

History

Year 8 Lesson 16

The working class story of political reform

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What can you see?

What can you see in this strange-looking cartoon from 1843? The men are trying to move an important document into parliament. Although the cartoonist has exaggerated the scene this is based on a real event. A document was produced that was so big it was difficult to take it to parliament. What could this document have been?

It was a **petition** signed by over three million people. The petition was calling for the vote for every man in the country.



Betrayal

In the 1830s, Britain had come close to a violent revolution. The working class and middle class had been united against Britain's ruling class. However, revolution was avoided when the 1832 Reform Act extended the franchise to include the middle class. Many members of the working class felt betrayed. It seemed like the wealthy aristocrats had given the vote to the wealthy urban middle class in order to build an alliance to work against Britain's poor working class. To confirm these fears, in 1834 a new Poor Law was passed which appeared to punish people who lived in poverty.



The People's Charter

A working class man called William Lovett shared this working class anger and decided to act. He wrote a document which became known as the "People's Charter". The Charter called for every man over 21 to be given the vote. This document became hugely popular with the working class and supporters became known as Chartists. The Chartists realised that Britain's rulers were not going to just give the working class the vote. So the Chartists planned to put pressure on the government to extend the franchise.



However, Chartists disagreed with each other about how best to put pressure on the government. Some, like Lovett thought collecting signatures for petitions would help Chartists win the moral argument and persuade parliament to pass a new reform act. However, there were other Chartists, like William Cuffay, who were more desperate because industrialisation was leading to lower pay. These Chartists were prepared to use physical force and some **handloom weavers** from Lancashire even started training to fight in a revolution against the government.

By 1848 Parliament had ignored three Chartists petitions. Because Britain's rulers were scared of revolution, the police had started spying on the Chartists too. As a result Chartist leaders were often arrested before rebellions took place. One of these was William Cuffay who was sent all the way to Tasmania. It looked like the Chartists' attempt to get the vote had failed.



Cooperatives and trade unions

However, after 1848, working class communities across Britain started working together in new organisations.

Workers formed organisations called **cooperatives** and **trade unions** where they could support each other.

Through Cooperatives workers showed they could improve their own lives without needing to rely on factory owners or parliament. Through trade unions, workers showed they could work together to get better pay. Cooperatives and trade unions showed that the working class had strength in numbers. As a consequence, in 1867 and 1884 the franchise was extended to include more and more members of the working class.



Glossary

Cooperatives: a type of business where the profits are shared between everyone who uses it. Cooperatives kept prices low so the poorest workers could afford to buy essentials.

Handloom weavers: skilled workers who make textiles by hand (without a steam-powered machine).

Petition: a request which is supported by lots of signatures.

Trade union: an organisation where workers agree to negotiate together so that employers have to treat their workers fairly.



Comprehension Questions

1. What documents did the Chartists try to take to parliament?

Sentence starter: The documents the Chartists took to parliament were called....

2. Many working class people felt betrayed in 1832. Who did they think had betrayed them?
3. What was the central request of the People's Charter?
4. Why did the police spy on the Chartists?
5. Challenge question: How did the cooperative movement help working class people win the right to vote?



Extension Question

6. Why did Chartists want MPs to be paid?

Use the sentence starters and key words below to answer this question

Sentence starters:	Key words
<p><i>The People's Charter called for working class men to get the vote. Point four of the charter also called for MPs to be paid. This was because....</i></p> <p><i>For example....</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-Democracy-Parliament-Representation-Working class-Jobs-Poverty-Professional-Wealthy

