 1842; *British Statesman*, 29 October 1842

Forfar and Kirriemuir. For example John Mitchell, the Dundee Chartist, went as delegate to Forfar and Kirriemuir on Sunday 21 and Monday 22 August to encourage support for a strike for the Charter.³² The Dunfermline Chartist activists went as delegates to other localities in West Fife to spread the political strike. For example the Dunfermline strike leaders Morrison and Flemming went as delegates to Chartist public meetings in Kirkcaldy on 25 and 27 August to ask the Kirkcaldy Chartists to join the Dunfermline people in a cessation from labour for the Charter and the meeting on 27 August unanimously resolved to strike if the movement had become national by 30 August. The Clackmannanshire Chartists sent activist Thomas Roberts to Airdrie on August 17 to spread the aim of the Charter; refuting Young's argument that the Chartists tried to prevent the miners' strike from becoming a strike for the Charter.³³ The deliberate planning and spreading of the strike for the Charter by the local Chartists, rather than by the trades, can be seen in the activity of Chartist delegates.

Turnout processions were a less significant feature of the strike for the Charter in Scotland than in England. In the strike for the Charter in West Fife and Forfarshire processions took place but these differed in some respects from those in England. Although there were processions in Dunfermline to meetings the turnout was largely voluntary and only small parties visited the workshops. In Dundee on 22 and 23 August processions of Chartists paraded around Dundee after morning public meetings; however they only sent small delegations of eight into the factories to ask them to turn out. The most significant procession of the strike in Scotland was the march by the Dundee Chartists to Forfar on 22 August; known locally as the 'Pilgrimage of Folly'. The Dundee Chartists hoped to emulate Manchester and before the Pilgrimage of Folly to Forfar they declared that Dundee bore exactly the same relation to Scotland as Manchester did to England. Their intention in going on procession to Forfar was to give the Forfar people the confidence to turn out, to increase their numbers, and then visit the landholders to demand relief. The march to Forfar was a failure for several reasons. The Dundee Chartists only finally decided to go to Forfar at a meeting on Tuesday afternoon after the authorities had prevented their turnout procession to works outside the town returning to Dundee. The Forfar people were only told by messenger on Tuesday night

³² *Dundee Warden* 23, 30 August 1842; *Aberdeen Journal*, 31 August 1842; PRO HO 45/266, ff. 98-99, Earl of Airlie to Sir J. Graham, 23 August 1842; PRO HO 45/266, ff. 100-101, Lord Duncan to Sir J. Graham, 20 August 1842

³³ *Fifeshire Journal*, 25 August, 1 September 1842

that the Dundee Chartists were coming and the procession only arrived at three in the morning; by which time the 1200 who had set out had been reduced in number after the marchers ignored the Dundee leaders' admonitions not to take food from the fields. The Forfar people had been reluctant to start a strike unless Dundee gave the lead and the small size and disorganised state of the procession failed to give heart to the Forfar Chartists. At the public meeting held in Forfar on Wednesday morning the Forfar Chartist activists decided that Dundee had not given the firm lead they had asked for on Monday if they were to strike, resulting in the return home of the Dundee marchers.³⁴

Young argued for a strong trade union basis to the strike in Scotland as in Manchester.³⁵ But the evidence shows that the initiative to strike and to strike for the Charter came from local Chartists rather than the trades unions in Scotland. Delegate meetings of the trades, on the pattern of those held in the townships outside Manchester rather than in imitation of the Manchester *Great Trades Delegate* meeting itself, to come to a decision on whether to hold a strike for the Charter in the locality, were held at Dundee, Aberdeen and Greenock. In all these areas local Chartists had been actively involved in leading the unemployed trades in their attempts to get better and less humiliating poor relief from the magistrates. By far the most significant trades delegate meeting was that held in Dundee on 19 August. The calling and the role of the Dundee trades conference is evidence that the Chartists rather than the trades were beginning and directing the strike and encouraging those involved to make the aim the Charter. It was called by the Chartists who at a public meeting ordered by the Council of the Dundee Democratic Society passed a resolution that a meeting of delegates should take place from the different works and this met on the evening of 19 August.³⁶ Most were delegates from individual flax linen manufactories, shops and mills though delegates from the engineers connected with the mills, and tailors, shoemakers, confectioners and the unemployed were also present. However it may have been more representative than the Manchester Great Trades Delegate Conference because the vast majority of delegates were from individual mills and manufactories in contrast to the overrepresentation of artisans at the Manchester conference. Despite the sitting of this convention there was not a strong trades organisational basis to the Scottish strike. The Dundee convention's

³⁴ *Dundee Warden*, 23, 30 August 1842; *Fifeshire Journal*, 25 August, 1 September 1842

³⁵ J. D. Young, *The Rousing of the Scottish Working Class* (London, 1979), 90-94

³⁶ PRO HO 45/266, ff. 89-90, Provost of Dundee to Sir J. Graham, 18 August 1842

decision was ratified by a popular meeting of the town people the next day, thus the decision to strike was ultimately made on a popular rather than trades basis. This Dundee convention did not try to imitate the Manchester conference by continuous sitting or by providing a directing role to the strike, and indeed it sat only once. The Dundee Chartist leaders did hope that Dundee would set an example to the rest of Scotland as Manchester had done, but a continuously sitting trade conference played no part in their plans. It was merely called to make an initial decision on whether to strike or not. Thus the Dundee convention cannot be seen as the Scottish counterpart of the Manchester *Great Trades Delegate Conference*. The Dundee convention bore more resemblance to the many local trade conferences which met in the townships of Southeast Lancashire with Chartist organisers.³⁷

At Aberdeen and Greenock Duncan's and Young's view of an insurgent trades movement being held back by cautious Chartists leaders is also inaccurate. The evidence shows that it was the local Chartist activists who were pressing most eagerly, though at the same time attempting to make realistic preparations, for a strike. The Greenock trades met at the suggestion of the Greenock Chartists on 29 August, a meeting which also included members of the public, when the Greenock Chartists issued an address to the trades of Scotland declaring that many of the trades of Greenock had expressed a willingness to strike for political rights if the rest of Britain agreed to it. Here the initiative was coming from the Chartists rather than the trades and the Chartists seem to have been in advance of the trades in their desire for the strike. The Aberdeen Chartist activists, after holding a public meeting on 22 August at which they passed a resolution of thanks to the trades of Manchester for declaring for the Charter, arranged a meeting of delegates from the trades, workshops and manufactories of Aberdeen on 26 August in the Chartists' hall. The Chartists were in advance of the trades in their desire for a strike for the Charter with the delegates voting sixteen to twelve against a strike. Despite this the Chartists continued to unsuccessfully push for a strike; at a public meeting on 27 August the Aberdeen Chartist David Wright proposed a resolution 'that this meeting considers a cessation from labour an effectual means of carrying the People's Charter into law, provided it be generally acted upon' and the Aberdeen Chartist activists organised a public meeting on 3 September with the Chartist John Troup in the chair to consider the propriety of a future cessation of labour and joint

³⁷ *Dundee Warden*, 23 August 1842

abstinence from articles of consumption on which taxes were paid, as a means of gaining the Charter. The meeting was to be merely a preliminary step to see if there was national support for a strike for the Charter and abstinence and there were plans that an address should be issued and sent all round Britain asking people to sign a paper saying if they were prepared to strike, how long they could support themselves, and for others to say if they were willing to support a strike financially. A committee was actually set up comprising the leading Chartists in Aberdeen to sit in the Chartists' hall for an hour every evening to issue and receive the sheets of paper with the names of those nationally who would strike, could support themselves and others who would contribute.³⁸ This initiative had come too late after the political strike had collapsed everywhere throughout Britain. Nevertheless the initiative to strike and to strike for the Charter was clearly coming from the Chartists rather than the trades in Scotland.

The failure of the Glasgow trades to take part in the strike, despite efforts by the Greenock Chartist activists and by delegates from the Manchester NCA Conference to involve the Glasgow trades, also weakens the argument that the strike was a trades movement. There was no attempt to emulate the Manchester example on the part of the Glasgow trades unions. Apart from the miners, whose union activity in Lanarkshire was largely Chartist led, the Scottish trades did not enter the strike as such. The Greenock Chartists belonging to the Greenock Chartist Church and the Universal Suffrage Association attempted to rouse the Scottish trades into action. The Greenock Chartist Joseph M'Lean had attended the public meeting organised by the Glasgow Chartists on Glasgow Green on 27 August and had called at that meeting for the trades to carry the Charter as they had carried the Reform Bill in 1832 but he was stopped from speaking by the Glasgow Chartist leaders. At the meeting held in Greenock on 29 August M'Lean, Robert Burrell and other Greenock Chartists criticised the Glasgow trades for not showing their moral power against tyranny, and criticised the Chartist meeting recently held in Glasgow for not calling on the Glasgow trades to copy the example of Manchester. The Greenock Chartists issued an address to the Trades of Scotland chiding the trades, particularly the Glasgow trades, for not becoming actively involved and calling on the trades of Scotland to take on a leadership role in the strike.³⁹

³⁸ *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842; *British Statesman*, 27 August, 3, 10 September 1842; *Aberdeen Herald*, 10 September 1842

³⁹ *British Statesman*, 3 September 1842

However the Glasgow trades failed to take on this leadership role. Meetings of many of the trades of Glasgow did take place at the very end of August or beginning of September but no active leadership was forthcoming. The Glasgow cotton spinners met at the beginning of September and agreed to demand the wages of 1840. They sent delegates to the masters in September to ask for the wages of 1840, however no strike took place when their demand was refused. The cotton spinners at a firm in the St Rollox district of Glasgow did go on strike over wages at the end of September. However there were only twelve cotton spinners employed by the firm. There were rumours that the cotton spinners' meeting at the beginning of September had decided on striking at the firms one by one to gain the wages of 1840, with the St Rollox firm being the first. However in fact no such plan appears to have existed and the strike at St Rollox was for an equalisation of wages with the other firms and not for the wages of 1840. The Glasgow dandyloom weavers struck in August. However there were only nine dandyloom firms in Glasgow, five of which rapidly came to terms with the men, and the dandyloom weavers' strike was merely for wages. The unwillingness of the trade union leaders to strike seems to have been the main reason for the absence of a serious strike in Glasgow. Delegates from the NCA Conference in Manchester, including William Beesley who then travelled on to Newcastle-upon-Tyne in an unsuccessful attempt to initiate a strike there, were present in Glasgow by August 20 to encourage the trade union leaders in the Glasgow area to strike; but the trades leaders refused to call for a strike in Glasgow.⁴⁰ This was certainly not due to lack of support for Chartism among the trades. It had been the trades of Glasgow who had organised the reception for Thomas Attwood and other delegates from the Birmingham Political Union in 1838. The Glasgow trades had continued to be involved in Chartist activity in Glasgow. The Greenock Chartists attributed the unwillingness of the trades to give a lead to the strike to their relatively comfortable condition compared to less fortunate working men. However more significantly the defeat of the cotton spinners' strike in 1838, and the trial and transportation of its leaders, may have made the Glasgow trades reluctant to embark on an all out strike aimed at the government, especially as Sheriff Alison, the trades' avowed enemy, was still at the helm in Glasgow.⁴¹ The miners in the

⁴⁰ *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 20 August, 1 October 1842

⁴¹ J. Marshall, *The Trial of Thomas Hunter, Peter Hacket, Richard M'Niel, James Gibson and William M'Lean, the Glasgow Cotton Spinners, before the High Court of Justiciary, at Edinburgh, on Charges of*

immediate vicinity of Glasgow were on strike however these were among the first to gain settlements from the masters. It is clear therefore that Young was wrong to identify the trades as the guiding force within the strike.

The role of the local Chartist activists in organising the strike demonstrates that the strike cannot be seen simply as the work of the local trades. In trying to explain why it was these areas that struck for the Charter the desire of the local Chartist activists to try to set an example for other parts of Scotland to follow was certainly important. In Dundee, Dunfermline and Clackmannanshire the local Chartist activists all declared that they were consciously acting as pace setters in the hope that other areas would follow their example and strike. In addition to this the areas of the strike for the Charter shared a numbers of characteristics. All had been strongly in favour of having a month long general strike for the Charter, the 'sacred month', in 1839. At the meeting of Scottish delegates held in August 1839 to discuss the 'ulterior measures' the delegate for Dunfermline told the meeting that his constituents thought the 'sacred month' the best measure that could have been proposed. Dundee, Forfar and Kirriemuir, all in Forfarshire, were reported to be strongly in favour of the 'sacred month' and Aberdeen was reported to support any measure which the National Convention thought would gain the Charter. The general strike or 'sacred month' proposals of 1839 seem to have been in the minds of the leaders of the political strike in 1842, with the difference that there was no question of arming in 1842 unlike 1839.⁴²

In the areas of the strike for the Charter the local Chartists had built up support among the trades, whether formally organised or unorganised. At Aberdeen there was strong support for Chartism among the trades. The town's trades had formed a procession in honour of one of Feargus O'Connor's visits to Scotland. In the Summer of 1842 the Aberdeen trades were formally joining the Aberdeen Northern Charter Union in a similar way to which the Manchester trades were forming themselves into NCA localities, for example the Aberdeen handloom weavers joined as a body in late July and the ships carpenters joined in August 1842. In Dundee Bakers and Confectioners Universal Suffrage Associations had existed until merged into the Democratic Council.

Murder (Edinburgh, 1838), 1-382; Sir Archibald Alison, *Some Account of my Life and Writings* (Edinburgh, 1883), 367-402, 486-499

⁴² *Northern Star*, 27 August 1839; T. Clarke, 'Early Chartism in Scotland' in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Conflict and Stability in Scottish Society, 1700-1850* (Edinburgh, 1990), 106-121

The Dundee trades had provided an enthusiastic demonstration on George White's and John Collins' entry to Dundee in 1840 following their release from prison.⁴³ However the most important characteristic of the strike for the Charter areas was the support for Chartist among workers in the flax-linen and woollen industries.

All the districts where the strike for the Charter took place were centres of the flax-linen or woollen industries where the Chartists found great support among the textile workers, particularly among the hand workers. The flax-linen industry was the single most important industry in West Fife centred on Dunfermline and in the Forfarshire towns of Dundee, Forfar and Kirriemuir. Woollen manufacture was important in Clackmannanshire. About one third of males above twenty years of age worked in the flax-linen industry in Dundee burgh and parish, about one third in Dunfermline burgh and parish, and about one half in Forfar. Dunfermline specialised in manufacturing table linen, which was still largely unmechanised as although there were five working spinning mills they employed only 160 men and 160 girls. The powerloom had not yet been introduced and around 3500 men and boys were handloom weavers, out of a total burgh and parish population of just over 20,000. In addition women worked in auxiliary roles to their husband weavers. Handloom weavers also worked in the surrounding parishes of West Fife. Dundee was also dominated by the linen trade. There were thirty flax spinning mills employing 3000 hands, though over half were children and the remainder partly women. Many Dundee weavers were based in factories, the first power loom factory had been set up by the Baxters in 1836, but domestic handloom weaving still continued in Dundee. There were 3000 weavers in each of the Forfarshire towns of Forfar and Kirriemuir. In Clackmannanshire there were woollen spinning mills in Tillicoultry and other towns but the powerloom had not yet been introduced and handloom waving continued.⁴⁴

The flax-linen and woollen workers in the region of the strike for the Charter had a strong tradition of radicalism on which the Chartists were able to draw. The radical tradition was particularly strong, though not confined to, the weavers and flaxdressers.

⁴³ *Northern Star*, 14 November 1840, 30 July, 6, 27 August 1842

⁴⁴ Peter Carmichael, *Dundee Textile History 1790-1885 from the Papers of Peter Carmichael* (Edinburgh, 1969), 1-278; William Gibson, *Reminiscences of Dollar, Tillicoultry, and other Districts* (Edinburgh, 1883), 1-239; Peter Chalmers, *Historical and Statistical Account of Dunfermline* (Edinburgh, 1844), vol.

In both Forfarshire and West Fife a number of Chartist leaders came from the weavers and flaxdressers. These included at Dunfermline Alexander Fleming and Alexander Henderson, who were leaders in the strike, as well as Alexander Halley and William Carnegie. Both Flemming and Carnegie had been office holders in the Dunfermline Working Men's Association in 1839. At Dundee Thomas Anderson, who played a very prominent part in the strike in influencing the Dundee trades conference to vote in favour of a strike for the Charter, was a flax dresser and James Graham was a weaver. The Dunfermline and West Fife weavers had taken a prominent part in the Town's Reform procession in 1832 together with the spinning mill workers. The West Fife weavers were active Chartists. Niffler societies to supply the weavers with a tool used in their looms existed in Dunfermline and at meetings of the Niffler societies the weavers discussed the latest Chartists speeches and compared them to the speeches given by Collins and other national leaders on their visits to Dunfermline. Chartists provided leadership for the weavers. In 1837 a weavers' strike committee was set up with two future prominent Chartists, Alexander Halley, member for the first National Convention, and William Carnegie, as members, and this continued in existence as the operative weavers committee at least up to 1840.⁴⁵ The flaxdressers also had a strong tradition of radicalism. The Dunfermline flaxdressers had provided subscriptions to support Lovett and Collins during their imprisonment and the flaxdressers organised a social event for Collins and McDouall on their visit to Dunfermline on their release from prison. The support for the strike for the Charter among workers in the flax-linen and woollen industries, especially but not only among the handloom weavers and flaxdressers, can be explained by their long radical traditions.

The West Fife and Clackmannanshire district was unusual in the 1830s and early 1840s in that the miners showed more interest in Chartism than was usual. The West Fife miners had taken part in Dunfermline Reform Procession in 1832. In 1840 when P. M. McDouall visited Dunfermline the colliers sent three bands with 100 miners to represent them suggesting an unusual interest in Chartism, in comparison for example with the Ayrshire miners who were widely regarded as among the least interested in Chartism

1, 1-592; *New Statistical Account of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1845), vol. IX, 886-890, vol. XI, 24-29; 'Census Occupations Abstract', *PP* (1844), vol. xxvii

⁴⁵ D. Thomson, *The Weavers' Craft* (Dunfermline, 1903), 330-334, 365; E. Henderson, *Annals of Dunfermline* (Edinburgh, 1878), 643, 646, 632; Alexander Stewart, *Reminiscences of Dunfermline Sixty Years Ago* (Edinburgh, 1886), 115-118; Andrew Carnegie, *Autobiography* (London, 1920), 4-19

out of the entire working classes of Scotland. The Halbeith miners in West Fife had been particularly prominent in the 1840 demonstration for McDouall. By Saturday 20 August 1842, before the strike for the Charter had begun in Dunfermline, Lord Duncan thought that the miners in West Fife would be prepared to act with Dundee in a strike for the Charter. Indeed there had already been links between John Duncan in Dundee and the West Fife miners as on the occasion of McDouall's visit it was John Duncan who had led the miners' demonstration.⁴⁶ Before the strike for the Charter in Dunfermline the weavers had struck over wages in early August and burned the factories of those masters who had reduced wages; the weavers had enlisted the support of the miners in this, but after the Provost and Sheriff had prevailed on the masters to reinstate the old wages the weavers had been detached from the colliers. The colliers had received visits from the Airdrie miners and were planning to come out on strike in late August once their warnings were worked out over wages and weights and in co-operation with the miners of Scotland.⁴⁷ The prior politicisation of the West Fife miners helps explain why Thomas Morrison and the other Dunfermline Chartist leaders were able to step in and bring the miners into the strike for the Charter in West Fife. Likewise the West Fife weavers had not been prepared to continue to act in concert with the miners in a strike merely over miners' grievances once their own wages claims had been met, but once the local Chartists had put forwards the aim of the Charter for the strike the weavers joined in the strike impelled by their tradition of support for Chartism.

Ideology and Concept of the General Strike for the Charter

The ideology articulated during the strike for the Charter in Scotland was shared with the strike in England. Chartism was a British movement in Scotland, and despite certain peculiarities, shared essentially the same ideology. Political monopoly rather than the relation to the means of production was identified in the strike for the Charter in Scotland as the source of society's ills. For example at the meeting at Dunfermline on 23 August the first resolution declared 'that this meeting is of the opinion that class legislation is the sole cause of their severe and long continued sufferings'.⁴⁸ At the Dundee trade delegates meeting on 19 August Thomas Anderson argued that class

⁴⁶ E. Henderson, *Annals of Dunfermline* (Edinburgh, 1878), 632; *True Scotsman*, 17 October, 28 November 1840; PRO HO 45/266, ff. 100-101, Lord Duncan, Dundee, to Sir J. Graham, 20 August 1842

⁴⁷ PRO HO 45/266, ff. 19-30, A. Alison to Sir J. Graham, 10, 11, 12 August 1842

⁴⁸ *Scotsman*, 27 August 1842

legislation was the cause of all their evils.⁴⁹ Class legislation and monopoly prevented the property of the people, their labour, from being protected.

The critique of ‘Old Corruption’ was the predominant ideology articulated in the Scottish strike for the Charter as in the strike in England. The poor were taxed by the government and this went to the parasitic placemen, pensioners and office holders. Fundholders of the national debt were receiving the interest from government stock and money for this came from taxes. The Corn Laws benefited the aristocrats at the expense of the productive. The State Church was oppressive.⁵⁰ In the Scottish strike for the Charter it was the aristocracy, state, government and established Church of Scotland that were identified as the targets of the strike by the local leaders. At speeches in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee the government due to its unjust and oppressive laws was identified as the enemy. For example the first Dunfermline resolution on 23 August declared that the reason class legislation was the cause of their suffering was that ‘it enables the landed aristocracy, who posses a predominance in both Houses of Parliament, to enact laws for their own exclusive benefit, at the expense of the community at large.’⁵¹ In Dundee at the public meeting on 20 August John Duncan urged that they had met ‘to relieve the country of the heaviest load she ever bore, the most bloody designing ministry that ever cursed the country.’⁵² At the Aberdeen meeting on 3 September the Chartist Alexander Henry argued that a system existed which ‘forced the industrious and virtuous working population to pine in hunger, destitution and misery, for the benefit of a debauched and profligate aristocracy, a bloated and avaricious state Church, and an unmeasurable host of fund holding, money grabbing millionaires.’⁵³ The aristocracy, as landlords, were also attacked for their failure to provide poor relief, and the Dundee and Forfar Chartists planned to march en masse around the landholders requesting relief after the march on Forfar. The established Church of Scotland was attacked by Scottish Chartists during strike. This was criticism of the established Church rather than Christianity as such, with Chartist preachers at Dundee and Greenock the most forward in criticising the established

⁴⁹ *Dundee Warden*, 23 August 1842

⁵⁰ J. Belchem, ‘*Orator*’ Hunt: Henry Hunt and English Working-Class Radicalism (Oxford, 1985), 110-111

⁵¹ *Scotsman*, 27 August 1842

⁵² *Dundee Warden*, 23 August 1842

⁵³ *British Statesman*, 10 September 1842

Church. In the strike the ministers of the established Church of Scotland were seen as hangers on of the aristocracy. All they cared about was money and they would change their opinions and even their skin to get money according to Alexander Henry of Aberdeen. This was also linked with the attack on the aristocracy as lay proprietors could appoint ministers instead of the congregation. It was also linked with the failure to give adequate poor relief as the ministers were responsible for relief in rural areas.⁵⁴

A constitutional discourse on the British constitution was present in the Scottish strike. This was based on the English constitution and its history shared through what Linda Colley shows to be the Scots' dual identity as Britons; the English constitution had become the British constitution. The Forfar address of 22 August referred to 'British Liberties'. Alexander Henry at Aberdeen had justified a right to relief from the commentaries of the English jurist William Blackstone as well as from the law of Scotland. Throughout the strike at Chartist meetings it was argued that a constitutional right to discuss grievances at public meetings existed, based on the constitutional rights of Britons, for example the Greenock Chartist condemned the arrest of John Mason for attempting to speak at a public meeting in Staffordshire. The Dundee marchers to Forfar on 23 August carried a white flag, this was mainly a symbol of peace, but it also carried constitutional implications, referring to the popular constitutionalist platform via Hunt's white hat.⁵⁵ Some natural rights imagery was present in the Scottish strike and mixed with popular constitutionalism in an eclectic manner. At Forfar on 22 August the people had a cap of liberty on a pole at the public meeting which agreed on a general strike; the cap of liberty carried both British constitutional and natural rights meanings. At Dundee in March 1842 the unemployed had carried a flag inscribed with the call for the Charter and topped with a tricolour flag with a hatchet, symbolic of French republican principles and of the French Revolution.⁵⁶ However the Scottish tradition of the Scottish Martyrs of the early 1790s was also an important ideological justification for universal suffrage in the strike for the Charter. It was approaching the anniversary of

⁵⁴ *British Statesman*, 10 September 1842

⁵⁵ *British Statesman*; 20 August 1842; Place Collection, Set 9, f. 91; William Kidd, *Memoranda of the Chartist Agitation in Dundee* (Dundee, 1889), 21-71; L. Colley, *Britons* (Yale, 1992), 1-375; J. Belchem, 'Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform in early Nineteenth Century England', *Social History*, 6 (1981), 1-35

⁵⁶ William Kidd, *Memoranda of the Chartist Agitation in Dundee* (Dundee, 1889), 21-71; J. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England, 1790-1850* (New York, 1994), 70-99

the trial and deportation of Muir, Palmer, Gerrald and the other Martyrs of the trials of early 1790s after the holding of the Conventions in Edinburgh. The Dunfermline Chartist issued an appeal for funds for Morrison and Henderson when it seemed they would be tried for sedition, and compared them directly to Scottish Martyrs, their 'cause' and 'crime' being the same.⁵⁷

In Scotland the strike for the People's Charter was not aimed against the middle classes. The strike was to be a traditional radical tactic involving all the industrious people. Where the Chartist leading the strike for the Charter showed hostility to the middle classes it was due to their refusing to help the working men gain their rights or supporting and benefiting from the tyranny of class legislation. There was talk at Greenock about the 'monopolisers of capital.' However in their resolutions the Greenock Chartist went on to accept more orthodox political economy arguing that workmen had a right to an adequate remuneration for their labour and to sell it in the best market, and that they may withdraw it if not adequately remunerated. They were not calling for the whole price of their labour apart from what the capitalist took as his wages for supervision. The argument that labour is the source of all wealth was also made use of in the meetings at Aberdeen, but it was not an Hodgskinite theory aimed at capitalists even in their role in exchange. Instead during the strike the Aberdeen Chartist argued that it was the landlords, aristocracy and Church who took the labourers' wealth and did not mention the capitalist. At the meeting convened by the Edinburgh Chartist it was argued that the masters in Lancashire had reduced wages and so provoked the strike, yet even here this was attributed to a desire to pressure the government for relief from taxes and commercial restrictions. Thus the working and middle classes' interests were seen as being in harmony and were only upset by the lack of the franchise for the working men and consequent bad legislation. Where attacks were made on the middle classes it was for their political role as electors in upholding the government. For example at the Glasgow Chartist public meeting Samuel Kidd blamed the middle classes and 'all other electors' for the distress because they supported a government which passed bad laws.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ *Fifeshire Journal*, 1 September 1842; *British Statesman*, 20 August 1842

⁵⁸ *British Statesman*, 3, 10 September 1842

The betterment of society was expected to come through the gaining of the Charter. The Greenock address to the trades of Scotland argued that 'we are fully convinced that as we can have no safeguard for the protection of the proper reward of labour, so long as the legislative power of this country is fully invested in the hands of those who produce nothing.' The address went on to argue that one class cannot legislate for the benefit of others so there would not be redress of their grievances until they were fully, fairly and freely represented in the House of Commons.⁵⁹ One important way in which the obtaining of the Charter in the strike was to bring betterment was through just poor law relief. The right to relief had been a constant issue among the Chartists in the strike districts in the months leading up to the strike and during August itself. Poor relief was an issue in Scotland though in different terms from England. The *Poor Law Amendment Act* did not apply to Scotland but the Scottish courts did not recognise a right of relief for the able bodied unemployed. The Chartists in the summer of 1842, for example at Greenock, Aberdeen and Dundee, argued that the Scottish law gave the able bodied unemployed a right to food and subsistence and that courts, magistrates and clergy were misrepresenting the law of Scotland by denying relief to the able bodied unemployed. The enactment of the Charter would bring a fair administration of the law which would in the Chartist's view in Scotland restore the supposed right under the laws to relief for the able bodied unemployed.⁶⁰

The obtaining of the Charter by the strike would also better society by leading to the repeal of the Corn Laws. There was strong support for Corn Law repeal among the Scottish Chartist strike leaders, as being in the interest of both the working and mercantile classes. At Dunfermline the Chartist strike leader Thomas Morrison was a strong free trader believing that repeal would increase the demand for labour rather than reduce wages and denying that there was any connection between the price of provisions and wages levels.⁶¹ Morrison argued that the Corn Laws benefited only the aristocracy and that the manufacturing interest, both employers and employees, would benefit from its repeal. The rejection by the House of Lords of Lord Radnor's motion to repeal the Corn Laws and all restrictions on trade was an important issue at the Chartist public meetings during the strike at Edinburgh and Glasgow. In July John Duncan of

⁵⁹ *British Statesman*, 3 September 1842

⁶⁰ *Northern Star*, 30 April 1842; *British Statesman*, 6, 20 August 1842; William Kidd, *Memoranda of the Chartist Agitation in Dundee* (Dundee, 1889), 21-71

⁶¹ *True Scotsman*, 20 March 1839

Dundee had argued strongly for the Charter in order to get rid of bad legislation particularly the restrictions on commerce. The third resolution adopted in the strike at Dundee on 20 August argued that the employers could not give higher wages under the present legislation, 'After hearing the statements of the employers in reference to their inability to raise wages, it is the opinion of this meeting that the only means that can be adopted to enable employers to give a fair remuneration to the employed is to strike for the People's Charter.'⁶² A Parliament and government elected under universal suffrage and no property qualifications would repeal the Corn Laws. Cheaper food prices and the end of indirect taxation would increase the home demand for manufactured goods and so boost the manufacturers' productivity without them having to cut wages, and this increased home demand would create more employment. However the Scottish Chartist strike leaders' arguments were not solely based on home consumption. For example the Dundee linen trade had the USA as an important market and John Duncan argued for repeal of the Corn Laws in order to boost foreign trade and so increase the demand for employment leading to higher wages.⁶³

Many of those taking part in the strike for the Charter undoubtedly were unhappy with wages, unemployment and poor relief. It is true that wages and unemployment were an issue in Dundee before and during the strike and that the reports the delegates made from the mills and manufactories in Dundee at the trades convention on 19 August were less unambiguously for the aim of the Charter in a strike than the final vote of the delegates suggested. It is also true that weavers' and colliers' wages were an issue in Dunfermline before the political strike began on 23 August. But this does not detract from the aim of the strike being the Charter. It was not simply a case that people could want both the Charter and better wages; the link was more intimate than this. The strikers attributed low wages and lack of poor relief to bad legislation. Thomas Anderson's opinion at the Dundee trade conference was that 'there was an undercurrent working in the minds of the people that enabled them to perceive the real cause of their distress (class legislation), that if they once turned out on the plea of wages in Dundee, the question would soon merge, as it had already done at Manchester, into a political question, and that they would not return to work until they had obtained their rights, the

⁶² *Dundee Warden*, 23 August 1842

⁶³ *British Statesman*, 9 July, 27 August, 3 September 1842; *Dundee Warden*, 23 August 1842

Charter.⁶⁴ It was poverty as well as a desire for political freedom for its own sake that had brought them out on strike; but this poverty was attributed to political causes. The strikers wanted both political liberty for its own sake and for the benefits in terms of prosperity that it would bring.⁶⁵

The general strike for the Charter in Scotland must be seen as a traditional radical tactic such as that outlined by Thomas Attwood on his visit to Glasgow in 1838. In Dunfermline the strike was linked with a run on the Savings Bank; echoing the 'Go for Gold' of the Reform Bill agitation. Likewise in Dundee John Duncan recommended a run on the Savings Banks during the strike and the setting up of people's banks on a mutual understanding between the working and middle classes to ruin the bankers and thus force them to call for the Charter. In Aberdeen proposals for a strike were coupled with abstention from consumable goods which carried excise so that the government's resources would be destroyed. The general strike for the Charter in Scotland was the carrying out, three years late, of the 1839 general strike or 'sacred month'.⁶⁶ By the early summer of 1842 the Chartists in the Dundee, Clackmannanshire and Dunfermline districts believed that they had the edge in public opinion over the ACLL and emerging Complete Suffragists. They believed that they had built up a public opinion, that once directed, the government could not withstand; as was suggested by the supposed example of 1832. Thus the general strike for the Charter was to be a way of directing this public opinion and presenting it in a unified form which the government could not withstand. The result would be the resignation of the government, once it had lost its nerve and felt it had lost the complete confidence of the country, and the appointment by the Queen of ministers who would enact the Charter.⁶⁷

The general strike for the Charter in Scotland was particularly peaceful in nature compared not only to the Scottish miners' strike and to the weavers' and colliers' outbreak in Dunfermline earlier in August, but also to the strike in parts of England. The peaceful, and in the view of the Chartist leaders, constitutional and legal, nature of the

⁶⁴ *Dundee Warden*, 30 August 1842

⁶⁵ *Dundee Warden*, 23 August 1842; PRO HO 45/266, ff. 69-70, Report by the Sheriff of Fife to the Lord Advocate, August 1842

⁶⁶ *British Statesman*, 3, 10 September 1842; *Fifeshire Journal*, 1 September 1842; *Dundee Warden*, 30 August 1842

⁶⁷ *Northern Star*, 23 April 1842

strike movement was insisted upon in many of the speeches and resolution during the strike for the Charter in Scotland with frequent appeals not to harm persons or property and no mention of arming. The first Dunfermline resolution on 23 August stated that they ‘voluntarily resolve to abstain from labour as a legal, peaceful and efficient means for putting to an end these intolerable evils.’ The peaceful nature of the general strike was again emphasised in the second resolution at Dunfermline which declared their deep conviction that ‘unless the people scrupulously abstain from all violence and outrage, and inviolably maintain the existing laws, they cannot succeed in wresting their rights from their oppressors.’ They pledged themselves to ‘act strictly in accordance with the laws, and to prevent or repress all violations of them to the utmost of our power on the part of others.’⁶⁸ Similarly at Dundee on 20 August John Duncan warned that ‘we have no wars to wage against the rich or against property...I hope wisdom and prudence will govern you...we wish to do no harm to any human being.’ The strike was not to be an excuse for a physical confrontation with the authorities. He had been warned that the magistrates were determined to act with rigour and the military were to be called out on the first day ‘that the final crash may come,’ but he did not want a battle; instead he advised them ‘to be forewarned is to be forearmed. I advise you to keep the peace, be not seduced to break the law, for at present it is stronger than you, it would be to make it your master.’⁶⁹

The processions in West Fife and Forfarshire were meant as shows of passive resistance rather than of revolutionary violence (though of course they were ‘revolutionary’ if that term is defined as hoping to seek political change by peaceful means); they were displays of ‘moral power’ in the words of the Dunfermline committee. This was the basis of the grand demonstration of Dunfermline turnouts on 25 August when between 8000 and 20,000 met at Crossgates, of the meeting at Devonside in Clackmannanshire on 22 August, and partly of the ‘Pilgrimage of Folly’. The ‘Pilgrimage of Folly’ was viewed by the Tory press as the nearest thing to revolutionary action in the strike; though its leaders’ motives were not revolutionary if that term be defined as seeking change through violence. There was no use of force on the march, a white flag was carried, and the marchers once in Forfar merely held a public meeting.⁷⁰ The peaceful

⁶⁸ *Fifeshire Journal*, 1 September 1842; *Scotsman*, 27 August 1842

⁶⁹ *Dundee Warden*, 23 August 1842

⁷⁰ *Fifeshire Journal*, 1 September 1842; *Dundee Warden*, 23, 30 August 1842; William Kidd, *Memoranda of the Chartist Agitation in Dundee* (Dundee, 1889), 21-71

nature of the strike in some instances extended to a taking over of the governing role which frightened the authorities so much in Lancashire. At Dunfermline the masons, bakers and butchers applied to Morrison for permission to continue essential work and this was granted. At the Clackmannanshire meeting on 22 August at Devonside the assembled people pledged themselves as special constables for the occasion at the request of the Chartist speakers.⁷¹

In sharp contrast there was a high amount of violence in the Scottish miners' strike with assaults on the police, intimidation and violence against strikebreakers, theft of food from fields, and finally the murder by pistol shot of a strikebreaker.⁷² Wright and Wilson assumed that the peaceful nature of the Scottish strike for the Charter did not need any explaining as they were writing within a tradition that viewed Chartism in Scotland as peculiarly devoted to rational, sober, moral activity. Clarke has challenged this view of Scottish Chartism at least for 1839 and has shown that Scottish Chartism was in the mainstream with the English movement in 1839 in its support for ulterior measures including arming against tyranny, in support for the General Convention, and in support for Feargus O'Connor.⁷³ Clarke can be criticised for exaggerating the extent to which Scottish Chartists were prepared to use force in 1839; declaring in favour of holding arms or even actually possessing arms was quite different from being prepared to use them. In fact Wilson had already admitted that the majority of Scottish Chartists held similar views on moral and physical force to those in England. By 1842 there was less willingness to use the language of menace in England after the failure of the Newport rising of November 1839 and the Yorkshire risings in early 1840, and this was also true in Scotland. However in Scotland as in England the constitutional right to resist tyranny with force was maintained with a motion by Patrick Brewster for unconditional obedience to the authorities being decisively rejected at a Scottish Convention in Glasgow in January 1842 when a resolution was passed to use 'legal and constitutional means'; the Scottish Chartists did not repudiate the right to use defensive force if the state attacked them and thus in 1842 as well as in 1839 Scottish Chartism was in the

⁷¹ *British Statesman*, 27 August 1842

⁷² PRO HO 45/266, ff. 8-18, A. Alison to Sir J. Graham, 4, 6, 8 August 1842; *Scotsman*, 28 September, 5 October, 26 November, 1842; *Times*, 18 November 1842; *Glasgow Saturday Post*, 5 November 1842

⁷³ A. Wilson, *The Chartist Movement in Scotland* (Manchester, 1970), 181-198; Leslie Wright, *Scottish Chartism* (Edinburgh, 1951), 13-155; T. Clarke, 'Early Chartism in Scotland' in T. M. Devine (ed.), *Conflict and Stability in Scottish Society, 1700-1850* (Edinburgh, 1990), 106-121; W. Hamish Fraser, *Scottish Popular Politics, from Radicalism to Labour* (Edinburgh, 2000), 48-70

mainstream with the English Chartist movement. Of course individuals varied in their attitudes. Morrison and a significant number of Dunfermline Chartists sided with Patrick Brewster of Paisley in their rejection of violence or the threat of violence in any circumstance; although in the West Fife region outside Dunfermline the majority of Chartists were O'Connorites. In the other areas of the strike for the Charter the vast majority of Chartists were strong O'Connorites particularly in Dundee and Clackmannanshire.⁷⁴ Nevertheless all acted in unison in 1842 to ensure that the strike for the Charter was strictly peaceful without any desire to force the government to use repression which would be the occasion for an armed insurrection or even to use any language of menace. In the light of Clarke's reinterpretation of the nature of Scottish Chartism in 1839/40 it remains to be explained why the strike for the Charter in Scotland was so peaceful.

The peaceful nature of the strike for the Charter was due in part to the local Chartist activists' belief that they had a chance, however uncertain, of winning the support of the reform-minded middle classes so long as the strike remained strictly peaceful and did not threaten property. The Scottish Chartist strike leaders felt that middle class support was a realistic proposition given joint support for Corn Law repeal and increasing support for Complete Suffrage in Scotland among the radical portion of the middle classes. John Duncan had outlined this strategy in July when he told a meeting that 'Agitation and a thorough union with the honest portion of the middle class' were necessary for them to gain their rights and that 'that union may be effected, it was such a union that carried the Reform Bill.'⁷⁵ There was a crisis in the country and the working classes and productive middle classes all felt something must be done. In Dundee in early August the Chartists felt that the trade depression was bringing over the middle classes and shop keepers. Dunfermline had a number of radicals on the town council and the Provost, Morris, a manufacturer, had shown strong sympathy to the Chartists. In Dundee the prominent Leaguers the Baxter brothers and Alexander Easson, among the manufacturers, had come out in support of Complete Suffrage.⁷⁶ Scottish Chartist support for repeal of the Corn Laws made an alliance between middle and

⁷⁴ *Northern Star*, 8, 15 January 1842

⁷⁵ *British Statesman*, 9 July 1842

⁷⁶ *Dundee Warter*, 23 August 1842; William Kidd, *Memoranda of the Chartist Agitation in Dundee* (Dundee, 1889), 21-71

working class radicals more easily achievable than in England.⁷⁷ It was to attract middle class support in the circumstances of 1842 that the Scottish strike for the Charter was characterised by what Morrison and the Dunfermline cessation from labour committee described as ‘passive resistance’. The people were ‘showing the power of passive resistance’ and this was specifically linked to the hope that the people will ‘now receive the support of all the middle class *professing* opinions in favour of equality.’⁷⁸

This desire for middle class support was evinced by the Scottish Chartists throughout the strike for the People’s Charter. At the Dundee meeting on Saturday 20 August the second resolution declared that ‘the mercantile and working classes’ were in many points closely connected in their interests, and therefore appealed to the employers to ‘cast aside all doubts as to our objects and at once to come forward and join with us their exertions to put an end to all unjust power, and by the establishment of justice to secure the good of all.’ The second resolution went on to offer to the employers the ‘right hand of fellowship in the earnest hope that they will accept it, and offer theirs to us, and thus by a union of sympathy and action cut off all the curses that lead to tumult and discord and build upon a lasting basis the peace and prosperity of our country.’ At the same meeting the Chartist leader Robert Mitchell was able to declare that they had not come there to advocate for wages, but for the ‘sacred principles of justice and humanity. All classes were declaring for a change, the middle classes were crying for it, though they stood aloof. But many of them were on the eve of bankruptcy, and would come forward and strike the blow, if they were certain that the blow would be followed up.’⁷⁹ The aim of the Aberdeen Chartists’ proposals for providing supplies during a strike was to avoid collisions with the authorities caused by the stealing of food and thus allay middle class fears over public order and the safety of property so as to enable the middle classes to support a general strike; they claimed that many of the middle classes, particularly shopkeepers, had already pledged their support if their proposal was carried out and would continue to supply customers on credit.⁸⁰

The Chartists did not receive the middle class support they had hoped for. Even in Dunfermline and Dundee there was distrust of the middle classes in their political role.

⁷⁷ P. Pickering and A. Tyrrell, *The People’s Bread* (Leicester, 2000), 48-66

⁷⁸ *Fifeshire Journal*, 1 September 1842

⁷⁹ *Dundee Warder*, 23 August 1842

⁸⁰ *British Statesman*, 10 September 1842

In Dunfermline at least there seems to have been fair contributions made to the strike funds by the middle classes though it is difficult to know how far these were given in order to buy a quiet life. However in fact there seems to have been more middle class sympathy for the miners' strike than for the strike for the Charter, judging by the press, due to the publicity given to the many blatantly unfair practices the masters or contractors practised over the weighing of coal and reductions for small amounts of stone unavoidably brought up with the coal. There was particularly strong support for the miners among shopkeepers who in areas such as Airdrie and Coatbridge were dependent on miners' custom for their income. The Ayrshire miners were also able to rely on charity at least until the outrages in November.

Another important reason for the peaceful nature of the Scottish strike for the Charter was that the Chartist activists had direct control over the rank and file strikers during the processions. The attitude of the Scottish strike leaders was not all that peculiar when compared with for example the speeches made by leaders of the strike in Yorkshire and the English East Midlands. The Chartist strike leaders in both Yorkshire and Scotland in their speeches stressed that the strike must be peaceful; but in Yorkshire there was quite a lot of violence among the rank and file despite these warnings. In Scotland the strike was on a smaller scale so the leaders were normally present on the scene to restrain the men. For example the procession which went around Dundee on 23 August was attended by the main Chartist leaders and did not go wholesale into the factories but instead sent a deputation of eight inside to ask the workers to turn out and did not use force or intimidation. Even when confronted by the police when parading around Dundee, although they refused to disperse when the *Riot Act* was read, the strikers followed John Duncan's advice and simply tried to evade the police. They did not attempt to stone the police which was the common response in Yorkshire. In contrast in Yorkshire the Chartist activists who initiated the strike were mainly present at public meetings, but the turnout crowds were very large, marched over a wide area and constantly split up to visit as many places as possible. When the turnout crowds actually went into the mills in Yorkshire to pull the plugs or were confronted by the military they were directed either by men from a lower tier of command coming from among the turnout crowds themselves who were less fussy about not using force, or by those Chartist activists who were more ready to use force than were the main Chartist leaders who had initiated the strike at public meetings. Of course the Scottish leaders could not

always keep control. The Dundee Chartist strike leaders lost partial control over the marchers to Forfar when they stole turnips against the advice of the leaders and the march then became sadly disorganised.⁸¹

The unwillingness of the local authorities in the areas of the strike for the Charter to use more force than was absolutely necessary also contributed to the peaceable nature of the strike for the Charter in Scotland. Initially the authorities in Forfarshire and West Fife were alarmed by the strike for the Charter. This was particularly the case in Forfarshire where the Earl of Airlie, Lord Duncan and the Provost of Dundee believed that all the towns in Forfarshire would strike if the strike in Dundee was successful. From Forfarshire the Earl of Airlie reported that 'there can be no doubt that a very bad spirit exists among the lower orders in all the towns' and that he did not believe there was 'a town or village...where Chartism does not prevail to a very great extent.' The authorities in Arbroath were in a great state of alarm.⁸² Whether a situation became violent or not was largely at the discretion of the authorities in how they chose to respond. It would seem that the impression that the Chartists were not intending violence influenced the authorities on the scene to act with restraint. For example the magistrates at Forfar allowed the Dundee marchers to stay in the town, once they were convinced they were peaceable, to be fed by the inhabitants.⁸³ The magistrates did act firmly. Public meetings organised by the Chartist leaders of the strike, such as one in West Fife on 29 August, were declared illegal. The Queen's Proclamation was issued, as were separate proclamations by the magistrates against unlawful assemblages. The Magistrates enrolled special constables in the Forfarshire and Clackmannanshire towns and in West Fife, and in Dundee the most loyal workers in the factories were enrolled as special constables. The Chartist leaders of the strike in Dunfermline and Dundee were arrested. However, unlike in the strikes in England, no use was made of the military, and the magistrates felt able to make do with the special constables and rural police. This was despite the fact that the military were already stationed in Dunfermline following an earlier outbreak at the start of August, 160 foot were already stationed in Dundee, and the military had also been brought into Clackmannan at the request of the

⁸¹ *Dundee Warden*, 30 August 1842; *Scotsman*, 28 December 1842; William Kidd, *Memoranda of the Chartist Agitation in Dundee* (Dundee, 1889), 21-70

⁸² PRO HO 45/266, f. 98, Earl of Airlie to Sir J. Graham, 23 August 1842; PRO HO 45/266, f. 106, Earl of Airlie to Sir J. Graham, 26 August 1842

⁸³ William Kidd, *Memoranda of the Chartist Agitation in Dundee* (Dundee, 1889), 21-70

magistrates. The failure of the Dundee magistrates to use the military was even made a matter of enquiry by the Home Secretary.⁸⁴ Undoubtedly it was the patently peaceful nature of the strike for the Charter in Scotland which influenced the magistrates not to call on military assistance, although available, and this in turn prevented the escalation of violence which took place in the strikes in England, for example at Halifax.

In conclusion the local Chartist activists in eastern Scotland as in the West Riding of Yorkshire and the English Midlands had attempted from the local platform to revive the general strike or 'sacred month' 'ulterior measure' of the platform agitation after the rejection of the 1842 National Petition and the tardiness of the national Chartist leadership to propose firm ulterior measures from the national platform and following the success of the Lancashire Chartist activists in bringing large numbers out on strike for the Charter. The strike in Scotland bears great similarity to the strike in the English Midlands in that there were really two separate strike movements in 1842. The first was a miners' strike associated largely with miners' industrial grievances with little Chartist leadership. The second was the strike for the Charter. The two were not completely discrete as the West Fife and Clackmannanshire miners were part of the strike for Charter before remaining out over miners' grievances, a Chartist Miners' Association had been in existence since at least January 1842 in Lanarkshire which provided some of the leaders of the Lanarkshire miner's strike, and resolutions for the Charter were not completely absent from the miners' strike in mid-August. Overall Young's and Duncan's assessment of the strike for the Charter in Scotland is found unconvincing. In its lack of trade society involvement the strike for the Charter in Scotland shared more similarity with the strike in the West Riding of Yorkshire and the English Midlands, than with the strike in Lancashire. It was the local Chartists who began the strike for the Charter and pushed for the Charter as aim. The Chartists organised the trades conferences which met at Greenock, Dundee and Aberdeen suggesting that Young's and Duncan's view of an insurgent trade union movement being held back by a cautious Chartist leadership is inaccurate. The Dundee trades conference highlighted by Young was in no way the equivalent of the Manchester *Great Trades Delegate Conference*. Likewise the failure of the Glasgow trades to become involved in the strike, despite efforts to involve them by the Greenock Chartists and delegates from the Manchester

⁸⁴ *Dundee Warden*, 23, 30 August 1842; *Fifeshire Journal*, 1 September 1842; PRO HO 103/9, f. 474, Sir J. Graham to the Lord Advocate, 31 August 1842

NCA Conference, underlines the Chartist rather than trades leadership of the strike for the Charter. Prior planning was undertaken during the intervening period between the arrival of the news of the strike in Lancashire and the start of the strike for the Charter in Scotland. The Chartists maintained and tried to spread the strike for the Charter by public meetings, addresses, resolutions and delegates. Most importantly the Chartists set up Cessation from Labour and Correspondence Committees to direct and spread the strike. It was these Chartist created and led committees rather than trades conferences which provided the nearest equivalent to the leadership role of the Manchester *Great Trades Delegate Conference* in Lancashire, again highlighting the Chartist rather than trades leadership of the strike for the Charter in Scotland. Prior support for the 1839 general strike or 'sacred month' among the local Chartists and a desire by the local Chartists in West Fife, Clackmannanshire and Forfarshire to set an example for the rest of Scotland goes some way to explain why the strike for the Charter occurred in these areas. However equally important was the strong radical tradition among the woollen and linen textile workers in Forfarshire, West Fife and Clackmannanshire, particularly but not only among the handloom weavers and flax dressers. Handworkers such as these could not hope for improvement from further mechanisation and instead could only hope for improvement by legislation in their favour, for example minimum wage legislation, following organic reform of the constitution. In addition there was a level of prior support for Chartism among the miners of the West Fife and Clackmannanshire coal field which was unusual among the Scottish miners and helps explain why they gave support to strike for the Charter rather than merely supporting a strike over miners' grievances.

The ideology expressed in the Scottish strike for the Charter, as in the strike in the Northwest England, the West Riding of Yorkshire and the English Midlands, was that of William Cobbett's criticism of 'Old Corruption'. Political monopoly rather than the relation to the means of production was identified in the strike in Scotland as the source of society's evils. In the Scottish strikes for the Charter it was the aristocracy and the state that were identified as the targets of the strike by the local leaders. In Scotland the strike for the People's Charter was not aimed at the middle classes. The strike was to be a traditional radical tactic involving all the industrious people. The Scottish Chartist strike leaders hoped that the strike would force the government to resign or the Queen to dismiss her ministers and appoint those who would enact the Charter. In the strike for

the Charter the betterment of society was expected to come through the gaining of the Charter in the strike. It was to be a peaceful means of achieving political change. The attempt to collapse into one another the miners' strike and the strike for the Charter and to exaggerate trades influence in starting and spreading the strike in Scotland also fails to account for the peaceable nature of the strike for the Charter in Scotland. A contrast emerges between the miners' strike and the strike for the Charter in that there was little, in fact almost no, violence in the strike for the Charter compared to considerable violence in the miners' strike. This peaceful nature would also be hard to explain if there really had been trades society leadership of the strike as the Scottish trades were noted for the violence they brought to their trade disputes. The strike for the Charter's peaceful nature was due to the strong Chartist, rather than trade union, leadership and to the tactical decisions made by the Chartist leaders of the strike. Given strong support for repeal of the Corn Laws among the Scottish Chartists as well as the radical middle classes and given the increasing tendency during the depression of 1842 for the radical element of the middle classes to move towards Complete Suffrage the local Chartist leaders of the strike felt that they had a realistic chance of winning middle class support for the strike so long they could guarantee that the strike would remain peaceable. However this support was not forthcoming and the Scottish Chartist activists themselves allowed the strike to peter out at the end of August once it was clear that the strike for the Charter in England had failed.

CHAPTER FIVE

WALES AND THE STRIKE FOR THE CHARTER

The strike for the Charter in Wales in August 1842, while exciting considerable attention in the London and provincial newspapers due to memories of the Newport Rising of 1839, was far less significant in extent than the strike for the Charter in the Northwest, the West Riding of Yorkshire, the English Midlands and parts of Scotland. The strike was confined to the Merthyr district of South Wales, a centre of iron production and coal mining, and Wales' premier industrial district. Local Chartist activists organised and led the strike from Wednesday 17 August in response to the news of the strike for the Charter in England and called the strike off on Wednesday 24 August after news had arrived of the disintegration of the strike for the Charter in Manchester.

The most significant contributions to the historiography on the strike in Merthyr are those of Morgan and Jordan. Morgan characterised the strike in the Merthyr district as being merely a matter of a wage dispute and as unconnected with the Merthyr Chartists.¹ Jordan recognised the political nature of the strike but asserted, without presenting any evidence, that the strike in the Merthyr district was part of a longstanding national plan by the Chartists for a general strike.² The chapter will suggest that a better understanding of the strike in Wales can be reached if we position ourselves between these two arguments. The strike was a political strike for the Charter organised by local Chartist activists from the local platform but it was not the result of a long-term plan and rather was a response by local Chartist activists to the news of the strike for the Charter in Manchester. The strike in Merthyr differed significantly from the strike in most of England because in Merthyr the miners were committed to a strike for the Charter rather than for miners' wage grievances.

Merthyr Tydfil had a long nonconformist radical tradition stretching back beyond the Merthyr Reform Bill riot of June 1831. There is evidence of radical underground

¹ W. Morgan, 'Chartism and Industrial Unrest in South Wales in the 1840s', *National Library of Wales Journal*, X (1957), 8-16

² H. Jordan, *The 1842 General Strike in South Wales* (London, 1983), 1-22

activity in Merthyr in 1800 and Merthyr shared briefly in the post-war radical revival.³ That the strike for the Charter should take place in the Merthyr district was a reflection of the region's importance as the main stronghold of organised Chartism in Wales after the failure of the Newport insurrection of 1839 when miners under the leadership of the Chartist John Frost had been dispersed by troops when they marched on Newport perhaps as a first step in the creation of a Chartist republic. The Merthyr colliers and ironworkers had not taken part in the Newport insurrection. The view that the rank and file in Merthyr were more committed to moral force than the Monmouthshire Chartists does not seem entirely convincing. The failure of the Merthyr district Chartists to take part in the Newport Rising may have been due in part at least to their being kept in the dark by their Chartist leaders such as Morgan Williams who were committed to non-violent agitation. However it may also have been due to John Frost's changes of plan. Merthyr delegates had been present at the initial meetings when it was decided that the Merthyr men should march to Breconshire, however Frost later revised his plans and Merthyr delegates did not attend the later meetings. Certainly some coal and ironworkers in the Merthyr region stopped work on the Saturday night before the rising and were thought to be acting suspiciously.⁴ By the summer of 1842 Chartist associations were reviving in Monmouthshire and other parts of Wales. However none could match the strength of the Merthyr district where the National Charter Association (NCA) took very firm root. The district had eight or nine lecturers of its own. Morgan Williams, the Merthyr Chartist leader, was able to bring over 23,000 signatures to the National Petition from Merthyr and Aberdare to the National Convention in April 1842 and more signatures were sent up to London later in April. A crowd of 10,000 accompanied him when he left for the National Convention in April 1842.⁵

Much of the support for Chartism came from the miners and ironworkers. However support also came from the artisans and shopkeepers of Merthyr. The Chief Constable of the Glamorgan police, Captain C. J. Napier, believed every other shopkeeper in Merthyr was a Chartist at heart. The leaders of Merthyr Chartism were linked, in many

³ G. A. Williams, *The Merthyr Rising* (London, 1978); D. J. V. Jones, *Before Rebecca: Popular Protests in Wales, 1793-1835* (London, 1973), 28, 135

⁴ D. J. V. Jones, *The Last Rising: the Newport Insurrection of 1839* (Oxford, 1985), 85-229; D. Williams, *John Frost* (Cardiff, 1939), 195-239; D. Williams, 'Chartism in Wales', in A. Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), 220-248

⁵ *Northern Star*, 23 April 1842

cases, by shared Protestant nonconformity and a commitment to educational improvement. Activists included miners such as William Miles, Evan Rees, David Rees, and William James, all officers of the Merthyr Tydfil Chartist Association. However artisans and small masters also figured prominently, such as the blacksmiths Matthew John, David John senior and David John junior, the cooper Henry Thomas, and the weaver David Ellis. A number of Nonconformist ministers such as David John senior, Unitarian Minster and publisher of the Chartist newspaper *Udgorn Cymru*, were prominent activists, as were shopkeepers such as William Gould, a grocer, and John Balis, a confectioner. Morgan Williams, clothier and former publisher of the Chartist newspaper the *Advocate and Merthyr Free Press*, was the leading activist not only in Merthyr but in South Wales as a whole and indeed was elected to the NCA Executive in June 1842. He was committed to peaceful agitation and moral improvement, but was also a firm supporter of Feargus O'Connor who had dropped the language of menace after his release from prison in 1841.⁶

That the strike for the Charter in Wales was confined to the large Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare district of Glamorgan in South Wales was a reflection partly of the district being, along with the neighbouring iron and colliery district of Monmouthshire, the premier industrial region in Wales. In 1841 at least 12,800 persons were employed in the iron works and collieries in the Merthyr Tydfil district. This included around 5190 at Dowlais works, owned by Sir John Guest, about 1900 at Pendarran, 3000 at Cyfarthfa, owned by William Crawshay, and 2400 at Plymouth works, owned by the Magistrate Anthony Hill. The town of Merthyr also included numbers of artisans and shopkeepers. At this time the total population of the Merthyr Tydfil parish was around 35,500. In fact Merthyr was the largest town in Wales.⁷

The strike in Merthyr was organised and led by the local Chartist activists. They organised the meetings and proposed the resolutions which began and maintained the

⁶ *Northern Star*, 11 June 1842; D. J. V. Jones, 'Chartism in Welsh Communities', *Welsh Historical Review*, VI, 3 (1973), 243-261; A. V. John, 'The Chartist Endurance, Industrial South Wales 1840-68', *Morganwg*, XV (1971), 23-49; D. J. V. Jones, *Chartism and the Chartists* (London, 1973); D. Smith (ed.), *A People and a Proletariat: Essays in the History of Wales* (London, 1980); D. J. V. Jones, 'Chartism at Merthyr', *Bulletin of Celtic Studies*, XXIV (1972), 230-245

⁷ Sir Thomas Phillips, *The Language, Social Condition, Moral Character and Religious Opinions of the People of Wales* (London, 1849), 1-55; 'Report of the Commissioners for Inquiring into the Employment and Condition of Children in Mines and Manufactories', *PP* (1842), 634, 635; 'Census Occupations Abstract', *PP* (1844), vol. xxvii

strike and finally, admitting its failure, proposed the return to work. Morgan, in his article on the strike, was unwise in his conclusion that the local Chartists did not instigate and lead the strike.⁸ The speakers and chairman at the meeting which began the strike on the afternoon of 17 August, which had been called by a handbill put up on 15 August advertising a meeting to memorialise the Queen to recall Parliament in the present crisis, were local Chartist activists. The chairman was either David Morgan, a shoemaker, or David Jones, a cordwainer, both of whom were Chartist activists. The speakers, who proposed and seconded the resolutions, were Chartist activists. These included William Miles, miner and officer of the Merthyr Chartist Association, David Ellis, weaver and officer of the Chartist Association, Thomas Evans, a miner and Chartist activist, Evan Rees, a collier and officer of the Chartist Association, and David Davies, a smith and secretary of the Merthyr Chartist Association.⁹ At a strike meeting early in the morning on 18 August the main speaker was William Miles.¹⁰ It was the local Chartist activists who on 19 August organised a procession to Dowlais to make a show of strength and to seek support from the Monmouthshire miners.¹¹ At a large meeting on the morning of 22 August in the Chartist room at Caedraw, to decide whether to continue the strike, the chairman was the Chartist activist Thomas Pugh.¹²

William Miles was the main speaker at most of the meetings. There were complaints among the Chartists that their leading orators, such as the Unitarian Minister David John senior and the Unitarian school master David Evans, did not speak. Neither did Morgan Williams speak at any of the meetings. However at several meetings held by the Chartists on the evening of 19 August and the morning of 20 August Morgan Williams attended and during the strike agitation he was, according to Chief Constable Napier and the Marquis of Bute, receiving letters from the North of England and issuing orders to the men under him as to what subjects they should discuss to keep up the agitation and how they were to proceed.¹³

⁸ W. Morgan, 'Chartism and Industrial Unrest in South Wales in the 1840s', *National Library of Wales Journal*, X (1957), 13-16

⁹ *Glamorgan, Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 20 August 1842; *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 20 August 1842

¹⁰ *Glamorgan, Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 20 August 1842

¹¹ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 6 September 1842

¹² *Glamorgan, Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 27 August 1842

¹³ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 6 September 1842

The Merthyr Chartist activists not only deliberately started the strike but also gave it the aim of the enactment of the People's Charter; although the aim of the strike to pressure the government into enacting the Charter was obscured at the beginning of the strike by the tactics of the Chartist activists. Morgan, in his article on the strike at Merthyr, was misled when he characterised the strike as a dispute over wages.¹⁴ The Chartist activists began the strike on 17 and 18 August by calling for a strike for the wages of 1840. The initial call for the wages of 1840 was a tactical device. Once enthusiasm for a strike had been generated they intended to show the men that it was impossible for the masters to raise wages, and that as class legislation was the cause of oppression and distress, the strike must be for the People's Charter. The Chartists proceeded to convince the men on 18 August that it was impossible for the iron masters to raise wages due to the state of the iron trade. On 19 August the Chartist activists put forwards the true aim of the strike, the enactment by Parliament of the People's Charter in order to remove class legislation as the only solution to oppression and distress. The Merthyr magistrates, Chief Constable Napier, and the Marquis of Bute were all clear that the true aim of the strike was the Charter, that 'the real object of these assemblies is to obtain the Charter, and the attempt to induce the great body of workmen to strike under the hope of obtaining the same rate of wages as was paid in the year 1840 is but a means to the end.'¹⁵

At the meeting which started the strike on the afternoon of 17 August it was proposed that at the next days meeting they should consider the resolution 'to form a deputation to meet their masters to propose to them that unless the wages of the workmen are immediately raised to the standard of 1840, a strike at all the establishments in the district will be the consequence.'¹⁶ Four resolutions were also passed at the meeting. The first three resolutions stated that it was absolutely necessary to enquire into the unparalleled distress prevailing in Merthyr and its vicinity, that workmen could not possibly support themselves and families unless they had the same wages for their labour as they had two years previously, and that it was much better for the workmen to be idle without sufficient quantity of provisions than to be toiling by working without the common necessities of life. However the fourth resolution, moved and seconded by

¹⁴ Walter Morgan, 'Chartism and Industrial Unrest in South Wales in the 1840s', *National Library of Wales Journal*, X (1957), 13-16

¹⁵ PRO HO 45/265, f. 36, A. Hill to HO, Merthyr, 21 August 1842

¹⁶ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 34-35, A. Hill and E. L. Richards to HO, Merthyr, 17 August 1842

the Chartist activists William Miles and David Ellis, revealed the activists' tactics, of showing the cause of distress to be class legislation which could only be solved by the obtaining of the People's Charter. They resolved that 'it is almost impossible for the ironmasters to make any advance of wages to their men at this present low price of iron.'¹⁷ The Marquis of Bute was quite correct in his appraisal of the Chartist activists' aims when he wrote that 'the state of wages is a mere pretext, as indeed is evident from the contradictory speeches of the local agitators.'¹⁸

This tactic was followed through on 18 August. At the meeting very early in the morning on 18 August the Chartist activists William Miles and Evan Rees moved the resolution that they should send a deputation to the masters of the iron works to ask them to increase wages, and if they should fail they would stand out and ask the shopkeepers to support them. The resolution was passed. At a meeting early in the afternoon of 18 August Evan Rees put the resolution that no more work should be performed until the wages of 1840 be had. The meeting formed into a procession to the Cyfarthfa works, and a deputation met the iron master Henry Crawshay. Crawshay told them that he could not raise wages due to the low price of iron, and the deputation reported this to the men after the procession had marched to the Market Square.¹⁹

The intention of the Chartists activists all along had been to set off the strike for the Charter, and to convince the men that the Charter was the only solution to distress. This was made clear by one of the speeches at the early morning meeting on 18 August. One of the Chartist activists had told the meeting that he did not blame the masters, who had been kind to them, and did not blame the tradesmen of Merthyr, who were a very industrious body. The speaker attributed their miseries principally to class legislation. After the Chartist activists had shown the men that the masters could not raise their wages they were free to make the aim of the strike the Charter. This was done at a meeting at Dowlais Pond on the morning of 19 August. The meeting was attended by 1200 men and the Chartist activists were again the speakers. A resolution was unanimously passed by the 1200 present that they should not return to work until the People's Charter became the law of the land and the Chartist activists exhorted the men

¹⁷ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 20 August 1842

¹⁸ PRO HO 45/265B, f. 5 Bute to HO, Cardiff Castle, 23 August 1842

¹⁹ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 27 August; *Glamorgan, Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 27 August 1842

to remain firm to the resolution. On 19 August another meeting was held on the side of a mountain at Penrheolgerig early in the evening and again the meeting agreed not to go to work until the Charter was obtained.²⁰ At several other meetings held on the evening of 19 August and the morning of 20 August, with Morgan Williams attending but not speaking, the avowed object of the strike was the People's Charter.²¹

The links between the Merthyr Chartist strike leaders and the strike leaders in other parts of the country on strike were close. The initial success of the Lancashire Chartists in bringing out large numbers for the Charter gave the Merthyr activists the hope that the national holiday could also be implemented in Merthyr and they kept in close touch by letter with activists in other strike areas to gauge the progress of the strike in other parts. Chief Constable Napier certainly believed the strike agitation to be 'a shadow of the Manchester affair.' While the strike was at its height in England Morgan Williams was receiving the latest news from the Chartist activists in Manchester, Birmingham and Leeds as to the success or otherwise of the strike there.²² The Merthyr Chartists were waiting for news of the continued success of the strike for the Charter in Northern England before they attempted to do more. The meeting early in the evening on 22 August was adjourned waiting further news from the North: Chief Constable Napier and the Marquis of Bute were certain that what was to take place in Merthyr would depend upon further reports from the North. The intention of the meeting to be held on 23 August was to receive news from the North, and if the news was that the trades delegate meeting in Manchester had in fact failed, there would be an end to the strike agitation in Merthyr.²³ The resolutions passed at the indoor meeting on 23 August were for continuing work until the receipt of the next *Northern Star* for its news of the strike elsewhere. Anthony Hill had no doubt that the Chartists at Merthyr had letters of the latest intelligence from Manchester and other places, and so knew that the strike for the Charter had failed in Lancashire and the West Riding, and that the decision to await the next issue of the *Northern Star* was a cover to hide their disappointment. Napier and

²⁰ *Glamorgan, Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 27 August 1842

²¹ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 6 September 1842

²² PRO HO 45/265B, f. 2, C. J. Napier to HO, Merthyr, 23 August 1842; PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 6 September 1842

²³ PRO HO 45/265, f. 46, C. J. Napier to HO, Merthyr, 23 August 1842; PRO HO 45/265B, f. 5, Bute to Graham, Cardiff Castle, 23 August 1842

Bute were certain that when the colliers resumed their work on the morning of 24 August it was due to the news of the failure of the strike in Northern England.²⁴

In terms of duration and extent the strike agitation in the Merthyr district lasted seven days beginning with the meeting on 17 August and ending on 24 August. However the feeling among the local authorities was that the workmen were prepared to strike for far longer if the Chartist activists had not called off the strike on hearing of the depressing reports from Manchester. The works principally affected were those at the Aberdare, Cyfarthfa Pendarren and Gydlas works. There was no strike at the Dowlais works perhaps due to Sir John Guest's popularity among his work people.²⁵ By 23 August those on strike included most of the colliers and miners at the Cyfarthfa works and Pendarran works and many of the miners and colliers in the Aberdare valley. It also appears that workmen in other trades gave over work to some extent with the *Nottingham Mercury* correspondent going so far as to state that 'business may be said to be at a standstill; indeed, commercial travellers now here say that they have thrown away their journey, as they are actually doing nothing in the way of business.'²⁶ Outdoor meetings ended after the Queen's proclamation was published though indoor meetings continued. The threats to compel a strike were continuing on 22 and 23 August but there was no turn out procession to the works and collieries either then or earlier. The miners and colliers resumed their work on the morning of 24 August. In all a few thousand colliers and miners had left off work between 18 and 23 August.²⁷ However the numbers who attended the strike meetings was far larger. Upwards of 10,000 attended the meeting on 17 August which began the strike agitation.²⁸ Over the weekend the magistrate Anthony Hill believed the bulk of the workmen would offer only faint resistance to any direct attempt to prevent them from working. If the Chartists had attempted a turnout procession as in the other strike it seems likely the numbers that would have struck would have been far greater.

²⁴ PRO HO 45/265, f. 42, C. J. Napier to HO, Merthyr, 24 August 1842; PRO HO 45/265, f. 54, Bute to HO, Cardiff Castle, 25 August 1842

²⁵ *Morning Chronicle*, 23 August 1842

²⁶ *Nottingham Mercury*, 26 August 1842

²⁷ PRO HO 45/265, f. 44, A. Hill to HO, Merthyr, 23 August 1842; PRO HO 45/265, f. 50, A. Hill to HO, Merthyr, 24 August 1842; PRO HO 45/265, f. 42, C. J. Napier to HO, Merthyr, 24 August 1842; PRO HO 45/265B, f. 5, Bute to HO, Cardiff Castle, 23 August 1842

²⁸ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 20 August 1842

No strike took place in Wales beyond the important Merthyr district. The Merthyr Chartist activists attempted to bring the Monmouthshire workers from the Ebbw Valley and Tredegar into strike for the Charter, but failed. On 19 August the Merthyr Chartist activists led a procession of seven hundred, mainly colliers, to Dowlais Pond to show their strength and receive the reply to the messages they had sent asking the Monmouthshire men to join them. However the colliers of the Ebbw Valley returned the reply 'You left us in the lurch at Newport, and now you may go to the devil your own way.'²⁹ A Chartist delegate from Leeds was reported to have passed through Newport on 20 August and was, according to the Marquis of Bute, endeavouring to 'make mischief' in the Monmouthshire works on 22 August. However the delegate was not caught, and his attempt to start a strike at Samuel Homfray's Tredegar works in Monmouthshire did not succeed, with the military being immediately sent down from Cardiff to protect the Tredegar works.³⁰ There were rumours of a strike in the Montgomeryshire flannel factory town of Newton in mid Wales. On 23 August the Chief Constable of the Montgomeryshire rural police reported that the operatives of Newton were expected to turn out for an increase in wages the next day, and there had been rumours in the London newspapers since 19 August that delegates from Manchester were in Newton and that a disturbance had taken place. However the rumours were false and no strike or disturbance occurred, and no delegates were discovered.³¹

The dominant ideology expounded in the strike in South Wales was the traditional radical analysis of the state and the criticism of 'Old Corruption'. The aristocracy, sinecurists and placemen were criticised. At the meeting on the morning of 18 August in Merthyr the speakers did not blame the iron masters or tradesmen. Instead they attributed their miseries to class legislation and were decidedly of the opinion that things would not improve until they had a voice in the forming of the laws of the country. At the meeting at Dowlais Pond on the morning of 19 August the speakers wanted to hold out until the Charter became the law of the land because it would 'incur incalculable blessings on the sons of labour, then would...people have their just rights,

²⁹ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 6 September 1842

³⁰ PRO HO 45/265, f. 40, Bute to HO, near Cardiff, 22 August 1842; PRO HO 45/265, f. 44, A. Hill to HO, Merthyr, 23 August 1842

³¹ *Shrewsbury Chronicle*, 26 August 1842; PRO HO 45/265, f. 49, Chief Constable Montgomeryshire rural police to HO, Newton, 23 August 1842

tyranny and oppression would not be known in great Britain.' Radical Nonconformity was also evident in the strike. It was not only placemen and sinecurists who were singled out for criticism, but also the Church of England priests, who were opposed to the people. At the meeting on the morning of 18 August the speakers called on the Nonconformist ministers, such as David John senior, to aid them. The middle classes were not criticised during the strike in Merthyr. At the meeting on the morning of 18 August the Chartist speakers acknowledged their obligations to the tradesmen and were sorry they could not discharge them. They called on the tradesmen, as well as the Nonconformist ministers, to assist them in their present struggle for their just rights.³² In the immediate aftermath of the strike the Merthyr Chartists had no aversion whatsoever to working with the middle class suffrage radicals, describing the Sturgites as no other than Chartists as they claimed the six points but were just named after Sturge.³³ Chief Constable Napier believed that not only every other tradesman in the town but also several of the mine agents, or contractors, at the pits in Aberdare held Chartist principles. Certainly some support for the strike from the middle classes was forthcoming. In at least one pit the levels master colluded in the strike by refusing to send any more hands down. Many of the Merthyr shopkeepers responded to the strike by supplying the strikers with food. Chief Constable Napier even felt himself to be watched by other respectable citizens of Merthyr, Morgan Williams being connected with several of the leading citizens including the postmaster and High Constable.³⁴

There appears to have been a much closer relationship between the miners and Chartist activists in South Wales than in, for example, the Midlands where the activists provided leadership for the miners but never received full commitment to their political goals. In South Wales the miners do appear to have had a greater commitment to Chartism as seen by their role in the Newport rising and their willingness to strike in 1842 if the local activists had met with good news from England. In most other strike regions the miners were out for miners' wages grievances and the miners' strike in other areas was really a separate strike movement from strike for the Charter, but in Merthyr the miners provided the men who struck for the Charter and they only lost interest in the strike because the local Chartist activists decided to call it off. This closeness between

³² *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 27 August 1842

³³ PRO HO 45/265, f. 60-61, Spy's report of a Chartist meeting held at Caedraw on 29 August 1842

³⁴ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 6 September 1842

activists and miners may have been due to a large extent to a shared Protestant Nonconformity. The miners looked up to local Nonconformist ministers, mainly Baptist and Independent, as community leaders and at least six such ministers in Merthyr were active in Chartism. In addition the use of the Welsh languages by activists may have been a binding factor, William Miles and other activists had Welsh as their first language and spoke from the local platform in Welsh during the strike, Miles also providing a translation in his poor English for the English speakers. The miners were prepared to accept that higher wages could not be offered by the masters due to the state of the iron trade and were committed to the Charter as the aim of the strike in order to bring betterment by reducing taxes, Church of England tithes and the rest of the traditional radical panacea against old corruption.

The strike in Merthyr witnessed no violence whatsoever despite reports that the Merthyr Chartist had been arming in February 1842 when George Black of Nottingham and one of the John family were supposed to have been selling guns.³⁵ The strike movement in Merthyr was a completely peaceful agitation. There was not even any attempt to make a turnout procession to the collieries, though it is likely this would have occurred if news of the continued success of the strike for the Charter had been received from the north. The only attempt at intimidation was the placing of threatening letters in the Cyfarthfa iron works threatening the furnace men, upon whom the continued running of the ironworks depended, with vengeance by the turnouts if they continued to work. At all the strike meetings the Chartist strike leaders exhorted the men to be peaceable and avoid the snares of the police. At the meeting on 17 August the Chartist activists gave strict orders to preserve the peace. At the meeting on the morning of Thursday 18 August William Miles begged the workmen to be peaceable and orderly and not to insult or molest anyone. The men were advised to remain firm but not use any violence. At the meeting on the morning of 22 August indoors at Caedraw the Chartist chairman Thomas Pugh begged the men to keep themselves out of the power of the police and military as they were thirsting for their blood.³⁶ The completely peaceful nature of the strike in Merthyr meant that there was no excuse for arrests. No illegal acts took place

³⁵ PRO HO 45/265, f. 9, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 5 February 1842

³⁶ *Monmouthshire Merlin*, 20, 27 August 1842; *Glamorgan, Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 20, 27 August 1842

as the Chartist stopped holding outdoor strike meetings after the Queen's Proclamation against unlawful assemblies was posted up, and held their meetings indoors instead.

The strike agitation was defeated by a combination of the news from Northern England of the failure of the strike for the Charter and the firm action of the local authorities. On the evening of 20 August the magistrates sent dispatches to Colonel Bishop the commander of the Southern District, to make the necessary military arrangements, the police force was strengthened from other districts and was patrolling Merthyr, and by Sunday 21 August the military were ready in the barracks at Dowlais if required.³⁷ Sir John Guest, MP for Merthyr and owner of the Dowlais iron works, came down on Saturday night. Chief Constable Napier came down to Merthyr on 19 August after hearing that the Chartists would form a procession that day. Napier stayed at Merthyr in constant communication with his police force. The Marquis of Bute, Lord Lieutenant of the county of Glamorgan, came down to Cardiff on the evening of 22 August to keep in touch with the magistrates and Napier in Merthyr.³⁸ The active work of Napier and the ironmaster magistrate Anthony Hill was crucial in the defeat of the strike. Napier attended a meeting of the magistrates on 19 August and urged them to issue the Royal Proclamation in Welsh and English together with a caution against attending the procession due for that day. However the town magistrates were reluctant to act as no outbreak had actually taken place. But at the meeting of the magistrates next morning, on 20 August, Anthony Hill was in the chair. With the influence of Hill and the county magistrates Napier induced the magistrates' meeting to agree to issue the Royal Proclamation.³⁹

The posting up on 21 August of the Royal Proclamation against unlawful assemblages was a severe blow to the strike agitation. The Chartist activists had relied upon being able to hold public meetings in order to begin and maintain the strike for the Charter. However after the evening of 20 August they were no longer able to hold open air meetings, and though meetings continued, they were now held indoors in the Chartist room at Caedraw or on the mountain side at Aberdare. The Chartists activists were

³⁷ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 34-35, Anthony Hill and E. L. Richards to HO, Merthyr, 17 August 1842; PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Merthyr 22 August 1842; *Glamorgan, Monmouth and Brecon Gazette*, 27 August 1842

³⁸ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 46, Captain of Royal Glamorgan Militia to HO, Merthyr, 23 August 1842

³⁹ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 6 September 1842

determined not to give the authorities and police an excuse for arresting them and so remained within the law by ending their open air meetings, however this made it impossible to gather the masses they had been doing earlier in the week.⁴⁰

The reason the Chartists remained so cautious after the issuing of the proclamation was the unfavourable news that came from the north. Napier was certain that the twin issuing of the Proclamation and the news from the north had an immediate effect. Many who had taken an active part in the proceedings of 19 August absconded and from 20 August the ardour of the Chartists began to decline. The magistrates scored a further success on 21 August when notices of the relatively quiet state of Manchester and a list of the mills and factories in Manchester which had returned to work were posted up in the town and on the line of the road leading to the spot where the next strike meeting was to be held on Monday morning. When on the morning of 22 August the turnouts attempted to intimidate the furnace men at the iron works to stop work and not light the furnace fires, which would have closed down the iron works, the iron masters acted promptly to protect the furnace men from intimidation.⁴¹

Six days after the strike in Merthyr had ended, but while there were still lingering hopes that it could be revived, the Merthyr Chartists at an indoor meeting held in Caedraw were eager to take part in Joseph Sturge's 'Grand Conference on the 7 September', hoping that every place would send a delegate so as to settle how they were to act to obtain the Charter for the law of the land, and hoping that after the Conference they should have a 'grand general move'. William Miles was elected delegate, but the conference was cancelled, putting a final stop to any hopes of reviving the strike movement.⁴² The authorities followed up the strike with victimisation. In the few days after the strike had ended on 24 August Napier sent his superintendent to the agents of the iron works with the names of the men who had rendered themselves conspicuous at Chartist meetings and to suggest their immediate discharge. This met with the instant attention from the proprietors who even dismissed men who had attended the procession on 19 August. William Miles, the most active Chartist during the strike agitation, was one of those dismissed. The names were also circulated to the leading works in

⁴⁰ PRO HO 45/265, A. Hill to HO, Merthyr, 23 August 1842

⁴¹ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 38-39, C. J. Napier to HO, Merthyr 22 August 1842; PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 6 September 1842

⁴² PRO HO 45/265, ff. 60-61, Report of a Chartist meeting held at Caedraw on 29 August 1842

Glamorganshire as well as to Manchester, Birmingham and Nottingham. William Miles and Morgan Williams were being watched night and day by Napier's agents so nothing could take place without his knowledge.⁴³ Despite reports from a spy in late November that the Merthyr Chartist were establishing clubs for the distribution of arms there was no attempt to revive the strike in response to a letter received from the Ayrshire Chartist, or more likely colliers, who were still on strike, urging them to co-operate with them and at once commence active measures.⁴⁴

In conclusion the strike in South Wales showed a number of peculiarities. The most significant was the close relationship of the miners to the Chartist activists. The strike in Wales also differed significantly from the strike for the Charter in England and Scotland in that whereas two separate strike movements of miners and other trades can be seen elsewhere, in the Merthyr district the miners provided the rank and file for the strike for the Charter. Morgan, in his article on the strike, was certainly inaccurate in characterising the strike in the Merthyr district as merely a matter of a wage dispute and as unconnected with the Merthyr Chartist. Jordan was incorrect to suggest that the strike in the Merthyr district was part of a longstanding national plan by the Chartist for a general strike. In fact the attempt to start a strike for the Charter in the Merthyr district was the response of local Chartist activists to news of the strike for the Charter in Northern England. The example of the strike for the Charter in Lancashire had shown that it was possible to create a widespread general strike for the Charter overcoming the obvious reluctance to leave off work if others would not. The strike for the Charter took place in South Wales, as England and Scotland, after the Northwest strike had clearly become for the Charter and the Trades Delegate Conference in Manchester had declared the aim of the strike to be the enactment of the Charter. In South Wales, as in England and Scotland, the strike was deliberately launched from local platforms at public meetings by Chartist activists who from the first made the aim of the strike the enactment of the Charter. However the strike for the Charter in Wales was limited to the Merthyr district of South Wales and so was less significant in extent than the strike in England or Scotland. The strike in South Wales illustrated the crucial importance of news of the failure of the strike for the Charter in Manchester in undermining the strike

⁴³ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 6 September 1842; PRO HO 45/265, ff. 71, C. J. Napier to Bute, Bridgend, 12 September 1842

⁴⁴ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 73-74, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 30 November 1842

for the Charter outside the Northwest. It had been the news that there was a strike for the Charter in Manchester which had encouraged the activists in other districts to agitate for a strike for the Charter in their own district. However the news that the Manchester Trades Delegate Conference had dissolved produced a debilitating effect on the strike in Merthyr as it did in other regions.

CHAPTER SIX

THE RESPONSE TO THE STRIKE IN LONDON

No strike for the Charter took place in London. However there were important demonstrations and public meetings. Mass demonstrations took place at the Euston Railway Station on Saturday 13 and Sunday 14 August in protest against troops being sent to the manufacturing districts. More significantly mass public meetings with processions, to demonstrate support for the strike in the manufacturing districts, were organised by the London Chartists between Tuesday 16 and Monday 22 August, culminating in large simultaneous meetings at Paddington railway terminus, Kennington Common and Clarkenwell Green on Monday 22 August. The government was seriously alarmed by the meetings and processions in London but were successfully, and somewhat brutally, put down by the Metropolitan Police.

In his study of London Chartism Goodway concluded that it was not in 1842 or 1848 but rather only in 1838-9 that London failed the Chartist movement by its feeble support for the national movement.¹ While London was certainly the most important district of Chartist activity in 1848 it will be suggested here that Goodway's judgement requires revision so far as 1842 is concerned, and that the failure of London to move on a larger scale in August 1842 seriously weakened the strike for the Charter nationally. As it was, the nightly public meetings in London caused the Government almost as much alarm as did the strike in the rest of the country. If a strike had taken place in London or if the disturbances in London had been on a larger scale it would have been more likely that the Government would have lost confidence in itself. Goodway did not examine who were the London Chartists who organised the public meetings during the period of the strike, what their strategy was, how they hoped to support the efforts of the strikers in the manufacturing districts, and what ideology they articulated. These are issues which will be examined in this chapter.

London was by far the largest city in Britain with a population approaching 1.9 million in 1841. London lacked the heavy industry and mechanised large-scale textile industry

¹ D. Goodway, *London Chartism* (Cambridge, 1982), 221

which is associated with the industrial revolution in the provinces. Nevertheless London remained the greatest centre of manufacture based on small-scale workshops with a huge range of different occupations and a highly developed service sector to cater for the massive London market at both luxury and mass ends. Although London artisans did not suffer proletarianisation through the introduction of mechanisation in large factories they were exploited through slop production for the mass market by the lowering of wages and expansion of the workforce. The London trades had not suffered as severely in the 1838/9 depression as those in the northern manufacturing districts; but in 1842 the renewed depression had a greater impact on the London trades prompting increased participation in Chartism. London's great size, its huge population, and the lack of contact between its different districts and between different trades made it an ideal place for crowd actions such as the Wilkes and Liberty demonstrations in the 1760s and the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots in 1780 but was less conducive to the maintenance of a large scale organised radical movement; a point we will return to.²

In the 1790s London had been at the forefront of popular radicalism. Thomas Hardy had founded the London Corresponding Society (LCS) in 1792 with the programme of universal suffrage, vote by ballot and annual elections. Although many of its leading figures were professional men its rank and file was composed largely of London artisans. The London based Society for Constitutional Information, revived in the 1790s with Horne Tooke as a leading figure and link with the LCS, also came out in support of universal suffrage. The popular radicals supported a constitutional peaceful movement for parliamentary reform. The loyalist reaction and government repression broke the popular radical movement and forced what remained underground with advocates of insurrection emerging in the republican United Britons and the Despard Conspiracy. In the years of the Napoleonic Wars radicalism as a public movement was quiescent however a radical underworld culture thrived in the London taverns. After 1815 London lost its supremacy as the great centre of radicalism to the growing manufacturing districts in the Northwest, Yorkshire and the Midlands. The most convincing explanation for this shift from London to the north lies in the huge size of the capital, the isolation from each other of its component districts, and divisions between the London trades, rather than to an absolute decline in radical activity relative to other

² P. L. Garside, 'London and the Home Counties', in F. M. L. Thompson (ed.), *The Cambridge Social History of England* (Cambridge, 1993), vol. 1, 471-507

regions. London radicalism, apart from mass crowd actions such as the Wilkes and Liberty crowds of the 1760s and the mass meetings organised by the LCS in the mid 1790s, had always involved merely a minority of skilled artisans together with a small section of the discontented middling classes. The growing textile manufacturing districts of the North and the Midlands, dominated by one or two industries, provided a more conducive atmosphere for working class involvement in popular politics and these districts naturally superseded London as the main centres of radicalism as they grew in size with further industrialisation after 1815. Nevertheless London radicalism revived in the post war years with support for Henry 'Orator' Hunt's constitutional mass platform agitation. London was also the base for Arthur Thistlewood and the Society of Spencean Philanthropists, inheritors both of Spence's land scheme and the insurrectionary and republican traditions of Colonel Despard. Middle class London radicals, disciples of Bentham, including James Mill and Francis Place, advocated universal suffrage on utilitarian grounds. Following the agitation in favour of Queen Caroline economic prosperity took the wind out of the sails of the radical movement. But in the 1830s London artisans supported the first Reform Bill, the War of the Unstamped to obtain an untaxed press, co-operative trading and the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union. The National Union of the Working Classes (NUWC) was formed, including among its members William Lovett and also William Benbow who popularised the idea of a political general strike in his *Grand National Holiday and Congress of the Productive Classes* of 1831, many of its members going on to form the London Working Man's Association (LWMA) which was responsible for drawing up the People's Charter in conjunction with radical MPs and Francis Place. Organised support for Chartism in London in 1838 and 1839 had been notoriously weak and the failure of Chartism to become a mass movement in the metropolis had contributed significantly to the failure of the initial Chartist challenge. The first General Convention which had sat in London in 1839 had been largely ignored by working class Londoners.³

³ A. Goodwin, *The Friends of Liberty* (Cambridge, 1979), 209-499; I. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London* (Folkstone, 1979), 73-327; J. Stevenson, *Popular Disturbances In England 1700-1870* (London, 1979), 163-180; J. A. Hone, *For the Cause of Truth: Radicalism in London 1796-1821* (Oxford, 1982), 1-156; E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), 84-203, 491-514, 660-780; P. Hollis, *The Pauper Press* (London, 1970), 95-258

However from the second half of 1841, when the National Charter Association (NCA) took firm root in the capital, organised London Chartism grew rapidly. By early 1842 London had become a leading stronghold of Chartism with forty-three NCA localities by April. 100,000 to 150,000 took part in the procession to present the second National Petition to Parliament on 2 May 1842. In July 1842 the Metropolitan Delegates had been created as a permanent body to co-ordinate the NCA localities in London. Many of the London trades had formed themselves into NCA localities as was happening in Manchester. The depression of 1841-2, unlike that of 1837-9, seriously affected the London trades, and the trades which joined the NCA were experiencing economic difficulties. The tailors and the bootmakers, who were suffering particular hardships at this time, were the most numerous NCA trade localities in the metropolis. A new O'Connorite leadership had also emerged in London by 1842. William Lovett and most of the other LWMA leaders had been marginalised. The new leading activists such as Edmund Stallwood, Philip McGrath and Thomas Martin Wheeler were strong supporters of Feargus O'Connor and committed to London Chartism being a mass movement rather than confined to an elite of working men. Lovett's new National Association and the Complete Suffragists had very little rank and file support among the working classes in London, although they did gain support among many London shopkeepers. From late 1841 the London Chartists were strong enough to carry hostile votes at public Metropolitan Anti-Corn Law Association meetings in the capital. The great growth in strength of London Chartism was reflected in the new membership of the Executive of the NCA. Following the arrest of Leech, Campbell and Bairstow and McDouall's flight to France after the strike, members of the Metropolitan Delegates formed a provisional Executive. When the new Executive was elected in 1843 McGrath was elected President and Wheeler was elected Secretary.⁴

There is no evidence whatsoever either of the strike for the People's Charter nationally being part of a national pre-planned Chartist conspiracy or of the London Chartists

⁴ D. Goodway, *London Chartism* (Cambridge, 1982), 38-50; I. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London* (Folkstone, 1979), 319-327; I. Prothero, 'Chartism in London', *Past and Present*, 44 (1969), 76-105; I. Prothero, 'London Chartism and the Trades', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, XXIV (1971), 202-219; D. J. Rowe, 'The Failure of London Chartism', *Historical Journal*, XI, 3 (1968), 472-487; D. J. Rowe, 'Class and Political Radicalism in London', *Historical Journal*, 13, 1 (1970), 31-47; D. J. Rowe, 'Chartism and the Spitalfields Silk-weavers', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, XX (1967), 482-493; D. J. Rowe, 'The London Working Men's Association and the "People's Charter"', *Past and Present*, 36 (1967), 73-85; I. Prothero, 'Debates: The London Working Men's

being part of any such conspiracy. But once news had reached London that a strike for the Charter was taking place in the North the London Chartist activists organised a number of large public meetings and demonstrations in support. The first crowd actions in London connected with the strike in the Northern and Midland manufacturing districts took place outside Euston Station on the evening of 13 August and on 14 August. Large crowds gathered, and groaned and yelled at the soldiers, as the troops were embarked by railway for the North. These appear to have been spontaneous gatherings, after news of the strike in Manchester had reached London through the newspapers, by letter and by eyewitness, though some Chartist activists also turned up and spoke to the crowds.⁵

Chartist activists in London organised public meetings in the evenings from 16 August. Connected with these Chartist public meetings were processions from one place of meeting to another; however these were not turn out processions as the meetings took place at night after work. The first Chartist organised public meeting was held on Stepney Green on the evening of 16 August. Next evening, on 17 August, a Chartist organised public meeting was held on Clerkenwell Green. Three public meetings were organised by Chartist activists for the evening of 18 August with processions from one place of meeting to the next. The first took place at Islington Green at 7 p.m. After the meeting at Islington Green a procession went from there to Clerkenwell Green where the next meeting took place. After the Clerkenwell Green meeting a procession went to Lincoln's Inn Fields at 10 p.m. where the third meeting of that night was held. After the Lincoln's Inn Fields a procession proceeded to the East End through the City. After the late night meetings and processions Sir James Graham decided to prohibit Chartist public meetings in the metropolis. A public meeting announced by Chartist activists to be held on Clerkenwell Green on the evening of 19 August was dispersed by the metropolitan police after three hours and fifty arrests, and the Chartist organisers were prevented from speaking. However some of the crowd went on procession after the attempted meeting proceeding to Lincoln's Inn Fields and thence to Bow Street where there was a serious clash with the metropolitan police and some more arrests were made. The high point of the movement in London came on the evening of 22 August

Association and the “People’s Charter”, *Past and Present*, 38 (1967), 169-173; D. J. Rowe, ‘Rejoinder: The London Working Men’s Association and the “People’s Charter”’, *Past and Present*, 38 (1967), 174-6

⁵ *The Times*, 15 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 20 August 1842

when simultaneous public meetings were organised by Chartist activists on Kennington Common and near Paddington Station for 6 p.m. A third meeting was held later in the evening at Clerkenwell Green. The Metropolitan Police dispersed all three meetings, made arrests and prevented the Chartist organisers from speaking. From then on it became increasing difficult to hold public meetings due to police vigilance.⁶

The numbers who attended the demonstrations at Euston and the public meetings were considerable though not large relative to the size of the metropolis. The crowds who gathered at Euston station to demonstrate against the sending of troops to the North numbered perhaps 2000 on the evening of 13 August and 5000 on 14 August. About 8000 to 10,000 attended the Stepney Green meeting on 16 August. The meeting at Clerkenwell Green on 17 August was described by the *Times* reporter as a 'considerable'. The meeting on Islington Green on 18 August may have numbered 20,000 persons. The number of those assembled who adjourned to the Clerkenwell Green meeting was about 3000 to 4000. What the *Times* reporter described as 'a large body of Chartists marshalled in procession' attended the Lincoln's Inn Fields meeting. The police cordoned off the entrances to Clerkenwell Green on the evening of 19 August. However perhaps 300 managed to break through into the Square and troubled the police for three hours. The number who then went to Lincoln's Inn Fields and later to Bow Street was in the region of 500. However in terms of numbers involved the most impressive meetings were the simultaneous meetings held at Kennington Common and near Paddington Station on the evening of 22 August. Upwards of 10,000 assembled for the Paddington Station meeting and perhaps 40,000 assembled for the Kennington Common meeting. This was one of the largest public meetings of the whole strike and, considering that the 1842 meeting had taken place at very short notice, compares favourably with estimates ranging from around 15,000 to 150,000 for the famous 10 April 1848 meeting on the same ground. However the Kennington Common meeting, until the Metropolitan Police charged it and dispersed it with considerable violence, had a carnival atmosphere and many had undoubtedly come out of curiosity. The police dispersed the meeting when the Chartist speakers began to address it. Upwards of 5000 attended the indoor meeting of electors and others of Finsbury at the White Conduit

⁶ *The Times*, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842; *Illustrated London News*, 27 August 1842; *Evening Star*, 20, 22, 23, 24 August; PRO MEPO 7/8, Metropolitan Police, Police Orders, ff. 244-8, 19, 20, 21 August 1842; PRO MEPO 1/43, Metropolitan Police, letter books, letter 91722, R. Mayne to HO, 20 August 1842, letter 92043, R. Mayne to HO, 31 August 1842

House.⁷ Although many of the meetings in London were of a respectable size and compared favourably to the size of the meetings in the North and Midlands they were not large in relation to the size of the population of the metropolis. However this was the proverbial problem of popular movements in London. London was really a number of separate towns with great distances separating one part from another. The various meetings, considered as meetings of the parishes in which they took place rather than of the whole metropolis, were not so unimpressive in size.

The 'Committee for getting up Public Meetings', a committee of the NCA Metropolitan Delegates, organised the Chartist public meetings in London to support the strike in the manufacturing districts. The Committee for getting up Public Meetings was increased in size by seven members once news of the strike in the North reached London. Its leading member was Henry Dron, a dyer who was one of the Metropolitan Delegates and an officer of the Lambeth Chartist Youths NCA locality, and who was to be chosen a member of the provisional NCA Executive following the arrest or escape of the old Executive members after the strike. The speakers at the public meetings were recognised Chartist activists and lecturers. Henry Dron was chairman of the Stepney Green public meeting on 16 August. John Parker, a tailor, former member of the London Democratic Association and a leading NCA Chartist in the 1840s who was to be secretary of the United Tailors' trade union from 1844, was a speaker at the Islington Green public meeting on 18 August. Dr R. T. Webb, a founder member of the NUWC and of Feargus O'Connor's Marylebone Great Radical Association, also spoke at the Islington Green meeting. Anderson, a regular Chartist lecturer in London, spoke at the Islington Green meeting and was reading out the first resolution at the Kennington Common meeting when the police charged. The regular Chartist lecturers Ferguson and Soars both spoke at the Islington Green meeting. Nodder, a shoemaker and officer of the Walworth NCA locality, was the chairman at the Kennington Common meeting. Edward Blackmore, a baker and officer of the Lambeth NCA locality, was a speaker at the Stepney Green meeting. Mantz, a regular Chartist lecturer in London, was a speaker at the Stepney Green and Islington Green meetings. Charles Bolwell, a bootmaker and Chartist activist from Bath who was lecturing in London in 1842 and 1843, was a speaker at the Islington Green meeting. Feargus O'Connor was back in London after the

⁷ *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842; *Illustrated London News*, 27 August 1842; *Evening Star*, 23, 24 August 1842; *The Times*, 15, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23 August 1842

Manchester NCA Conference had dispersed but does not appear to have played any part in organising the public meetings in London. O'Connor did however turn up at the Kennington Common public meeting on 22 August and was prepared to speak. But he left before the speeches began as it was believed that the police intended to arrest him if he spoke. Nevertheless O'Connor did speak at an indoor meeting on 23 August at the White Conduit House when he stressed that the Chartist case still rested on the 3,317,752 signatures to the second National Petition. John Campbell, secretary of the Executive of the NCA, after his return from Manchester issued addresses calling for the continuation of the strike in the rest of the country and continued to attend meetings of the London trades to encourage them to declare in favour of the Charter.⁸

The aim of the public meetings, as expressed in the placards which announced them, the speeches by the Chartist activists at the meetings, and the resolutions passed, was to give moral support to the strike for the Charter in the manufacturing districts. The placards, speeches and resolutions criticised the authorities for 'assaulting and massacring the people of Manchester'. There were calls for the removal of the troops from the north. For example Blackmore and Mantz moved and seconded a resolution at the Stepney Green meeting that a memorial should be presented to the Queen praying that she would order the troops to be withdrawn from the disturbed districts. At the 17 August Clerkenwell Green meeting Sir Robert Peel was charged with murder for sending troops into the provinces 'with instructions for them to cut down a suffering and unoffending class of men.' At the Islington Green meeting on 18 August Bolwell referred to Sir Robert Peel's admission before parliament was prorogued that the Government did not see how the distress of the country could be alleviated and commented that 'under such circumstances it was the duty of a minister who made such an admission at once to abdicate and leave it to the people, who knew the evils under which they suffered, and who also knew the remedy and were in a position to apply it.' The Manchester manufacturers were criticised for reducing wages. Interference with the constitutional right to hold public meetings, both in the North and in London itself, was criticised. Indeed the placards announcing the Kennington Common meeting declared

⁸ *The Times*, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August, 3 September 1842; *Evening Star*, 23, 24 August 1842

that its purpose was to protest against the interference with public meetings in London since 19 August.⁹

The strike in the manufacturing districts was above all used as an opportunity by the London Chartist activists to blame distress on class legislation and to call for the enactment of the Charter. Dron at the Stepney Green meeting stated that it was only by the adoption of the principles of the People's Charter that protection would be afforded. The second resolution carried unanimously at the 18 August Islington Green meeting was 'that this meeting are determined to demand equal rights and equal laws for the whole people of the three kingdoms.' Bolwell at the Islington Green meeting 'hoped that the people would take every advantage of time and circumstance, and never delay in their efforts until the People's Charter by becoming the law of the land gave them a share in the promulgation of the laws by which they were governed.'¹⁰

Although there was no attempt to start a strike in London from the meetings the alternative 'ulterior measure' advocated in May 1842 by the General Convention in London following Parliament's refusal to consider the second National Petition was strenuously endorsed. This was to memorialise the Queen to dismiss her ministers and appoint those who would enact the Charter as called for by the 3,317,752 signatures to the National Petition. For example the first resolution carried at the Islington Green meetings was 'that this meeting...is convened to lament the awful state of distress which prevails in the manufacturing districts, and to memorialise the Queen to abolish the present system of class legislation; to amend and alter laws which now so grievously oppress and afflict the poor; and to pass the People's Charter as the law of the land.' At the Stepney Green meeting a resolution was passed unanimously that a memorial should be presented to the Queen praying that the Charter might be adopted as the law of the land.¹¹

The traditional radical picture of society's ills deploying William Cobbett's 'Old Corruption' analysis was articulated at the meetings in London during the strike by both the O'Connorite NCA Chartists and by Lovett's National Association members. The

⁹ *The Times*, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August, 3 September 1842

¹⁰ *The Times*, 17, 19 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842

¹¹ *Northern Star*, 27 August, 3 September 1842; *The Times*, 17 August 1842

aristocracy rather than the middle classes in their economic role were singled out as the enemy. At the 17 August Clerkenwell Green meeting one speaker declaimed that the 'Aristocracy, who were rolling in wealth, and revelling in all kinds of luxury, might fancy themselves secure; but they might rest assured, that the words *Vox Populi, Vox Dei* would speedily convince them the contrary, and that in the end the people, who had manfully struggled for their rights, would, in spite of the aristocracy, gain their ends.' Social evils were seen to be the result of political disenfranchisement. The first resolution of the National Association meeting on 25 August attacked class legislation declaring that 'the distress and disorder prevailing in the manufacturing districts are sufficient evidence of the folly and injustice of class legislation, and that those who arrogate the Government of the country to themselves distinctly prove that they do not carry out those principles upon which Governments were founded, namely, the comfort, happiness, and welfare of the governed.' The third resolution called for the enactment of the Charter declaring that the meeting could not 'see any other mode of alleviating the disturbed state of Great Britain, than by giving to every man equal rights as set forth in the document called the People's Charter.' A symbolic reference to radical patriotism and the rights of freeborn Englishmen was present in the Union Jack flag carried by the demonstrators after the Friday Clerkenwell Green meeting. Another flag bearing the words 'Civil and Religious Liberty' was topped by a cap of liberty, a symbolic reference not only to the rights of man but also to the ancient English constitution as James Epstein and John Belchem have demonstrated.¹²

As we have seen, in London in the second half of 1841 and the first half of 1842 trade societies or members of the same trade had been forming NCA localities in a similar process to that which had been occurring in Manchester. However the London trades did not call for a strike or play a parallel role to the Manchester Trades Delegates. But the London trades were reported to be listening anxiously to the news from the North and Midlands. The process of London trade societies declaring in favour of the Charter as necessary to protect their labour also continued throughout the strike with John Campbell, secretary of the NCA Executive who was back in London after the Manchester NCA and Executive Conference, actively encouraging London trades to

¹² *Northern Star*, 27 August, 3 September 1842; *The Times*, 18, 22 August 1842; *Evening Star*, 20 August 1842; J. Epstein, *Radical Expression* (Oxford, 1994), 70-99; J. Belchem, 'Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform in Early Nineteenth Century England', *Social History*, 6 (1981), 1-35

declare for the Charter. Some of the London Chartist trades also collected funds to send to the 'Committee for getting up Public Meetings' to help defray the expenses of the public meetings held during the strike and supported the memorial to the Queen. A meeting of one of the shoemakers' Chartist trade localities was held on 21 August to discuss the strike in the manufacturing districts and collected money to defray the expenses of calling the public meetings. On 24 August upwards of 1000 members of the West End Boot and Shoe Makers trade society met, with John Campbell attending, and passed resolutions declaring that only the enactment of the Charter could protect their labour. There was no call for a strike but the meeting did pass a resolution to '...tender our heartfelt thanks to the Trades Delegates, recently assembled at Manchester, for adopting the People's Charter, as the only reasonable means by which the evils of class legislation may be removed, and increased trade, good wages, peace, happiness, and prosperity once more bless our land.' A meeting of the Spitalfields weavers, with John Campbell attending, passed resolutions supporting the memorial to the Queen calling for the dismissal of her present ministers and their replacement with men who would enact the Charter.¹³

William Lovett's newly formed National Association demonstrated its divorce from the mainstream of London Chartism by not wholeheartedly endorsing the strike in the manufacturing districts. Nevertheless the National Association did use the strike as an opportunity to hold an indoors public meeting, to consider the alarming state of the country and call for the enactment of the Charter, in the National Association Hall in Holborn on 25 August. The charging of one penny for admission also distanced the National Association meeting from the earlier public meetings held by the NCA Chartists. Former activists of the NUWC, of the Unstamped Press, and of the LWMA including William Lovett, Henry Hetherington, James Watson and others spoke, moved and seconded the resolutions at this public meeting. Hetherington was in the chair and called upon them to unite and destroy the monopoly of class legislation. The first resolution attacked class legislation and the third resolution, which was seconded by Lovett, called for the enactment of the Charter. However the second resolution failed to give that strong support for the strike in the manufacturing districts which had been evinced at the NCA public meetings, only going so far as to declare that 'although the meeting could not refrain from expressing their regret at what had taken place, they

¹³ *Northern Star*, 3 September 1842

thought the starving population were justified in some measure, but at the same time they called upon the people to conciliate instead of provoke the troops, and refrain from all violence.'¹⁴

The Metropolitan Anti-Corn Law Association tried to make some political advantage out of the strike in the manufacturing districts, and counter suggestions in the *Times* and elsewhere that the Leaguers had plotted the strike, by drawing up and printing a representation to Sir Robert Peel which in the words of the League lecturer Sydney Smith 'was to tell Peel that he, and not they, were the cause of the present state of the country'. An address to their fellow citizens blaming the crisis on the government's failure to repeal the Corn Laws was also drawn up by Colonel Thomas Perronet Thompson, author of the *Catechism on the Corn Laws*, P. A. Taylor and Francis Place. When the Metropolitan Anti-Corn Law Association met indoors on 24 August only one speaker denounced Feargus O'Connor for 'leading the people astray'. Colonel T. P. Thompson, P. A. Taylor and other leading London Leaguers attributed the strike to the government's refusal to repeal the Corn Laws and the League's responsibility was warmly denied.¹⁵

The continued holding of Chartist public meetings and processions was defeated by the Metropolitan Police. No attempt was made to disperse the meetings before 19 August and the Chartist activists and lecturers were not prevented from speaking at the public meetings on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday, although the Metropolitan Police did arrest those found posting up the placards advertising the meetings as the placards were held to be seditious. However Sir James Graham ordered the Police Commissioner to prevent any further Chartist public meetings following the meetings and processions of 18 August.¹⁶ This the Metropolitan Police successfully did using great brutality at Kennington Common where mounted police charged the crowds. An indoor meeting was held at the White Conduit House on the evening of 23 August under the cover of a meeting of the electors of Finsbury and was adjourned to outside the building while resolutions were passed and Feargus O'Connor spoke. During the rest of the week many

¹⁴ *Northern Star*, 3 September 1842

¹⁵ *Anti-Bread-Tax Circular*, 25 August 1842; 'Colonel T. P. Thompson', in *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1885), vol. LVI, 224-6, 'P. A. Taylor' in *Dictionary of National Biography* (London, 1885), vol. LV, 455-6; Dudley Miles, *Francis Place* (Brighton, 1988), 226-247

¹⁶ PRO MEPO 7/8, Metropolitan Police, Police Orders, ff. 243-8, 15, 18, 19, 20, 21 August 1842

attempts were made to hold large public meetings but the vigilance of the police and Sir James Graham's bans on public meetings taking place after 6 p.m., making it impossible for those in work to attend, prevented most from taking place. But indoor meetings and the occasional outdoor meeting, such as that at Lambeth held at noon on 25 August to circumvent the 6 p.m. curfew, continued. At least 100 persons were arrested at the public meetings and for posting the bills which advertised the meetings.¹⁷ Occupations of twenty-one of those arrested and tried, not including those tried merely for posting the bills advertising meetings, can be identified. They included five shoemakers, five carpenters, two tailors, one journeyman printer and one journeyman coachmaker.¹⁸ This reflects the support Chartism received from artisans in London particularly those such as shoemakers and tailors who were facing increasing economic exploitation.

While no strike for the Charter took place in London in August 1842, there was a general strike of the coal-whippers at the end of August, yet this was entirely an industrial matter unconnected with the strike for the Charter. There were reports that 600 workers of the Chartist master builder Cubitt, who himself appeared before the Bow Street magistrates for distributing a placard advertising a meeting at Stepney Green, had struck work on 22 August following rumours of a reduction in wages in the building trade. However this did not set an example for others to follow and if the men left work at all they quickly returned.¹⁹

In Southern England and East Anglia, outside London, very little activity connected with the strike took place. The three partial exceptions were Norwich and the West Country textile towns of Trowbridge and Chard. Norwich and Trowbridge both had radical traditions dating back to the 1790s and indeed Trowbridge had been a centre of Chartism in 1839. Significantly all three were declining textile towns; Norwich was a centre of jacquard handloom weaving, Trowbridge was a centre of woollen cloth handloom weaving, and Chard had lace factories. Although there were resolutions

¹⁷ *The Times*, 20, 23, 24 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August, 3 September 1842; *Evening Star*, 20, 23, 24 August 1842

¹⁸ *Evening Star*, 24 August 1842; *Sun*, 22, 24 August 1842; *Morning Chronicle*, 24 August 1842; *The Times*, 22 August 1842; PRO HO 16/7, Old Bailey Sessions, 1842; PRO HO 26/48, Criminal Register Middlesex, 1842; PRO PCOM 1/46, Central Criminal Court Sessions Papers, 935-939, 1016-1018, 1084

¹⁹ *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842

passed, supporting the strike for the Charter elsewhere and condemning both class legislation and the League for provoking the strike, at public meetings in Norwich and Trowbridge organised by the local Chartist activists, no strike for the Charter took place. The lace factory hands in Chard turned out for about one week from 22 August but this was merely for higher wages although the London Chartist activist Ruffey Ridley had been lecturing in Chard on the Friday before the strike as part of a lecture tour in the West Country and the committee of the Working Men which helped provide organisation for the strike included the local radical leader Joseph Brown Woodward. Ridley, who had also addressed the public meetings at Trowbridge, was eventually arrested at the start of September after addressing the miners of the Forrest of Dean in Gloucestershire. The Norwich jacquard weavers did strike from 22 to 25 August. But again this was also merely a wages dispute and the men returned to work after the masters agreed to an advance of wages.²⁰

In conclusion there is no evidence whatsoever either of the strike for the People's Charter being part of a national conspiracy or of the London Chartists being part of any such conspiracy. However once news of the strike for the Charter in the Northwest reached London the London NCA Chartist activists organised a number of large public meetings and demonstrations. The 'Committee for getting up Public Meetings', a committee of the Metropolitan Delegates, organised the Chartist public meetings in London to support the strike in the manufacturing districts. The strike in the manufacturing districts were above all used as an opportunity by the London Chartist activists to blame distress on class legislation and to call for the enactment of the Charter. Although there was no attempt to start a strike in London from the meetings the alternative ulterior measure of memorialising the Queen to dismiss her ministers and appoint those who would enact the Charter was strenuously endorsed. The traditional radical analysis attacking 'Old Corruption' was articulated at the meetings in London during the strike by both the O'Connorite NCA Chartists and by William Lovett's

²⁰ PRO HO 45/245, f. 2, Magistrates of Axminster, Devon, to HO, 28 August 1842, f. 6, copy of letter from Ruffy Ridley to Joseph Brown Woodwood of Chard, Devises, 25 August 1842; PRO HO 45/259, f.33, placard of the Committee of the Working Men, Chard, 26 August 1842, ff. 18-9, W. Loveridge to HO, 26 August 1842, ff. 29-30, Mayor of Chard to Lord Lieutenant, 27 August 1842; PRO HO 45/248, ff. 48-9, Clerk to the Justices of Newnham Gloucestershire to HO, 3 September 1842; PRO HO 45/262, ff. 2-9, Magistrates of Trowbridge to HO, 23 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August, 3 September 1842; *Wiltshire Independent*, 25 August 1842; *Northern Star*, 27 August 1842; *Manchester Guardian*, 31 August 1842; R. B. Pugh, 'Chartism in Somerset and Wiltshire', in A. Briggs (ed.), *Chartist Studies* (London, 1959), 174-219

National Association members. The London Anti-Corn Law Leaguers attributed the strike to the government's refusal to repeal the Corn Laws and the events in the North and Midlands were used by them as a stick to beat the government with. The continued holding of Chartist public meetings and processions in the capital was defeated by the Metropolitan Police. The public meetings and demonstrations organised by Chartist activists in the capital to express support for the strike in the North and Midlands were not without significance. One at least of these meetings was very large at perhaps 40,000 persons. While this may have been small in relation to the size of London the processions in the capital nevertheless caused Home Secretary Sir James Graham, Premier Sir Robert Peel and Commander-in-Chief the Duke of Wellington a disproportionate amount of anxiety. Nevertheless the failure of any strike to take place in London and the fact that the public meetings were not, given the size of the population in the capital, better supported, suggests that Goodway's verdict that it was not in 1842 or 1848 but rather in 1839 that London let Chartism down needs to be revised so far as the strike in 1842 is concerned.²¹ The failure of London to move on a larger scale during the strike was a crucial reason for the strike's failure nationally because the government would have been far more likely to lose its nerve if the strike in the provinces had been accompanied by more and larger demonstrations and a greater show of public opinion in favour of the Charter in the capital. Francis Place's comment to Richard Cobden in 1840 regarding the failure of the Metropolitan Anti-Corn Law Association, that 'London in my time, and that is half a century, has never moved. A few of the people in different parts have moved, and these, whenever they come together, make a considerable number – still, a very small number indeed when compared with the whole number' was applicable to London Chartism in August 1842.²²

²¹ D. Goodway, *London Chartism* (Cambridge, 1982), 291

²² F. Place to R. Cobden, 4 March 1840, quoted in G. Wallas, *The Life of Francis Place* (London, 1898), 393

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE AFTERMATH

By the end of August the strike for the Charter had failed in all districts. Miners in the Midlands and Scotland and cotton workers in the Northwest continued on strike into September or even later, however their demand was now merely higher wages and no longer the Charter. The immediate aftermath of the failure of the strike was the trial in 1842-43 of over 1000 of those involved. The long-term aftermath of the failure of the strike was the decline of Chartism as a mass movement and the transition from independent radicalism to popular liberalism. In the long term the failure of the strike marked a turning point in British working class history. There was to be no further political strike in nineteenth century Britain. The failure of the strike produced disillusionment with the strategy of forcible intimidation inherent in the mass platform agitation and encouraged the British working class to turn towards industrial trade unionism, free trade and popular liberalism. Judged by the government's response to the strike, involving three Special Commissions as well as assizes and more defendants than in either 1839 or 1848, the 1842 strike was the high point of Chartism, in terms of the culmination of the Chartist threat to the state, and posed a greater perceived threat to the government than did the Chartist challenge of either 1839 or 1848.

Jenkins portrayed the trials which followed the strike as acts of class justice. This concurred with Saville's examination of the Chartist trials in 1848 where the court system was portrayed as an instrument of class power.¹ Fellague Ariouat, examining procedure in Chartist trials over the period 1839-48, argued that the Chartists received fairer treatment in their trials from the legal personal than either the Chartists themselves or historians have acknowledged and that where unfairness existed it was in the law itself and in legal procedure rather than from legal personnel acting with class bias. Epstein has demonstrated that earlier radicals used the courts as theatres in which to express their political faith, but against this Fellague Ariouat has suggested that the

¹ M. Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London, 1980), 219-239; J. Saville, *1848* (Cambridge, 1987), 166-199

Chartists tended not to use the courts as arenas for airing their political beliefs.² Jenkins and Foster suggested that the outcome of the government's conspiracy show trial in March 1843, whereby the sentences of imprisonment were never carried out, was a deliberate act of 'liberalisation' on the part of the government.³

Whether the outcome of the 1843 'show trial' really was the result of government liberalisation or whether it was due to the decision of the judges interpreting legal procedure and against the wishes of the government must be re-examined. How far Fellague Ariouat's interpretations are applicable to the 1842 and 1843 trials must be considered. Whether Chartist defendants used their trials as platforms for expressing their political beliefs as did earlier radicals, and if so how these political beliefs compared to those of earlier radicals, will be enquired into. The failure of the strike will be related to the collapse of Chartism and to the decline of the Chartist constitutional mass platform agitation strategy. However the Government's dealings with the Anti-Corn Law League (ACLL) must first be examined.

The Government and the Anti-Corn Law League

After the strike had failed the Prime Minister Sir Robert Peel and the Home Secretary Sir James Graham paid much attention to the activities of the ACLL. Graham arranged for a barrister to build up a pamphlet, based on access to the government's papers as well as to journals, giving all evidence available in support of the League having fomented the strike in order to pressurise the government into repealing the Corn Laws. J. W. Croker was then asked to work the pamphlet up into an article, with further suggestions from Graham and Peel, which was published as the 'Anti Corn Law Agitation' in the *Quarterly Review* of December 1842.⁴

² J. M. Fellague Ariouat, 'Rethinking Partisanship in the Conduct of the Chartist Trials 1839-1848', *Albion*, vol. 29, No. 4, Winter (1997), 596-621; J. M. Fellague Ariouat, 'The Politics of Trial Procedure in the Chartist Trials in England and Wales 1839-1848' (PhD, Birmingham, 1995), 12; J. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England* (Oxford, 1994), 39

³ J. Foster, 'Introduction', in M. Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London, 1980), 14-19

⁴ Sir James Graham Papers, Cambridge University Library, Bundle 53A, Graham to Peel, 2 September 1842; Sir Robert Peel Papers, BL Add. MS 40,447, ff. 344-7, Graham to Peel, 18 November 1842; J. W. Croker, 'Anti Corn Law Agitation', *Quarterly Review*, VLXXI (December 1842), 244-314

The Leaguers had certainly discussed the idea of stopping the mills; and such talk was especially prevalent in February and March and again in July and early August. The League's lecturers, especially John Finnigan and Timothy Falvey in Manchester in late July, had been responsible for stirring up discontent, and talk by Leaguers at the League conferences at Manchester in February and London in July, and by some of the delegates on their return to Manchester at the very start of August, had brought the tactic of a political strike back into discussion. In February and March prominent Leaguers such as Robert Greg and the free trade supporting *Stockport Advertiser* were suggesting that unemployed operatives laid off due to lack of work because of restrictions on commerce should be sent to their original parish settlements in the countryside as an attack on the landowners and aristocracy who would have to maintain them by vastly increased poor rates. Ashdown, a delegate from London to the London League conference in July, had declared that the mills should be stopped and had been invited to discuss his ideas with the London Leaguers who had organised the conference, though this was no doubt to remove the issue from the floor of the conference. The Bayley brothers of Stalybridge, whose threatened wage reductions had been the immediate cause of the strike, were minor members of the ACLL.⁵ Peel and Graham did not however have access to the highly embarrassing correspondence between John Bright and Richard Cobden of March 1842 where a forced lockout in Lancashire and Yorkshire was discussed but dismissed on the grounds of impracticality.⁶

Peel and Graham felt that they did not have a legal case against the League but they nevertheless believed that the article was convincing proof of the League's moral responsibility for the strike through the language of the League leaders, lecturers and press. Graham's aim was to use the article to deter people from contributing to the League's £50,000 appeal fund which he suspected might be used to fund another attempt at a forced strike; and for this reason Graham was anxious to have the article published as quickly as possible before the fund appeal really got under way. In the event Graham and Peel were unsuccessful in damaging the appeal fund.⁷ Graham also reprimanded those free trade magistrates whom he felt had deliberately allowed the strike to gain a

⁵ J. W. Croker, 'Anti Corn Law Agitation', *Quarterly Review*, VLXXI (December 1842), 244-314

⁶ Bright Papers, Add. MS 43,383, Bright to Cobden, 9 March 1842; Cobden Papers, BL Add. MS 43,649 Cobden to Bright, 12 March 1842

⁷ Sir Robert Peel Papers, BL Add. MS 40,447, ff. 344-7, Graham to Peel, 18 November 1842

foothold and consulted the government law officers on the possibility of legal action against them, however no legal action was ultimately taken.⁸

The Government and the Chartists

The main attention of the government was focused on the Chartists in the autumn and winter of 1842 following the strike. Sir James Graham viewed the strike as overtly political from as early as Monday 15 August believing that there existed a conspiracy between the trades and the Chartists. Graham noted that the ringleaders of the strike were among the better-paid workmen and that trade was improving, evidence that the strike was political rather than economic in nature.⁹

That 1842 was considered by the Government to be the highpoint of the Chartist threat to the state is demonstrated by the Government's creation of no less than three Special Commissions and attempted creation of a fourth. This was in addition to trials before judges at assizes elsewhere and before magistrates in quarter and petty sessions. The key trials were the Special Commissions for the Cheshire, Lancashire, Potteries and Black Country strikes held at Chester, Liverpool and Stafford in October 1842, the Yorkshire 1842 summer assizes in September, and the famous conspiracy show trial of Feargus O'Connor and fifty-eight other Chartist leaders and activists at the Lancaster spring assizes in March 1843.¹⁰ More people were arrested and tried for seditious and public order offences following the strike than in either 1839/40 or 1848. About one 1500 prisoners were being held in jail for their part in the strike by the end of August. This is an indication of the seriousness of the perceived threat to the existing political order and of the mass support which the Chartist challenge received in 1842. There were mass arrests of the rank and file as well as of the national leaders and local activists. Where the evidence was weak the magistrates proceeded summarily at petty sessions, preferring the certainty of immediate punishment for a more minor offence rather than committing for trial at assizes or Special Commission with the chance of

⁸ PRO HO 48/34, Law Officers, cases 40, 42, 43 and 44 respecting the conduct of magistrates, November 1842; A. G. Rose, 'Truckling Magistrates of 1842', *Transactions of the Lancashire and Cheshire Antiquarian Society*, 83 (1985), 40-70

⁹ Sir James Graham Papers, Bundle 52A, Graham to Sir William Warre, 15 August 1842

¹⁰ PRO HO 27/67, ff. 198-256, Criminal Register, Lancashire, 1842; PRO HO 27/66, ff. 112-6, Criminal Register, Cheshire, Chester Special Commission, 5 October 1842; PRO HO 27/68, Criminal Registers Staffordshire, Stafford Special Commission, 1 October 1842; *Northern Star*, 15 October 1842

acquittal. Many were dismissed, released on recognisances, or fined at petty sessions. Large numbers of prisoners appeared before the magistrates at petty sessions in Lancashire, Cheshire, the West Riding, Cumberland, Staffordshire, Shropshire, Worcestershire, Warwickshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire. However at least 1045 were tried before quarter sessions, assizes and Special Commissions in England in 1842 for their part in the strike. In comparison only 467 prisoners in England and Wales were tried for political offences in 1839/40 and only around 207 Chartist prisoners were to be tried at assizes in England and Scotland in 1848.¹¹

At least 604 defendants from Lancashire and Cheshire appeared before quarter sessions or the Special Commissions in 1842 for their part in the strike.¹² 187 were tried at the Liverpool Special Commission and eighty-nine were tried at the Cheshire Special Commission in October 1842.¹³ In the Midlands at least twenty-nine defendants in Nottinghamshire, five in Shropshire and two in Worcestershire appeared before quarter sessions and assizes in 1842. 276 prisoners were indicted to appear before the Stafford special commission in October 1842; 274 of whom were actually tried in October. Of these fifty-five were indicted for offences in South Staffordshire and 221 for offences in the Potteries. At least a further thirty-two from the Potteries and South Staffordshire appeared before quarter sessions in 1842.¹⁴ No Special Commission was ultimately held for the East Midlands; a reflection of the strike's peaceful nature in the East Midlands. The toll of those tried for their part in the strike in Yorkshire was smaller than in the Northwest and the Midlands. 190 defendants were indicted at the Yorkshire 1842 summer assizes for their part in the strike.¹⁵ In Scotland the Chartist activists who lead the strike in Dundee, and a handful of the Clackmannanshire, Ayrshire and Lanarkshire

¹¹ 'Progress of Crime in the United Kingdom', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, VI (1843), 226; PRO PCOM 1/46, Central Criminal Court Sessions Papers, v. 16, 1842; 'Return', *PP* (1840) vol. 38, 691-750; L. Radinowicz, *History of the English Criminal Law* (London, 1968), vol. 4, 249; C. Godfrey, 'The Chartist Prisoners, 1839-41', *International Review of Social History*, 24 (1979), 191; R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement* (London, 1894), 335-344; *Hansard*, Third Series, LVIII (1841), 751-2

¹² 'Progress of Crime in the United Kingdom', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, VI (1843), 226

¹³ PRO HO/27/67, ff. 232-241, Criminal Register, Lancashire, 1842; PRO HO/27/66, ff. 112-6, Criminal Register, Cheshire, 1842; *Northern Star*, 15 October 1842

¹⁴ 'Progress of Crime in the United Kingdom', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, VI (1843), 226; PRO ASSI 6/6, Calendar of Prisoners Stafford Special Commission, October 1842; PRO PCOM 2/401, County Prison Stafford Sheriff's Gaol Register, 1842

¹⁵ *Northern Star*, 3, 10 August 1842

miners were tried at the Court of Justiciary in Edinburgh.¹⁶ In London four prisoners were tried at the Old Bailey; the London equivalent of trial at assizes. The remainder of the hundred or so prisoners arrested at the public meetings and for posting bills advertising the meetings were tried summarily before the London magistrates.¹⁷

There were many more convictions and sentences of imprisonment and transportation for seditious and public order offences in the 1842/43 trials than in those of 1839/40 or 1848; a further indication of the mass support the Chartist challenge received in 1842. Of the at least 1045 who were tried before Special Commissions, quarter sessions or assizes in England in 1842 for their part in the strike 923 were convicted. Seventy-five of them were transported. Others traversed to the 1843 assizes. In comparison only 397 political prisoners were convicted in England and Wales in 1839-40. Only eight were transported for political offences in 1839 and 1840.¹⁸

The famous trial of Feargus O'Connor and fifty-eight other national and Lancashire leaders for seditious conspiracy took place at the Lancaster spring assize in March 1843. Some of the local Cheshire activists who were among the real originators of the strike in the Hyde near Ashton had been tried and convicted at the Chester Special Commission in early October 1842 in what was a test run by the Attorney General for the larger sedition and conspiracy trial. Peel and Graham had hoped to try O'Connor, as well as Thomas Cooper and William Ellis, for High Treason. But just before the October Special Commissions opened the law officers advised that the evidence for all three only amounted to a lesser charge of seditious conspiracy.¹⁹ The Attorney General Sir

¹⁶ *Scotsman*, 28, 31 December 1842, 4, 7, 14, 18 January 1843; A. Broun, *Reports of Cases before the High Courts and Circuit Courts of Justiciary in Scotland during the Years 1842-45* (Edinburgh, 1844-46), 480, 512; Sir Archibald Alison, *Some Account of my Life and Writings* (Edinburgh, 1883), 498

¹⁷ PRO PCOM 1/46, Central Criminal Court Sessions Papers, v. 16, 1842; PRO HO 16/7, Old Bailey Sessions, 1842; PRO HO 26/48, Criminal Registers, Middlesex, 1842; *Times*, 24 August 1842

¹⁸ PRO HO 27/67, ff. 198-276, Criminal Register, Lancashire, 1842; PRO HO 27/66, ff. 112-6, Criminal Register, Cheshire, 1842; PRO ASSI 6/6, Calendar of Prisoners Stafford Special Commission, October 1842; PRO PCOM 2/401, County Prison Stafford Sheriff's Gaol Register, 1842; PRO HO 27/68, ff. 509-518, Criminal Registers Yorkshire, County Assizes York, September 1842; PRO PCOM 1/46, Central Criminal Court Sessions Papers, v. 16, 1842; PRO HO 16/7, Old Bailey Sessions, 1842; PRO HO 26/48, Criminal Registers, Middlesex, 1842; 'Return', PP (1840) vol. 38, 691-750; *Northern Star*, 27 August, 3, 10 September, 15 October 1842; *Times*, 24 August 1842; 'Progress of Crime in the United Kingdom', *Journal of the Statistical Society*, VI (1843), 226; L. Radinowicz, *History of the English Criminal Law* (London, 1968), 249; C. Godfrey, 'The Chartist Prisoners, 1839-41', *International Review of Social History*, 24 (1979), 191

¹⁹ Sir Robert Peel Papers, BL Add. MS 40,447, f. 198-203, Graham to Peel, 30 September 1842, f. 215 Graham to Peel, 3 October 1842

Frederick Pollock and Solicitor General Sir William Follet instead planned to catch O'Connor in a monster indictment which included those Chartist activists in Ashton and neighbourhood who had started the strike and been prominent in its opening and all the delegates to the Manchester NCA and Executive conference. Pollock explained to Graham that he proposed 'to charge O'Connor as a general conspirator with the others and not to proceed against him for libel merely, or for acting as a delegate, or taking part at the meeting of delegates. I propose to try him in the same indictment with the worst of the defendants who headed mobs, made seditious speeches, and stopped mills and factories. I shall blend in one accusation the head and the hands, the bludgeon and the pen, and let the jury and the public see in one case the whole crime.'²⁰ Feargus O'Connor and the fifty-eight others charged in the monster indictment all traversed from the Liverpool Special Commission. The Law Officers, Peel and Graham then hoped to have the trial held before the Queen's Bench in London, but this was decided against as it would have caused further delay, so the trial under the monster indictment took place at the Lancaster 1843 spring assizes instead.²¹ Here the government was wielding the ideological authority of the law signalling that the Chartists were lawless and reinforcing the aristocratic constitution which was based on the legitimising ideology of the majesty, as well as the justice and mercy, of the law.²²

The Lancaster State Trial and Government 'Liberalisation'

The sentences of imprisonment imposed on O'Connor and other national Chartist leaders at the Lancaster 1843 spring assizes government 'show trial' were never carried out. However Jenkins does not present a convincing case when he argues that the government deliberately allowed O'Connor and the other national Chartist leaders to escape punishment. It would be unwise to mark out the trial of O'Connor, as Foster does in his introduction to Jenkin's book, as a first deliberate step in 'liberalisation' on the part of the government.²³ It is certainly true that the trial was conducted in a more conciliatory manner than were the Special Commissions in October 1842. However this

²⁰ Sir James Graham Papers, Bundle 54A, Sir Frederick Pollock to Pollock to Graham, 9 October 1842

²¹ Sir James Graham Papers, Bundle 54A, Graham to Sir Frederick Pollock, 17 October 1842, Bundle 54A, Pollock to Graham, 13 October 1842, Bundle 54B, Pollock to Graham, 21 October, Bundle 55A, Pollock to Graham, 7 November 1842

²² D. Hay, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', in D. Hay *et al*, *Albion's Fatal Tree* (London, 1975), 17-64; E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, (London, 1990), 258-69

²³ M. Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London, 1980), 13-19, 219-239

was a natural result of the length of time that had elapsed since the strike's failure and because it was obvious that Chartism, as a mass movement, was collapsing. In March 1843 the Attorney General, Sir Frederick Pollock, did still hope to obtain a conviction against Feargus O'Connor. In his addresses to the court Pollock certainly did not try to play down the political nature of strike as Jenkins suggests. It is true that Pollock declared that Chartist principles were not on trial and that the defendants were not being tried for their political beliefs. However he maintained that a strike to enforce those political beliefs was conspired at by O'Connor and the others and was illegal. In fact it became clear that the Attorney General was engaged in a political prosecution when he ordered the acquittal of one of the defendants on the grounds that the defendant was never mentioned in connection with the Charter. Instead of downplaying the political nature of the strike, as Jenkins claims, the Attorney General made it plain at the time of the trial itself that the government was prosecuting O'Connor and the fifty-eight others because they had allegedly tried to intimidate, by means of the strike, Parliament, the Queen and the Government into enacting the Charter.²⁴

The Attorney General, on behalf of the government, made every effort to secure the conviction of O'Connor. Jenkins misinterprets a line in a letter written by of one of the junior counsel at the trial and northern circuit revising barrister, William Frederick Pollock, the Attorney General's son. Pollock wrote to a friend just after the trial had closed that 'The result, however (at present at least), is satisfactory, and the trial will have answered its object.' Jenkins interprets this as evidence of a prearranged plan to let O'Connor and the others escape. However the letter was written on 14 March after O'Connor had been convicted but before the Queen's Bench had set aside the conviction due to a technicality in the indictment. The result was satisfactory because O'Connor as well as the principal Chartist leaders had been convicted and the trial had answered its object because the trial had shown the Chartist leaders to have been deeply implicated in the strike at least after it began. The qualification in parentheses refers to the unwelcome possibility that the Queen's Bench might uphold the objection over the drawing up of the indictment. In fact the prosecution were very disappointed at the trial judge Baron Rolfe's lenient summing up. The younger Pollock believed that Rolfe's 'summing up fell very short of our expectations. It was feeble, frigid and timid; he frittered away the whole of our case, and this I say without imputing to him any want of

²⁴ M. Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London, 1980), 219-239

impartiality, for he was perfectly free from fault in that respect; but either he was fatigued by his extraordinary exertions during so many days, or else in the great pains he had taken to dissect the evidence – picking out the parts which applied to each person, and which was a most necessary part of his duty – he totally lost sight of the great features of the case.²⁵

The written correspondence between Graham and Peel at the time of the Lancaster state trial also provides strong evidence against any policy on the part of the government to deliberately allow O'Connor and the others to escape punishment. After hearing of O'Connor's not guilty verdict on the fourth count but before hearing of his conviction on the fifth count Graham told Peel that 'I am afraid Feargus O'Connor has escaped; but we have convicted fifteen very dangerous men.' Later that day after hearing from George Maule, the Treasury Solicitor, Graham wrote again to Peel that 'Since I sent you the letter from Lancaster Mr Maule has forwarded to me the enclosed, in which it appears that Feargus O'Connor is convicted, but on a minor count.' Graham and Peel obviously did hope for a conviction against O'Connor and were disappointed that he was only convicted on the minor count. O'Connor was also obviously their chief target. Graham continued, apprehensive of the legal fault in the indictment, 'They will all probably move in arrest of judgement next term; but to have obtained a verdict against so large a portion of the most violent Chartists is a good deed done.'²⁶

Thirty-one of the fifty-nine defendants, including O'Connor and all of the most prominent Chartist leaders, were convicted at the Lancaster 1843 spring assizes. A point of law regarding the wording of the indictment had been raised by the defence at the trial and as the trial had initially been planned to take place before the Queen's Bench sentencing and argument over the point of law took place at the Queen's Bench in May and June 1843. After gaining the conviction of O'Connor and the others the Attorney General and Solicitor General pressed for their sentencing. There is no convincing evidence at this stage of any policy by the government to allow O'Connor and the others to escape punishment as Jenkins and Foster suggest. The escape of O'Connor and the others was the result of Lord Denman's decision at the Queen's Bench to uphold the legal objection raised by the defence as to the faulty drawing up of the indictment. This

²⁵ Sir William Frederick Pollock, *Personal Remembrances* (London, 1887), 204-205

²⁶ Peel Papers, BL Add. MS 40,448, ff. 234-6, Graham to Peel, 10 March 1843

fault in the indictment as to the location where the offences took place could have been an oversight in the drawing up of the indictment but was most likely a deliberate attempt by the Attorney General to secure conviction by having as wide a location as possible in order to implicate the Manchester NCA Conference members and Executive in whatever disturbances took place. No sentence was passed because Lord Denman delivered the judgement that the fifth count of the indictment, upon which O'Connor, George Julian Harney, William Hill the editor of the *Northern Star*, and twelve others had been convicted, failed due to the fault in the indictment. There is no suggestion whatever that Lord Denman was influenced to come to this decision by the wishes of the government. Lord Denman was a stickler for the rule of law, as shown by his earlier decision not to allow a Special Commission for the West Riding against the wishes of Sir James Graham and the Treasury Solicitor, and his later decision to overturn Daniel O'Connell's conviction for seditious conspiracy.²⁷

The fourth count of the indictment, on which sixteen others had been convicted including the NCA Executive members P. M. McDouall, James Leech, John Campbell and J. H. R. Bairstow, was also faulty though Lord Denman declared that it just passed as being legal. However counsel for the defendants convicted on the fourth count continued proceedings to have it overturned on the legal technicality and there remained a strong possibility of the fourth count also ultimately being overruled. O'Connor had always been the target of the 'show trial' for the Attorney General, Sir James Graham and Sir Robert Peel. It appears most likely that the law officers allowed proceedings on the fourth count to lapse because O'Connor had already escaped on the fifth count. Much had been made by the Chartists that they were being prosecuted while no prosecutions were laid against ACLL members and the government felt some sensitivity over this charge. For O'Connor to have walked free while other lesser Chartists were convicted would likewise have risked adverse public opinion. In any case the law officers and government knew that the conviction of the sixteen others on the fourth count meant that they had the threat hanging over them of proceedings being resumed so the defendants were likely to keep quiet in the future without the government having to continue proceedings. P. M. McDouall, another important target for the government who was convicted on the fourth count, had already fled into exile in France. The law officers had reason to think that judgement would anyway also be arrested on the fourth

²⁷ *Reports of State Trials 1839-43*, New Series, vol. 4 (London, 1892), 1231-47

count if proceedings were carried on with and this was born out in Lord Denman's ruling on Daniel O'Connell's appeal against his conviction for seditious conspiracy and sentence of one years imprisonment in 1844 following the Irish repeal agitation and the Clontarf meeting of October 1843. In Daniel O'Connell's case Lord Denman declared that the court had considered the fourth count at the Lancaster show trial too general and so it seems probable that if proceedings had continued judgement would also eventually have been arrested on the fourth count.²⁸ It also seems likely that the government let the proceedings lapse because by the summer of 1843 its attention was now on Daniel O'Connell's repeal movement in Ireland. Graham in particular feared civil war in Ireland in the summer of 1843. The first of O'Connell's monster meetings in Ireland had been held in April 1843 and the Clontarf meeting was attempted in October 1843. By the autumn of 1843 the government was also increasingly concerned with the Rebecca Riots in rural Wales and was considering a new Special Commission to deal with it. With Chartism as a mass movement now increasingly a spent force it is not surprising that proceedings were quietly forgotten about with the government's attention now focussed on Ireland and to a much lesser extent on rural Wales.²⁹

In the spring of 1843 the Government did press home the prosecutions in the Midlands against Thomas Cooper, John Richards (both Stafford 1843 spring assizes), Arthur O'Neill (originally Stafford 1843 spring assizes but moved to the *Stafford 1843* summer assizes), George White (Worcester 1843 spring assizes), and William Jones (Leicester 1843 spring assizes for a speech at the end of the Leicester strike) which arose out of the strike but took place at assizes in 1843 as they had traversed. All the cases were conducted as government prosecutions on the orders of Sir James Graham and all the defendants were convicted and sentenced to between one and two year's imprisonment – a most unpleasant prospect in the goals of the time. The Midlands trials in the spring of 1843 suggest that it is doubtful that the Government had decided upon the liberalisation, in relation to its dealings with the working class leaders in the courts, noted by Foster and Jenkins. Sergeant Talford took O'Neill's, Cooper's and Richards' cases for the law officers and argued that all three had tried to coerce Parliament, the Queen and Government into enacting the Charter through fear. When

²⁸ *Reports of State Trials 1839-43*, New Series, vol. 4 (London, 1892), 1231-47

²⁹ Sir James Graham Papers, Bundle 63A, Graham to Wellington, 10 June 1843, Bundle 65B Graham to Wellington, 24 September 1843; L. McCaffrety, *Daniel O'Connell and the Repeal Year* (Kentucky, 1966), 51-91, 173-213

Cooper and Richards were sentenced to lengthy terms of imprisonment at the Queen's Bench in May 1843 following their conviction at Stafford the Solicitor General Sir William Follett appeared at the Queen's Bench to address the court on sentencing and entreated the court to pass a severe sentence on Cooper.³⁰ These were still all crown prosecutions and the government was pressing for convictions and jail sentences against the Chartist strike leaders in the Midlands at the very time when, in the view of Jenkins and Foster, the government had supposedly decided on a policy of liberalisation in its dealing with the working class leadership.

The unexpected and unplanned outcome of the Lancaster 'show trial', whereby sentence was never carried out, occurred despite of, not because of, the actions of the Government and was certainly not part of a policy of deliberate liberalisation, though it worked in favour of the Government's image by portraying it as merciful, bolstering the aristocratic constitution which was based on the legitimising ideology of the justice and mercy of the law which was available to all.³¹ Nevertheless this is not to deny an increased liberalisation of the state in the 1840s, which indeed had already begun earlier in 1842 with Peel's first budget. However the shock of 1842 was a further incentive for the governments of the 1840s to continue limited liberalisation in social policy with free-trade, concessions over the factory acts and less harsh administration of the New Poor Law.

Class Justice

Fellague Ariouat's work is an important corrective to a simple 'class justice' approach to Chartist trials but it perhaps goes too far in discounting the class bias of legal personnel. Fellague Ariouat suggested that historians such as Saville and the Chartists themselves expected legal personnel to act in a biased fashion but that the Chartists also wrongly believed that the law and legal procedure was unbiased. However there are weaknesses in this argument. Significantly the Chartists did normally expect the judges to act in a fair way as Epstein has pointed out. It was the prosecution team and special

³⁰ *Reports of State Trials*, new series, vol. 4 (London, 1892), 1316-1330; Thomas Cooper, *The Life of Thomas Cooper* (London, 1872), 235; PRO HO 49/8, f. 457, HO to George Maule, 16 February 1843

³¹ D. Hay, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', in D. Hay *et al.*, *Albion's Fatal Tree* (London, 1975), 17-64; E. P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters*, (London, 1990), 258-69

juries rather than judges whom the Chartists normally accused of class bias.³² In fact there was bias exhibited by the legal personnel in the 1842 and 1843 trials. As we saw above the Attorney General requested the acquittal of one of the defendants in the show trial simply because the defendant had not been a Chartist. At a lower level the magistrates often acted in a biased way for example refusing to grant bail to Arthur O'Neill, George White and other defendants thus unlawfully keeping them in prison before their trials. At the Special Commissions the defendants were tried by special juries with a high property qualification rather than by a normal jury. In general the judges did act in a fair manner. The Chartists themselves expected this and in the trials Thomas Cooper praised Lord Denman and Feargus O'Connor praised Baron Rolfe. However Lord Abinger did make biased political speeches attacking Chartist principles to the grand juries at the Liverpool and Chester Special Commissions.³³

The argument of Fellague Ariouat that bias lay more in legal procedure and the law itself rather than emanating from legal personnel but that the Chartists themselves did not recognise this is not entirely fair. It was obvious to the Chartists that the law was biased in the favour of the aristocracy and holders of real property. Certainly it is true that most Chartists recognised and respected the rule of law and in the 1842 strikes the local activists almost invariably advised the strikers to stay within the law and to maintain 'peace, law and order'. However this was also almost automatically conjoined with the remark that they themselves had had no part in making those laws which they were called upon to obey. A central tenet of Chartist political belief was that a monopoly Parliament was producing class legislation in which working men had no say. Of course this would apply to statute law rather than judge made common law. Although legal procedure was often biased against the Chartist defendants in 1842, for example many were tried in batches rather than individually, there were crucial times in the 1842 and 1843 trials where legal procedure in conjunction with fair judges benefited the defendants against the wishes of the government. The government law officers had wished for more time to study the depositions before the creation of a Special

³² J. M. Fellague Ariouat, 'Rethinking Partisanship in the Conduct of the Chartist Trials 1839-1848', *Albion*, vol. 29, No. 4, Winter (1997), 596-621; J. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England* (Oxford, 1994), 39

³³ F. O'Connor (ed.), *Trial of Feargus O'Connor and Fifty-Eight Others* (London, 1843), i-iii; *Reports of State Trials 1839-43*, New Series, vol. 4 (1892), 1316, 1387-8, 1416-22; Peter Campbell Scarlett, *A Memoir of the Right Honourable James, First Lord Abinger* (London, 1877), 168-9

Commission for the West Riding. However as the Yorkshire summer assizes was already sitting, and the law officers did not specify what new evidence they hoped to uncover, the presiding judges, Mr Justice Maule and Lord Chief Justice Denman, refused to grant permission for a Special Commission to be set up ruling that legal procedure required that the strikers be tried at the Yorkshire summer assizes.³⁴ The refusal of the judges to allow a Special Commission in Yorkshire appears to have saved some of the local West Riding Chartist strike leaders, who had delivered strike speeches but not actually gone on the processions themselves, from prosecution in Yorkshire.³⁵ More importantly we have already seen that the outcome of the 1843 'show trial', whereby the Chartist leaders escaped sentence, was due to legal procedure and the fair interpretation of that legal procedure by the judges.³⁶

The Courts as Arenas for Expressing Chartist Beliefs

Epstein has demonstrated that popular radicals in the 1790s and in 1816-20 used the courts as arenas for the expression of their political beliefs. Against this Fellague Ariouat suggested that, in contrast to earlier radicals, few Chartists used their trials as opportunities for the expounding of their political beliefs in the period 1839-48.³⁷ However in the 1842 and 1843 trials this was far from the case. The trial defence speeches turned out to be the last major opportunity the Chartist activists would be assured of public interest in their speeches until the revival of the Chartist mass platform in 1848. Many of the Chartist activists used their trial defence speeches as an opportunity to re-affirm their belief in universal suffrage and the other points of the Charter and their willingness to suffer imprisonment for their political beliefs. The memory of past martyrs in the cause of political and religious liberty was invoked. For Cooper at the Staffordshire 1843 spring assizes 'If then I am in the post of danger, it is not for me to shrink, but rather to remember the spirit of our forefathers, the martyrs of our fatherland, and attempt at a humble distance to imitate them.'³⁸ At the end of his

³⁴ *Northern Star*, 3, 10 August 1842; Sir Joseph Arnould, *Memoir of Thomas First Lord Denman* (London, 1873), vol. 2, 137-146

³⁵ Sir James Graham Papers, Bundle 53A, Graham to Lord Wharncliffe, 2 September 1842

³⁶ *Reports of State Trials 1839-43*, New Series, vol. 4 (1892), 1231-47

³⁷ J. Epstein, *Radical Expression: Political Language, Ritual, and Symbol in England* (Oxford, 1994), 39; J. M. Fellague Ariouat, 'The Politics of Trial Procedure in the Chartist Trials in England and Wales 1839-1848' (PhD, Birmingham, 1995), 12

³⁸ *Northern Star*, 22 October 1842

defence speech George Julian Harney referred directly to Thomas Muir who had been sentenced to transpiration by Braxfield at the Scottish trials in 1793 following the meeting of the conventions: ‘Yes in the language of the martyred Muir, “It is a good cause; it shall ultimately prevail; it shall finally triumph,” - the conviction that cheered that patriot on the eve of his banishment from his loved land, is my consolation on the threshold of a dungeon.’³⁹

At the Lancaster 1843 spring assizes show trial the defendants were successful in presenting themselves as nobly suffering for upholding their political faith. Remarkable testimony of this came from no less a person than the trial judge Baron Rolfe himself. Following the day occupied by the speeches of several of the defendants Rolfe remarked at dinner that they reminded him of seventeenth century Puritans. William Frederick Pollock, though considering that ‘mere selfish vanity, and the lowest ambition of personal notoriety, appeared to be the leading motives of the Chartists’ was forced to admit that ‘They all spoke well, with great propriety and power of language; and although this was the less remarkable, as most of them were paid orators who had been for two or three years in the constant habit of speaking, yet they all surprised us by their eloquence.’⁴⁰

The trials were used as an opportunity to denounce class legislation and insist on the Charter as the cure for society’s ills. In his defence speech at the Lancaster spring assizes in 1843 George Julian Harney told the court that ‘distress is not confined to one part of the country...And why is this state of things? Because, as a Chartist, I believe that the people are not represented, and their interests are not cared for in the legislature...Does not the present state of things proclaim, trumpet-tongued, that the privileged classes of society have abused the powers they have exercised...The remedy for the present evils I believe will be found in investing the people with their rights.’⁴¹

The continuity of Chartist political ideas with those of eighteenth and early nineteenth century popular radicalism is apparent in the trial defence speeches in 1842 and 1843.⁴²

³⁹ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 240

⁴⁰ Sir William Frederick Pollock, *Personal Remembrances* (London, 1887), 200-205

⁴¹ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 240

⁴² J. Belchem, ‘Republicanism, Popular Constitutionalism and the Radical Platform in Early Nineteenth Century England’, *Social History*, 6 (1981), 1-35

In the trial defence speeches the most commonly used argument in support of Chartist political beliefs was the historical justification derived from the ancient English constitution and the rights of freeborn Englishmen. The justification from natural right was not completely absent in the defence speeches. The justification from natural right, derived from the belief that God created all men equal, was present in George Julian Harney's declamation that eventually the Chartists would 'by the force of reason and the march of mind oblige monarchs to acknowledge the justice of their principles, and compel the privileged classes to yield to the rights of man – rights based on this glorious principle, "Do unto thy brother as thou wouldest thy brother should do unto thee." Gentlemen, that principle is altogether violated under the present system of legislation.'⁴³

However overwhelmingly it was by the ancient English constitution and the rights of the freeborn Englishman rather than by natural rights that the Chartists justified their political activities and beliefs at the trials. In this the defence speeches showed a great continuity with the political beliefs earlier radicals expressed at their trials in the 1790s and 1816-20.⁴⁴ We can see this appeal to the historical English constitution in the defence speeches of Arthur O'Neill at the Stafford summer assizes in 1843, of Richard Otley and Thomas Storah at the Lancaster spring assizes in 1843, and of Thomas Cooper at the Stafford Special Commission in October 1842. Arthur O'Neill in his defence speech proclaimed to the court that 'He had called the Government a usurped Government, and he believed that the people, according to the ancient constitution of England, were and ought to be a branch of the government; but, by the act of Henry VI, the franchise was limited, and the people were excluded from their share in the government, till at length those who professed to represent the people had no connection with them. Instead of coming in by the door of the constitution, like thieves and robbers they had come over the wall by force. The house of Commons, instead of representing the people, only represented bricks and mortar, clods, iron, ships, sugar – not hearts, minds, intelligence – in short the people. Such a government could not be other than usurped. He was charged with bringing the House of Commons into contempt, but that was quite unnecessary – they had brought themselves into

⁴³ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 240

⁴⁴ J. Epstein, "Our Real Constitution": Trial Defence and Radical Memory in the Age of Revolution', in J. Vernon, *Re-reading the Constitution* (Cambridge, 1996), 22-51

contempt.⁴⁵ The Ashton Chartist activist Thomas Storah, in his defence speech at the Lancaster 1843 spring assizes, told the court that, 'I have advocated the right of the people to enjoy political freedom, because, in the ancient laws of this country – if we examine the history of the country – we find that in the reign of King Ethelred, universal suffrage was the law of the land.'⁴⁶ At Lancaster Richard Otley, the Sheffield Chartist activist who had attended the Manchester NCA Conference, had prepared what he described to the court as 'a defence got up with some pains, and in which I had drawn evidence from eminent men, and great authorities – Blackstone, Coke, and Fortescue – as well as the usages of our country in ancient times – to demonstrate that what we seek is not a change of the constitution, but a reformation.'⁴⁷

The appeal to the rights of freeborn Englishmen and the appeal to the ancient English constitution was strongly present in Thomas Cooper's defence speech at the Stafford special commission. Cooper declared that he 'became attached to the legal enactments of my country because I believe that in the legal enactments of our glorious Alfred, and our other Saxon monarchs – in the Magna Carta, and the Bill of Rights, and in all our judicial institutions, there were luminous traces of the broad and enlightened principles of freedom...the principle of the Charter were no other than the embodiment of the principles contained in the theory of the British Constitution.' Cooper affirmed the rights of the freeborn Englishman and appealed to the memory of past English men who had suffered in the struggle against tyranny. Cooper declared in court that 'I am proud that I am an Englishman...not because the advocates of freedom are left unprotected and oppressed, but I am proud of my country because it has produced men of the highest intellect who have suffered deeply, and with dignity, in the sacred cause of human freedom... Since I am an Englishman, I belong to a land which has produced men whose independence no tyranny could crush, whose fortitude no tyranny could subdue.'⁴⁸ The Chartist defendants in 1842 and 1843 certainly made use of the courts as arena in which to expound their political beliefs. However their trials were to be the last time the Chartists would be assured of public interest in their speeches for some time to come because Chartism had collapsed as a mass movement following the defeat of the strike.

⁴⁵ *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 12, 19 August 1843

⁴⁶ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 256

⁴⁷ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 248

⁴⁸ *Northern Star*, 22 October 1842

The Failure of the Strike and the Decline of Chartism

Despite their eloquence at the subsequent trials the failure of the strike contributed significantly to the collapse of Chartism as a mass movement at least until its temporary revival in 1848. Certainly the trials in 1842 were as effective in breaking the Chartist movement as was the government repression of the 1790s and the post-war period. It is true that no new repressive legislation was enacted by Peel and Graham in 1842 in contrast to Pitt's *Two Acts* of 1795, *Unlawful Oaths Act* of 1797 and Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800, and Liverpool and Sidmouth's *Six Acts* of 1819; although of course some of this legislation remained on the statute book to impede Chartist organisation. *Habeas Corpus* was not suspended in 1842 in England in contrast to 1794, 1798 and 1817. There were no treason trials in 1842 unlike in 1793 and 1794 and there were no executions for treason in 1842 unlike in 1803 following the Despard Conspiracy or in the post-war period following the Pentridge Rising, the Cato Street Conspiracy and the Scottish Uprising. Nevertheless there were only around two hundred prosecutions for sedition in the 1790s compared to the much higher figure for 1842. Repression was just as effective in 1842 as in the earlier periods. The fear created by the *Two Acts* and the *Six Acts* and the threat of imprisonment without trial had helped silence the earlier upsurges of popular radicalism without the need to actually undertake many prosecutions under the repressive legislation or imprison many people without trial. Chartism was crippled in 1842 by mass arrests, the imprisonment of supporters, and by fear of imprisonment.⁴⁹

The trials removed many local Chartist activists and also many of those who gave committed support to Chartism below the level of the local activists. Those who were arrested but escaped trial were potentially frightened out of further active support for Chartism. By using the trials to deter people from further Chartist activity effective use

⁴⁹ E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1968), 161, 700; M. T. Davies, "Good for the Public Example": Daniel Isaac Eaton, Prosecution, Punishment and Recognition 1793-1812', in M. T. Davies (ed.), *Radicalism and Revolution in Britain 1775-1848* (London, 2000), 110-132; L. Radinowicz, *History of the English Criminal Law* (London, 1968), vol. 4, 243-6; C. Emsley, 'Repression, "Terror" and the Rule of Law in England during the Decade of the French Revolution', *English Historical Review*, 100 (1985), 801-25; C. Emsley, 'An Aspect of Pitt's "Terror": Prosecutions for Sedition during the 1790s', *Social History*, 6 (1981), 155-84

was made of the majesty of the law by the government.⁵⁰ In the Potteries the Chartist leaders John Richards, Joseph Capper, Henry Yates and George Hemmings, as well as Thomas Cooper, were all imprisoned and William Ellis was transported. From the Black Country and Birmingham Arthur O'Neill, George White and Joseph Linney were imprisoned.⁵¹ In Yorkshire the Chartist leaders James Henry Dewhirst, Isaac Clisset and William Sheldrake were imprisoned.⁵² The Northwest Chartist activists William Moorhouse, Robert Wilde, James Wilde, Stephen Hirst, John Fairhurst and Samuel Lees, who all had been among the original originators of the strike at Hyde, were imprisoned.⁵³ In Scotland the Dundee Chartist leaders were either removed from the scene by imprisonment or had gone on the run. John Duncan was effectively deterred from further activity when his case was deferred never to be resumed.⁵⁴ In Wales no trials followed the strike in Merthyr. However a number of important activists such as William Miles were victimised and Morgan Williams appears to have been so scared by the threat of possible arrest that he took no further active part in the Chartist movement.⁵⁵ The national and Lancashire Chartist leaders, together with the Chartist leaders from Yorkshire and the East Midlands who attended the NCA Conference in Manchester, who were tried together at the Lancaster 1843 spring assize, of course escaped imprisonment.⁵⁶ However the threat of legal proceedings being resumed remained hanging over them.

The failure of the strike also contributed to the collapse of Chartism by the discrediting of the ultimate 'ulterior measure' of the Chartist mass platform agitation. At the General Convention in 1839 Feargus O'Connor and others, while abandoning the planned month long general strike or 'sacred month' due to the unprepared state of the localities, nevertheless stressed that only a united general strike could force the government into

⁵⁰ D. Hay, 'Property, Authority and the Criminal Law', in D. Hay *et al*, *Albion's Fatal Tree* (London, 1975), 17-64

⁵¹ PRO ASSI 6/6, Calendar of Prisoners Stafford Special Commission, October 1842; PRO PCOM 2/401, County Prison Stafford Sheriff's Gaol Register, 1842; *Reports of State Trials*, new series, vol. 4 (London, 1892), 1249-1422; Thomas Cooper, *Life* (London, 1872), 235; *Northern Star*, 8 April, 19 August 1843

⁵² *Northern Star*, 3, 10 September 1842, 25 March 1843

⁵³ PRO TS 36/26, ff. 1-326, notes of Chester and Liverpool Special Commissions, 1842, R. v. Moorhouse and others; PRO HO 27/66, ff. 112-6, Criminal Register, Cheshire, 1842; *Northern Star*, 15 October 1842

⁵⁴ *Scotsman*, 28, 31 December 1842, 4, 7, 14, 18 January 1843; A. Broun, *Reports of Cases before the High Courts and Circuit Courts of Justiciary in Scotland during the Years 1842-45* (Edinburgh, 1844-46), 480, 512; Sir Archibald Alison, *Some Account of my Life and Writings* (Edinburgh, 1883), 498

⁵⁵ PRO HO 45/265, ff. 56-57, C. J. Napier to HO, Bridgend, 6 September 1842; PRO HO 45/265, ff. 71, C. J. Napier to Bute, Bridgend, 12 September 1842

⁵⁶ *Trial of Feargus O'Connor* (London, 1843), 2

enacting the People's Charter. A previously organised strike as was mooted in 1839 was unlikely ever to take place due to caution, doubts about its likely universality, and government action before the strike could have a chance of taking place. In 1842 the general strike had been realised in the only way that was practically possible, launched by local activists from the local platforms, yet the general strike had failed. 1842 permanently weakened the Chartist movement by showing that even once the ultimate constitutional weapon of the Chartist mass platform agitation was put into operation it did not succeed in destroying the nerve of the government. The defeat of the general strike for the Charter in the Northwest, the West Riding, the Midlands, Scotland and South Wales was the defeat of the Chartist mass platform agitation with its hopes of wringing political change from the government by the threat or implementation of 'ulterior measures'. The 'ulterior measures' of the Chartist mass platform agitation had been discredited by the failure of the strike for the Charter in 1842 in a way that had not happened in 1839, because in 1839 the call for a general strike or 'sacred month' had been rescinded and so the national holiday was never put to the test at that time. The failure of the ultimate 'ulterior measure' of the mass platform agitation in 1842 led to working men turning away from the discredited mass platform agitation, and this was reflected within what remained of the Chartist movement by the move to Feargus O'Connor's Land Plan and by an increasing emphasis on cultural activity in the localities. It is true that the Chartist mass platform agitation was to be briefly revived in 1848, but the Chartist mass platform agitation in 1848 never managed to give itself even the appearance of being a convincing threat to the state and its ultimate 'ulterior measure' had already been revealed as an empty threat.⁵⁷

Chartist activity continued at a much-reduced level after the failure of the strike. The decline was masked to some extent until the spring of 1843 with the raising of funds for trial defences and victim funds and with securing the election of Chartists to Joseph Sturge's Complete Suffrage Conference held at the end of December 1842. There was also interest in the petitions presented to Parliament condemning Lord Abinger's highly political speeches to the grand juries at the Liverpool and Chester Special Commissions and condemning the magistrates for refusing to accept Chartist sympathisers as sureties for bail. However the decline in organisation and mass support became increasingly

⁵⁷ J. Epstein, '1848: Feargus O'Connor and the Collapse of the Mass Platform', in J. Epstein and D. Thompson (eds.), *The Chartist Experience* (London, 1982), 269-310

apparent. For example sales of the *Northern Star* steadily declined from 10,000 copies a week in the summer of 1843 down to 7000 copies a week in the summer of 1844, compared with 40,000 copies a week in 1839. George Julian Harney found little or no Chartist activity in many of the localities while on a tour in the autumn of 1843. Among the activists internal recriminations came to the fore with *Northern Star* editor William Hill's criticism of the Executive becoming increasing vitriolic. Activists were apathetic, the organisation was derailed with the Executive awaiting trial, and mass support was no longer apparent. The breakdown of the Complete Suffrage Conference ruled out the strategy of co-operation by the bulk of the activists with middle class radicals. Thus an important lesson of the strike was lost. The strike had shown that without active middle class support, which despite some sympathy was not forthcoming, the ultimate 'ulterior measure' of the mass platform would not be effective. The NCA Chartist activists decisively rejected the middle class alliance in late 1842. It was left to individual activists such as Henry Vincent and Robert Lowry to shift further to middle class co-operation, while the bulk of the mainstream O'Connellite NCA Chartist activists were increasingly stranded without a mass following.⁵⁸ The ACCL was left as the most powerful popular movement in Britain, although overshadowed in 1843 by O'Connell's Irish repeal movement, with Chartism and the Complete Suffrage movement in decline.

In the longer term the 1842 strike marked a turning point in British working class history, a critical point in the transition independent radicalism to popular liberalism. There was never again to be a political general strike in Britain in the nineteenth century. Despite its peaceful nature the mass platform strategy always carried the threat of forcible intimidation. The failure of the strike produced disillusionment with the strategy of forcible intimidation inherent in the mass platform agitation and the working classes turned increasingly towards industrial trade unionism, friendly societies, free trade, and the popular liberalism of later Victorian England.⁵⁹ This trend was encouraged by limited amounts of state liberalisation in social policy in the 1840s such as further limited factory legislation, repeal of the Corn Laws, and tacit acceptance of the limited implementation of the New Poor Law in many parts of the North, and also by the improvement in the economy even though the benefits of this improvement were

⁵⁸ *Northern Star*, 2 September, 10, 17, 24, 31 December 1842, 7, 14, 21 January 1843

⁵⁹ M. C. Finn, *After Chartism* (Cambridge, 1993), 60-305; T. Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (New York, 1977), 156-327

slight for most of the working classes. After the strike there was not only a growing segregation between industrial and political activity but also an increasing political segregation between the genders as working class women's public involvement in politics all but ended. On the one hand politics became increasingly detached from the workplace and became part of the male dominated public sphere. On the other hand married working class females increasingly, though to a disputed extent, tended to move out of the workplace into the separate sphere of the home.⁶⁰ The general strike, where work and politics were intimately bound together, was the last significant occasion in nineteenth century Britain when working class men and women took part together in political activity.

The significance of the strike is far greater than the existing historiography has allowed. Even recent accounts too often have in effect portrayed the strike as a coda to the rejection of the 1842 National Petition and as being a series of localised outbreaks. This has undoubtedly been due to previous studies focusing merely upon one region and so losing the nation-wide presence of the strike. In the Ashton-under-Lyne and surrounding district the strike was begun by local Chartist activists in order to pre-empt a feared series of three wages reductions by Christmas which the Ashton activists believed the ACCL manufacturers had determined upon as a means of pressurising the government to repeal the Corn Laws. Outside the Northwest the strike was organised and begun by local Chartist activists from local platforms at public meetings, after receiving the news of the strike for the Charter in Manchester. It took the form of the implementation of the most decisive of 'ulterior measures' of the mass platform, but from the local activists following the failure of the national leadership to propose serious 'ulterior measures' at the time of the rejection of the National Petition in May. The strike for the Charter was a nation-wide movement in response to the initial outbreak in Ashton. It was not merely a series of unconnected risings but nor was it part of a national conspiracy. The strike affected all the manufacturing districts, apart from the Northeast and the Glasgow areas. Upon this pattern must be superimposed the miners' strike, especially that in the Midlands and Scotland. Although this had begun before the strike for the Charter and had local Chartists as organisers it was in origin and aim quite separate from the strike for the Charter, though Chartist activists made efforts after the news arrived of the strike for the Charter in Manchester to alter the aims

⁶⁰ D. Thompson, *The Chartists* (London, 1986), 120-51

of the miners strike and make it too for the Charter. The underlying popular concept of the strike for the Charter was remarkably coherent throughout the different regions. Invariably there were those activists who stressed different aspects. However in general the strike was seen as a peaceful, moral, legal and constitutional means of delivering an overwhelming display of united public opinion that would break the nerve of the Government (and Parliament as presently constituted), leaving it with no choice but to enact the Charter. Rather than being a narrowly based, Leninist style conspiracy to create a revolution, the strike reflected an existing pattern of working class experience and behaviour.

Class was present as an identity in the strike but it was not a Marxist form of class-consciousness and remained hazy. Other identities, particularly those of the people, the nation and Nonconformist Christianity were also present, though in many ways these all meant something similar to class. Throughout the strike regions the traditional radical analysis was present. The aristocracy, state Church, pensioners and placemen were attacked along with the millocrats and cotton lords who had now joined the traditional enemies of the people. Appeal was made to the historical English or British constitution and the rights of the freeborn Englishman. The working class or the people, the two meaning more or less the same, viewed social evils as arising from lack of political power. The Charter would guarantee fair wages by giving the workman as well as the employer a voice in the legislation and so bringing minimum wage laws, taxes on machinery and other reforms such as repeal of the Corn Laws, repeal of the New Poor Law, better factory legislation and lower taxes. Inspired by these traditional rather than overly revolutionary goals, Chartist working men and women rallied in considerable numbers to the strike but as we have seen lacked the ability to turn protest into an effective challenge to Parliament. In the face of local authorities bolstered by the military and a self-confident government the strike tended to peter out. In a wider sense, too, the strike proved a turning point in Chartist history, for its failure to implement the ulterior measure undermined the morale of the movement, while its activists were deterred by the repressive arm of the state. The escape from punishment of Feargus O'Connor and the other national Chartist leaders was not part of a deliberate plan of liberalisation, it was the result of the decision of the Queen's Bench on a legal technicality, though retrospectively the government undeservedly benefited from the seeming leniency. Chartism declined after the failure of the strike partly because the

‘ulterior measures’ of the Chartist mass platform agitation were shown to have failed when put into practice but also because the state remained self confident and effective in repression. There was to be no revival of the tactic of the general strike which disappeared from nineteenth century working class protest to be replaced by reformist politics and trade union activity.

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