MR. SMITH

(Concluded from last month)

OWENISM just then was swept into a new and important movement. The Reform Bill of 1832 had shown the workers the spectacle of a bloodless revolution. The English middle class, by a combination of threats, disorder, and political manœuvring, had destroyed the political power of the aristocracy. At the same time they had cheated the working classes of the hopes that they had pinned upon the Reform Bill. Now, a year later, the workers were in effect going to try to " rush " the bourgeois Government as the middle class had rushed the Duke of Wellington's. To the Parliamentary agitation of 1832 succeeded immediately a revolutionary Trades Union movement—in fact, though not in name, a more powerful Syndicalist movement. At the time at which Smith took over the *Crisis* this movement was only represented by one enormous union, the Builders' Union, which had, however, succeeded in gravely disquieting the employers. The flood-tide of Trades* Unionism did not come till the winter of 1833 was well on. It swept up into itself all the small Owenite societies, and accepted the Owenite programme in its entirety.

The Builders' Union already had an unofficial organ, the *Pioneer*, edited by James Morrison. This and the *Crisis* became the national unionist journals. Smith and Morrison found that their views more or less coincided and they worked together on a common policy. The circulation of the *Pioneer*, says Smith in one of his letters, reached the then astounding figure of 30,000.

In January of 1834 there was forged the instrument which was to break down capitalist rule in England and usher in the Socialist State outlined by Robert Owen. The GRAND NATIONAL CONSOLIDATED TRADES UNION was formed, by delegates from trades unions and groups all over the country. Into it were sucked up practically all the existing local bodies. There remained outside it only five unions of any importance or energy and they were completely dwarfed by it. In two months its membership reached half a million—a dizzying total never attained after or before by any union in the century. It was a monstrous growth, this union with its militant Socialist policy; it fills the journals of the time as though it were some pestilence or other natural disaster. The employers were well and thoroughly frightened.

In February the Union had assumed a permanent constitution, had elected an Executive, formed local lodges (generally by crafts) and put its finances on a reasonable basis. It meant business.

It had three leaders. First and most powerful by far was the justly respected Robert Owen. But beside him, and more and more opposed to him, were the two left-wingers, Smith and Morrison. Owen, in spite of his self-confidence, was obviously unfit for his position. It is hard to say it of so great and good a man, but it is the fact that he talked twaddle. Having placed himself at the head of a great and militant union, having given it for its aim the destruction of capitalism, he now attempted to forbid any verbal or other attack upon the employers. He attempted to

* A *trade* union is one covering a single trade, a *trades* union one covering all or many. Say, the London Society of Compositors and the I.W.W.

run a strike policy on an avowed "class peace" basis. As his difficulties increased, he seemed to become more crotchety and difficult to work with; he indulged in attacks on Christianity and turned from Union work to the exposition of his philosophy of life. He became more and more tactless, more and more short-tempered, arrogant and contemptuous of advice.

Smith, compared with him, stands out as a brilliant leader. He was as competent as Owen was incompetent, as clear-headed as he was muddled. He at once saw both the fundamentals of the class-struggle (this is in the year 1834, mind you, not 1884), and the only possible tactics for the Union. Morrison, who became an Executive member of the Union, followed his advice and acted as his spokesman. Thus, for a brief period, Smith was the most competent leader of some 500,000 revolutionary-minded Englishmen —a unique position in modern history.

In the *Pioneer*, in a series of "Letters on Associated Labour" he writes*:

> We know that the operative manufacturer [i.e. factory worker] and in fact the labourer of every description, requires sustenance, raw materials and tools. These are derived from the reserved produce of former labour, which is termed *capital*. That amount of capital in this country is very great, but, brethren, it was you that gave it existence. What hours out of every twenty-four have you not employed in building it up! . . . Reflect, though in the reflection, brethren, I know there is much anguish, how many of your fellow labourers, how many with whom you have communed in friendship, how many connected with you by the respected and the endeared ties of relationship, have sunk in toil and want; pale, sickening and starving; while all the energies of their bodies and of their minds was given to the rearing of this mighty mass, this boasted *capital!* "It is reserved labour," cries McCulloch. "Ay, reserved," shout a hundred bloated capitalists over their French and Spanish wines, "reserved for our present and future prosperity!" From whom and out of what was it reserved? From the clothing and food of the wretched—from the refreshment of the weary—from the wages of those who sink exhausted on their hard pallets after sixteen hours of almost ceaseless labour.

This vivid, almost ferocious, Socialist teaching we find scattered about the pages of the *Pioneer*, at a time when Owen, commonly supposed to be the most advanced and clear-headed Labour thinker of those days, was still exhorting his followers to base their actions on a realisation "that both masters and men were producers."

Smith will perhaps be best remembered for the lecture which he delivered on March 30th, entitled "On the Prospects of Society." In this lecture he outlined for the first time the Soviet idea, and it required no small force of mind and character to be able, at so early a date as this, to pass beyond the common revolutionary aspiration towards Parliamentary democracy. He exposed, in a passage now fairly well known† the unsuitability of geographical constituencies for the representation of the modern industrial proletariat, and outlined the real House of Commons, the "House of Trades," in which "every trade shall be a borough and every trade shall have its council and representatives to conduct its affairs."

But the brief period of high hopes in which such schemes could be taken seriously was coming near to its close. The Government, alarmed beyond measure, turned savagely upon the Union and struck it a heavy blow by seizing some Dorchester agricultural labourers, who had enrolled members, and having them sentenced to transportation under an old statute. All efforts were unsuccessful to reverse this monstrous decision.

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* See my *Revolution*, p. 94.

† It is quoted in Max Beer's History of British Socialism, I., 339, and in my own *Revolution*, p. 98.

The Union involved itself in further and worse difficulties. It enrolled every worker who cared to join, and therefore in every town where there was a "turn out" the strikers naturally joined the Union and claimed its assistance. In addition every lodge of the Union was filled with ardent enthusiasm and fighting spirit, and almost courted conflicts with the employers. The Union was involved in innumerable petty and useless strikes; from the 9th of May onwards it was practically bankrupt and subsisted on levies, which of course helped to cool the enthusiasm of the rank and file.

Here again Smith was practically the only leader to perceive the practical policy. While the Executive was still maundering about the possibilities of co-operative production, he published (May 3rd) a denunciation of the system of "partial strikes" and independent action, and urged the necessity of refusing battle until the Union was prepared for a general strike—"a long strike, and a strong strike, and a strike altogether."

Conceivably, he might have carried out his proposals and saved the Union, had not the employers delivered a concerted offensive. All over England and Scotland they began to present the "Document" to their employees to sign. This was an assurance that they neither belonged nor would belong to the Union. If they refused, they were locked out. Thus upon the already tottering Union was thrust an enormous number of further conflicts.

Internal dissentions brought the end. Owen decided that the open opposition to his views by Smith and Morrison must be silenced. In April he began publicly to denounce the *Pioneer;* in June he forced Morrison off the Executive, and started a rival journal, also called the *Pioneer.* Morrison's *Pioneer* ceased publication on July 5th. In August Owen closed down the *Crisis* to prevent Smith continuing to write.

Owen had won in his vendetta, but at the cost of the Union's life. It was by now in complete collapse, and on August 20th abandoned the pretence of being a Trade Union, and became "The British and Foreign Consolidated Association of Industry, Humanity and Knowledge," an Owenite propagandist body. The first mass frontal attack on Capital by British workers had failed.

The psychological effect on Smith was strange. During the struggle the sanest part of him had been supreme. In defeat he became again the mystic Smith, the disciple of John Wroe. He started a paper called the *Shepherd,* which purveyed general information of the irrelevant kind now provided by Harmsworth encyclopædias. In it he also began to deal again with religion. There was no mention of any economic or political subject. Nor was there much more in the *Shepherd's* successor, the *Penny Satirist.* In the end he became editor of the *Family Herald.*

The *Family Herald* was a new venture in journalism, being illustrated, and almost entirely consisting of fiction. Smith, as editor, had little to do but write occasional articles, answers to correspondents, and religious matter. His lively style was unimpaired and the *Family Herald* rose to a circulation of 250,000. His answers to correspondents were particularly praised, and no doubt deserved it, for he had to answer letters from women who desired to know if they should wear stays, others who believed him to be the Messiah, others who were outraged by his religious eccentricities,

others who wanted household recipes—in short, every question which a successful journalist could possibly be asked.

Nothing now was left of his old opinions. He was now Smith the mystic; Smith the revolutionary was dead. He was solely concerned with proving the numerical theory of the universe and the predominance of the feminine principle in history—whatever those words may mean. His mind had retired into the darkest recesses of modern occultism, and of his old ideas nothing was left but a vague dislike of Parliament and an equally vague idea that a man ought to belong to his Union.

Twenty years later, in 1857, he visited Scotland, where he died of a decline, sincerely lamented by many as a respectable and worthy, if eccentric, clergyman. An account of him was inserted in the *Dictionary of National Biography*, all reference to his past revolutionary activities being omitted.

R. W. POSTGATE