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# British socialism and European history

The right to work, 1880-1914

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## Abstract

This article builds on the insights of scholars who have sought to analyse the history of British socialism through a broader European analytical lens. It demonstrates that British socialists, as well as being aware of and influenced by contemporaneous late nineteenth and early twentieth-century developments on the continent, also drew inspiration from European history in order to justify specific political aims relating to the issue of unemployment. This insight is developed via the medium of a case study investigating the debate surrounding the 'Right to Work' campaigns of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The socialist advocacy of the right to work owed an overt debt to French political and social theory, being most commonly associated with the ideas of Louis Blanc, a nineteenth-century reformer who argued that state-funded cooperative production on the part of workers provided the means by which capitalism could be overthrown. British socialists explicitly referred to the political and economic inspiration of Blanc and situated their own views and policies, particularly in relation to the state and the role of politics, as belonging to the same historical tradition. Indeed, socialists were forced to defend the reputation and legacy of Blanc in fractious late-Victorian and Edwardian era debates involving opponents of state support for the unemployed who commonly cited the failure of the National Workshops in the French Revolution of 1848. By paying close attention to the contours of the contested debate between socialists and anti-socialists over the historical lessons of the Workshops, this article will demonstrate the stature of Louis Blanc in British socialist circles and make a broader point about the relevance of European history to political culture in Britain.

**Key words:** socialism, Europe, Britain, Louis Blanc, National Workshops, 1848 Revolution, unemployment, history

History has always been a key resource for political movements, traditions and parties. The record of the past was used in a myriad number of ways: deployed to instil a strong sense of shared origins amongst political activists and communities; establishing a recognisable and mutually agreed-upon lineage of leaders, heroes, events, villains and rituals; shaping and providing a justification for particular positions and identities; and also, often being situated within broader teleological frameworks that led inexorably either to the present or the future.<sup>1</sup> History was of fundamental importance to British socialists in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as they established their own distinct political organisations and crafted an identity that built upon, but was also recognisably different from, the established liberal, radical and Tory traditions. As the existing historiography has delineated in great detail, socialists during this period commonly celebrated the collectivist agrarianism of pre-industrial English society, invoked the oppositional implications of the English Civil War and pointed to the more recent inspirations of Peterloo, Robert Owen and Chartism.<sup>2</sup>

Invocations of the national past were also married with a recognition of the importance of European history for political struggle in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Chris Wrigley has noted, socialists in the 1880s and 1890s were also stimulated by memories of a 'wider European radical and socialist past'.<sup>3</sup> The salience of Europe in the historical memory of British socialists constitutes an important and still underdeveloped area of research; a lacuna in the existing scholarship that owes much to the lingering influence of traditional interpretations which stressed the vast gulf of difference between British and continental socialism.<sup>4</sup> According to this view, British socialism was defined by its moderate outlook and practice, influenced by the conservative economic influence of trade unions, an intersection of liberal, religious and ethical perspectives, commitment to parliamentarism and largely dismissive of revolution and Marxist theory. In contrast, continental socialism, symbolised most pertinently by the powerful German Social Democratic Party, was characterised by its adherence to a theoretically sophisticated Marxism, hostility to organised religion, overt separation from alternative political traditions on the left and a more radical estrangement from and opposition to the institutions of the state. There was undoubtedly much truth in this assessment of the differences between British and European socialists with the contrasting respective strengths and weaknesses of Marxism constituting perhaps the most striking feature.

A body of revisionist work challenged this influential scholarly

dichotomy in the 1990s, which emphasised the close cultural, personal and political links between European and British socialists in the early twentieth century.<sup>5</sup> The strength of reformist socialism in Britain and on the continent was particularly highlighted here with figures such as Jean Jaures, Eduard Bernstein and Keir Hardie featuring prominently.<sup>6</sup> More recent work in the field of intellectual history has noted that the ideological eclecticism of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century British socialism had parallels on the continent, with republicanism in France and religious anti-materialism in Italy playing important roles.<sup>7</sup> This article builds on the insights of scholars who have sought to analyse the history of British socialism through a broader European investigative lens. It will demonstrate that British socialists, as well as being aware of and influenced by contemporaneous late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century developments on the continent, also drew inspiration from European history in order to justify specific political aims relating to the issue of unemployment. This insight will be developed via the medium of a case study investigating the debate surrounding the Right to Work campaigns in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. During this period, a diverse array of socialists, from a range of organisations including the Social Democratic Federation, the Independent Labour Party, members of the Labour Party and trade unions, sought to pressurise local and national authorities to provide work for the unemployed during times of economic distress.<sup>8</sup> The demand that workers had a right to work underpinned a series of parliamentary bills tabled by the Labour Party in the first decade of the twentieth century, which would eventually be rejected by MPs on the grounds that they constituted examples of socialism.

Some historians of the Labour Party have described the Right to Work bills as 'propagandist ventures' which 'got nowhere'.<sup>9</sup> These assessments do not capture the ideological centrality of the right to work in British socialist thought and, importantly, do not convey any sense of its historical trajectory. The socialist advocacy of the right to work owed a debt to French political and social theory, being most commonly associated with the ideas of Louis Blanc, a nineteenth-century reformer who argued that state-funded cooperative production on the part of workers provided the means by which capitalism could be overthrown. British socialists explicitly referred to the political and economic inspiration of Blanc and situated their own views and policies, particularly in relation to the state and the role of politics, as belonging to the same historical tradition. Indeed, socialists were forced to defend the reputation and legacy of Blanc in fractious late Victorian and Edwardian debates involving

opponents of state support for the unemployed who commonly cited the failure of the National Workshops in the French Revolution of 1848. The National Workshops had been established by the French provisional government in the wake of the abdication of King Louis Philippe and represented a practical recognition of the right to work principle.<sup>10</sup> The Workshops were organised and funded by the state and provided work for upwards of 100,000 artisans and labourers between February and June 1848. These had met an ignominious end after only four months of operation, having been shut down by moderate republicans in the provisional government on the grounds of cost and inefficiency, a decision that ultimately led to the bloody June Days workers' uprising. The purported reasons for why the workshops failed in June 1848 constituted a key bone of contention between socialists and anti-socialists. In debates concerning the unemployment issue during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Conservative and Liberal anti-socialists argued that the failure of the National Workshops proved the futility of the socialist demand that the unemployed had the right to expect remunerative work from the state. By paying close attention to the contours of this highly contentious debate between socialists and anti-socialists over the historical lessons of the workshops, this article will demonstrate the stature of Louis Blanc in British socialist circles and make a broader point about the relevance of European history to political culture in Britain.

This article will be divided into two sections. The first section provides a brief historical overview of the right to work and will sketch its origins and trajectory in European radical and socialist thought. The second section examines how the history of the right to work became central to discussions concerning unemployment in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Britain.

### **Origins: The history of the right to work**

Thomas Paine, the great British radical and prominent participant in the American and French Revolutions, was among the first modern thinkers to promote the idea that individuals had a right to work. In his major work *Rights of Man*, published in 1791, Paine asserted that the government should erect public buildings 'containing at least six thousand persons, and to have in each of these places, as many kinds of employment that can be contrived'.<sup>11</sup> Paine's ideas developed very much in the context of the French Revolution, which accelerated existing eighteenth-century trends that emphasised awareness of society's obligations towards its poorer

members.<sup>12</sup> The right to work featured in the Jacobin constitution of 1793 and was grounded in the explicit recognition that citizenship contained economic as well as political components.<sup>13</sup> More sustained reflections on the economic dimensions of these rights claims would gain even more traction in France as it experienced its first pangs of industrialisation in the opening decades of the nineteenth century. The right to work became firmly established as a specifically socialist principle during this period. For the French socialist, Charles Fourier, the liberal tradition of natural rights, rooted in understandings of political liberty and equality before the law, constituted a ‘chimera’ as it failed to address the main social problem of the nineteenth century: whether the expanding ranks of the urban, industrial poor possessed adequate means of subsistence and work.<sup>14</sup> Fourier declared in 1848 that ‘the first right of men is the right to work’.<sup>15</sup> This philosophy was practically applied through Fourier’s phalansteries (*phalanstères*), small, self-contained co-operative communities where each member worked together for the mutual benefit of the collective.

Following in the wake of Fourier, the right to work would be further refined and connected to a more overtly political and statist framework by Louis Blanc. Blanc first came to prominence in the 1820s and 1830s as a radical critic of the newly emerging industrial order in France. Blanc argued that the right to work should be predicated on political democracy with governments and states, whose legitimacy was derived from a popular mandate, organising production and employment.<sup>16</sup> In Blanc’s schema, the state was to empower workers, providing them with lines of credit so that they could form producers’ workshops within their own trades.<sup>17</sup> These workshops, termed in most contemporary and subsequent scholarly parlance as ‘social workshops’, were voluntary organisations of producers where the instruments of production had been provided by the state.<sup>18</sup> The co-operative ethos of the ‘social workshops’ was envisioned by Blanc as ultimately helping to quash the evils of free competition and usher in a new world where producers laboured for the common good.

As briefly noted in the introduction, Blanc played a prominent role in the French Republican government of 1848, helping to pass a decree which established a system of workshops ‘based on the solemnly proclaimed right of all citizens to work’.<sup>19</sup> The designation of these workshops as national indicated that they were a fundamental institution of the new French republic.<sup>20</sup> However, in practice, the National Workshops deviated substantially from Blanc’s ideas and proposals. Blanc was not involved in the organisation of the National Workshops with this key function being delegated to Pierre Marie de Saint-Georges and Emile Thomas, a

liberal republican and an engineer who were both virulently opposed to socialism and viewed the workshops as a temporary solution to alleviate the plight of the poor during a period of commercial contraction.<sup>21</sup> The employment provided under the aegis of the workshops was rudimentary, differing little from the charity workshops that had been set up by the Ancien Régime in earlier times, and contained none of the cooperative elements favoured by Blanc.<sup>22</sup> The lack of governmental commitment to the workshops' success meant that they were not self-financing, operating at a loss with the cost derived entirely from public funds.<sup>23</sup>

Despite the inglorious fate that met the National Workshops in June 1848, Blanc's vision concerning the organisation of labour and the right to work found favour across the channel in Britain. The enthusiasm for Blanc's ideas amongst Chartists helped to temper the traditional libertarianism of English radicalism and supplemented attacks on the aristocratic elite with demands for state intervention on behalf of the poor.<sup>24</sup> The salience of the right to work or alternatively the right to labour in Chartist ideology can be traced in the rhetoric of trade unions connected to the radical wing of the movement. At a meeting of the National Association of United Trades in 1851, the right to labour was recognised 'as a social axiom' ... necessary for 'the sustenance of man'.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, one of the last issues of the leading Chartist newspaper, the *Northern Star*, declared that 'the right to labour' ... was 'part and parcel of the rights of man'.<sup>26</sup> Here, Chartists were operating within the parameters of a now established socialist argument that pointed to the limitations of political rights claims that had little to say about the social and economic ills of modern industrialised societies. British socialists would build upon this ideological inheritance in the context of an economic downturn in the 1880s with unemployment recognised for the first time as a chronic social problem affecting large sections of the working classes.<sup>27</sup> The article will now move forward in time and delineate how the history of the right to work was invoked by both socialists and anti-socialists in debates concerning the causes and solutions to the issue of unemployment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

### **The right to work: late Victorian and Edwardian perspectives**

Socialists organised marches and demonstrations in support of the rights of the unemployed during the 1880s and 1890s. This agitation largely focused on the provision of public work for the unemployed and was cast into the public eye by violent events like the Bloody Sunday riot

of 1887, where Metropolitan Police officers baton charged demonstrators protesting against rising rates of unemployment and Irish coercion policy in Trafalgar Square. Cross-party deputations, acting on behalf of the unemployed, pressured politicians and local authorities to act on the issue. In 1888, one such deputation led by Cardinal Henry Manning, who would become famous for his role in the London dock strike of 1889, petitioned the sitting prime minister, Lord Salisbury, to provide work for the unemployed.<sup>28</sup> Salisbury responded by employing a historical analogy; Manning's proposals were said to be equivalent to the solution offered by the National Workshops. Having offered labour 'to all those who wanted it, earning the ordinary wages of labour', the failure of the workshops provided a salutary lesson that the state should never seek to supplant the role of the private employer in the marketplace.

Socialist right to work campaigns were dismissed through similar historical attacks. Liberals such as John Morley, an ardent individualist, opponent of state intervention and historian of France, claimed to detect a hint of the same principles that had caused the collapse of the workshops in the unemployment proposals of Edwardian socialists.<sup>29</sup> At a meeting of the Walthamstow Liberal Association in November 1905, Morley outlined his opposition to any scheme that sought to provide work or relief for the unemployed at the expense of ratepayers. Any plan to increase the financial burden on ratepayers would greatly increase the 'numbers of the unemployed'. Morley illustrated this point by referring to the national workshops of 1848, noting that they had been financed 'out of the pockets of the country'. Men had withdrawn from private enterprise and were forced to labour under the aegis of the workshops. The ensuing results had been catastrophic with 'industry dislocated and finance destroyed'.<sup>30</sup> Morley ended his speech on a more positive note, stating that the historical failure of the workshops would never be repeated in England because of the 'widely held qualities of sanity, sobriety, and self-control'.<sup>31</sup>

Morley would repeat these sentiments two months later in a meeting with a deputation of labour and socialist bodies in Arbroath in Scotland.<sup>32</sup> The deputation called on Morley to support an amendment to the Conservative Party's Unemployed Workmen's Act of 1905 that would give distress committees power to undertake public works at standard rates of wages; the whole cost to be met from public funds. One of the members of the deputation also stated that it 'was the right of everybody born to have the opportunity of earning their living in their country and that when private enterprise failed to supply that opportunity it was the duty of the state to secure it'. Morley responded by taking direct aim at the

principle of the right to work; the idea that any man was owed employment by the state was fundamentally unsound. The practical application of this principle, again citing the example of the National Workshops, would only serve to increase the numbers of the unemployed. The folly of large-scale schemes of public employment had been demonstrated most pertinently by the failure of the workshops.

Both Salisbury's and Morley's beliefs were indicative of widely held assumptions about the inability of public works schemes to provide meaningful employment. State intervention in the marketplace, according to the tenets of orthodox political economy, would 'crowd out' private enterprise and investment. Furthermore, the socialist proposal that workers employed under the terms of public works schemes should be maintained at standard levels of daily pay would drive private capitalists out of business and encourage dependence on the state. The issue of funding was especially controversial with socialists asserting that ratepayers should fund the operation of public works, seen by critics as a form of class warfare.

The anti-socialist invocation of the historical example of the National Workshops was vigorously contested by socialists. The Social Democratic Federation activist, J. Hunter Watts, argued that critics were drawing the wrong historical lessons from the example of the workshops.<sup>33</sup> They had been organised by politicians 'whose interests' were 'bound up in their failure rather than their success'. Watts was unsurprisingly far more partial to citing the positive historical legacy of the workshops, declaring that 'France had rightly been called the 'Christ of the nations' and celebrating the 'named and nameless heroes of 1848 who had fought for the right to work'. Independent Labour Party member Sam Mainwaring struck a similar chord to Watts, arguing that the workshops were organised by 'bourgeois members of the provisional government' ... 'who had been bitterly opposed to socialism'.<sup>34</sup> Louis Blanc, accurately characterised by Mainwaring as having little to do with the operation of the National Workshops, was instead praised for his institution of cooperative mutual aid workshops at the Luxembourg Palace in Paris during the revolution of 1848.

Indeed, it is notable that Blanc garnered much praise in the pages of the Independent Labour Party's newspaper, the *Labour Leader*. A condensed version of his writings entitled 'The Evils of Competition' was featured in the newspaper's penny pamphlet series.<sup>35</sup> In its May Day supplement of 1910, a writer named J.F. Mills argued that Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Louis Blanc, Karl Marx, Ferdinand Lassalle and John Ruskin were the



pioneers of the modern socialist movement.<sup>36</sup> A year later in 1911, another *Labour Leader* contributor went even further, referring to Blanc ‘as the French pioneer of modern socialist method’.<sup>37</sup> The author praised Blanc’s argument that socialism and the right to work could only be realised by a democratic state that commanded broad popular support. The state, supported by democratic legitimacy, had been correctly identified by Blanc as the key mechanism for achieving social transformation and as a result he was entitled to be known as the ‘father of modern social democracy’.<sup>38</sup>

Admiration for Blanc’s ideas was notable too amongst early leaders of the Labour Party. Ramsay MacDonald singled out Blanc’s commitment to reformist strands of socialism and his disavowal of revolutionary means. MacDonald asserted in 1907 that Blanc was entitled to be called the ‘father of modern socialist methods’, drawing attention away from revolution and towards the realisation that ‘fundamental social change was to be brought about by reform’.<sup>39</sup> Blanc’s assertion that the democratic state could implement socialist reforms, such as the right to work, as opposed to the Marxist belief in revolutionary class struggle, meshed well with MacDonald’s own gradualist, reformist tendencies. The Fabian Society’s leading members, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, also noted Blanc’s impact on the Christian socialist cooperative movement in the nineteenth century. In their 1912 work *What Syndicalism Means*, the Webbs referenced the intellectual debt Christian socialist co-operators owed to Blanc’s vision of social workshops. The Cooperative movement’s ideal of ‘self-governing workshops’ was similarly organised around the view that industries should be democratically controlled by workers.<sup>40</sup> British socialist leaders such as MacDonald also found themselves defending the historical legacy of Blanc and the right to work in Edwardian unemployment debates. In his 1911 book *The Socialist Movement*, MacDonald wrote that ‘there are some events in history about which popular opinion comes to a conclusion, wrong as wrong can be, but the opinion is circulated, is reiterated ... until it become an unquestioned assumption’.<sup>41</sup>

This tide of ‘popular ignorance’, as MacDonald deemed it, pertaining to the failure of the National Workshops, had serious practical ramifications for the Edwardian Labour Party after 1905, as it sought to pressurise the then Liberal administration to pass legislation on the issue of unemployment. The party, then known as the Labour Representation Committee, had made an electoral breakthrough at the 1906 general election, winning twenty-nine seats and benefiting from an alliance with the Liberals who won a landslide majority. Labour politicians worked hard in the succeeding years to differentiate their party from the bigger and more powerful

Liberals, focusing on unemployment in particular. Liberal inaction provided the most immediate catalyst for Labour's introduction of its own Unemployed Workmen's Bill into the House of Commons in July 1907.<sup>42</sup> The bill was predicated on the idea that the state had a duty to assist the unemployed. It proposed that urban and rural districts should act as local unemployment authorities and work together in creating schemes of labour for the unemployed with wages being funded from the rates.<sup>43</sup> The principle of the right to work was embodied in the bill's third clause which recognised that 'where a workman had registered himself as unemployed, it shall be the duty of the local unemployment authority to provide work for him'.<sup>44</sup> This bill, and its third clause which recognised the right to work, proved controversial in Liberal and Conservative circles. John Burns, a former socialist and Liberal president of the Local Government Board from 1905 to 1914, stated that 'no friend of labour' would advocate the right to work with its echoes of the Parisian National Workshops of 1848.<sup>45</sup> Conservative commentators such as W.G. Towler, the secretary of the London Municipal Society, also depicted attempts at enshrining the right to work into the statute book of British law as merely recapitulating the 'disastrous experiment which was tried in France in 1848'.<sup>46</sup>

The spectre of the workshops would also haunt the subsequent re-introduction of the Right to Work bill in March 1908. When introducing the bill in the Commons, the Radical Liberal MP, P.W. Wilson, referenced criticisms that compared it to the national workshops, deeming them to be inapplicable to modern British conditions. 'You take a city in a state of revolution, with barricades in the street ... and you say that it is a fair parallel to a country which has enjoyed sixty years of unmistakable progress and pacific social development'.<sup>47</sup> Following the bill's defeat, by a decisive majority of 150 votes, the liberal *Daily News* expressed the opinion that those members who had opposed it were motivated to do so because they detected the hint of socialism in the right to work principle.<sup>48</sup> The enshrinement of the right to work would lead immediately to the establishment of national workshops where the unemployed would be remunerated at trade union levels of wages. 'Few such disastrous experiments would make the very name of socialism stink in the nostrils of all thoughtful observers'.<sup>49</sup> The Radical Liberal, J.T. Martindale, addressing a December 1908 meeting of the party's youth wing in Burnley, declared that clause three of the Labour Party's bill reminded him of the principles of the national workshops, 'where any man could employ himself and receive the ordinary rate as paid for similar goods elsewhere'.<sup>50</sup> The workshops 'went on for a week or two but there arose such a state of chaos that

they had to be abandoned'.<sup>51</sup> The Prime Minister, Herbert Asquith, for example, claimed that clause three of the bill was animated by a 'principle which involves in its application ... the complete ultimate control by the state of the full machinery of production'.<sup>52</sup> George Pudsey, the Liberal chief whip, cautioned against what he saw as a widespread tendency with the party to embrace 'a chronic state of semi-socialism'.<sup>53</sup> Any further acceleration of this development, he declared, would result in a party split with the consequent loss of 'the vast bulk of that moderate opinion which had been the backbone of Liberalism for fifty years'.<sup>54</sup>

Conservative opinion was similarly dismissive of Labour's Right to Work bill. An article by T.H. Manners Howe in the *Graphic* referenced 'the insidious, but historically refuted doctrine of the right to work, embodied in the Socialist principle of rate-supported labour'.<sup>55</sup> The Conservative historian, John Marriott, provided a more rigorous intellectual analysis of the Edwardian right to work debate and its parallels with the events in revolutionary Paris sixty years earlier. Marriott insisted that the essential principles of the bill and 'of the experiment tried with disastrous results in 1848' were 'not merely similar but identical'.<sup>56</sup> The story of the National Workshops had pertinent relevance for the student of contemporary politics in England as the Liberal Party, just like the French Republicans, were allied to 'social democrats' who looked forward 'to the speedy realisation of a social millennium'.<sup>57</sup> Decrying the falsehoods of natural rights theories, Marriott believed that no man possessed an inherent claim to demand employment from the state.<sup>58</sup> The failure of the Parisian experiment was not attributable to reasons of circumstances and context but rather resided in the faultiness of its logic, which was 'radical and fundamentally false'.<sup>59</sup>

Marriott's more rigorous historical dissection of the failure of the National Workshops and its lessons for contemporary socialism constituted a rarity amongst the Conservatives and Liberals cited in the article. Rarely going into meticulous historical detail and delving into the relevant nineteenth-century source material, anti-socialists deployed the example of the workshops as a prejudicial historical analogy; a crude political and rhetorical strategy that was nonetheless powerfully resonant in a context where suspicion of the state's role in the economy was widespread. Socialists tried to expose their opponents' lack of scholarly rigour by referencing what they deemed to be authoritative source materials. Ramsay MacDonald called attention to the 'oft exposed error of attributing the collapse of these workshops to Louis Blanc and his socialist allies'.<sup>60</sup> The workshops had, in fact, been instituted by moderate republicans fearful of socialism and were deliberately designed with the manifest aim of

destroying the credibility of the right to work. MacDonald's analysis prominently invoked the authority of Thomas Kirkup: the first English historian of socialism and the author responsible for defining the term in the 1887 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.<sup>61</sup> Kirkup asserted in his influential work *A History of Socialism* (1892) that the National Workshops represented a travesty of the proposals of Louis Blanc, having been established expressly to discredit them.<sup>62</sup> Whereas Blanc envisioned a future society organised around the principles of the right to work and co-operative production, the workshops had offered nothing but unproductive labour and it was intended that labourers employed under their remit would be ready to assist the republican government 'in the event of a struggle with the socialist party'.<sup>63</sup>

*The Social Democrat*, a monthly magazine founded by the Social Democratic Federation member Harry Quelch, even reprinted an article written by Ferdinand Lassalle in the 1860s in direct response to 'the gross misrepresentation of the experiment of '48' by Liberal politicians such as John Morley.<sup>64</sup> In the article, Lassalle condemned the popular assumption that the National Workshops were organised according to the principles of Louis Blanc. Vehement opponents of socialism active in the provisional government established after the February abdication of the monarch, Louis Philippe, had offered relief work to the unemployed as a means of creating 'a paid working-class army devoted to the moderate republication majority'. Lassalle cited the contemporaneous accounts of Emile Thomas, the official tasked with the organisation and maintenance of the workshops and, Augustine de Lamartine, the minister for foreign affairs in the provisional government, to underpin this argument. He specifically quoted in detail a conversation between Emile Thomas and the minister for public works, Pierre Marie de Saint-Georges, where the latter had stated that the workshops had been allowed to fail. This, the scheming Saint-Georges believed, would demonstrate the 'falsity' and 'hollowness' of the theory of the right to work.

Writing in a February 1906 article for the Social Democratic Federation's newspaper *Justice*, the socialist barrister, Ernest Belfort Bax, espoused a similar line of analysis, referencing Emile Thomas' 1848 work *History of the National Workshops* and the same conversation cited by Lassalle to counteract the 'stale falsehoods' uttered by John Morley.<sup>65</sup> Thomas, described by Bax as a 'violent political enemy of socialistic ideas', intimated that the whole business of organising the workshops had been done for the 'express purpose of failure in order to discredit such schemes once and for all'.<sup>66</sup> Bax questioned how a man such as John Morley, a Francophile

and a man who had written books concerning Voltaire, Diderot and Robespierre, could seemingly be so ignorant of modern French history. Seeking to convince an audience of a long-discredited historical fallacy, Morley was guilty of 'deliberate misrepresentation'.<sup>67</sup> Bax's interpretation was not without controversy amongst socialists. J. Margaret Mahler, also writing in *Justice*, argued that the conversation between Emile Thomas and Pierre Marie de Saint-George had actually been in reference to the social workshops set up by Louis Blanc in the Hotel Luxembourg.<sup>68</sup> Referring to passages in Thomas' *History of the National Workshops* as evidence, Mahler noted that it was important that socialists had 'gotten to the bottom of the facts relating to this historic experiment in view of its bearing on the right to work'.<sup>69</sup>

Other socialists referred to Blanc's own oeuvre to disprove anti-socialist claims. Herbert Burrows of the Social Democratic Federation implored his opponents to read Blanc's book *Historical Revelations of 1848* (1858) to learn how every effort was made to crush the workshops by the provisional government.<sup>70</sup> This book, alongside Lord Normandy's *A Year of Revolution* (1857), would prove to interested observers 'what lengths personal jealousy and prejudice went to in relation to thwarting such experiments'.<sup>71</sup> Contemporaries of Blanc who had participated in the 1848 revolution and fled Europe as a result of persecution also spoke wittingly of anti-socialist historical claims. The German liberal, Karl Blind, a participant in the Frankfurt Parliament of 1848 and later exiled to Britain on account of his political activities, challenged the historical arguments of anti-socialists in a 1906 article penned in the periodical *The Nineteenth Century*.<sup>72</sup> He remarked that the National Workshops were in no way a socialist experiment and had petered out at the behest of their political adversaries.<sup>73</sup> A personal acquaintance of Blanc, though not sharing his views on political economy, Blind argued that the National Workshops were corrupted by the machinations of Bonapartist and royalist elements.<sup>74</sup>

Judged by the practical considerations of *realpolitik*, the socialist espousal of the right to work could be deemed unsuccessful. Socialists singularly failed to achieve their objective of enshrining the right to work in unemployment legislation. Anti-socialists, with their jibes linking the right to work to the historical failure of the National Workshops, appeared to have achieved their aim of ostracising socialist plans to reform Britain's unemployment laws. However, this purely instrumentalist view would be an unduly short-sighted one to take. Advocacy of the right to work performed a unifying function in the socialist movement, cutting across the often otherwise rigid divisions between reformist and revolutionary

socialists in Britain. Socialists from both camps felt compelled to promote and defend the right to work and the historical legacy of Louis Blanc. The right to work provided the British Left with a sense of historical mission, a practical principle and slogan around which political action concerning the issue of unemployment could coalesce and crucially continued to underpin productive critiques of an economic system that denied many the means of leading a dignified existence.

## **Conclusion**

This article has sought to illuminate the influence of European history on British socialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It has done so by examining the political and rhetorical battle over the legacy of the French National Workshops of 1848. Citing the inspiration and pioneering role of Louis Blanc, it is evident that European history was significant to the political and intellectual worldview of British socialists. The focus on this continental contribution to British socialist thought and practice has been one of the key features of this article. It has illuminated an alternative set of historical resources for British socialists, ones that were not firmly orientated around national traditions, figures and events. While in no way denying the importance of national history, it is equally apparent that British socialists saw themselves as very much operating within a broader European movement and tradition, something which the historical record had helped to confirm.

The socialists examined in this article were active in a historical context where prevailing opinion asserted that the state organisation of employment impinged on the economic freedom of employers and employees, distorting the operation of supply and demand and the natural tendency of markets to equilibrate. Furthermore, it was also widely believed that rate- or tax-supported public work schemes did not provide employment that was reproductive and functioned as an unfair form of class warfare that targeted the incomes of the prosperous. The idea that large-scale state intervention could not influence economic outcomes in a beneficial way would totter in the 1930s and eventually collapse in the 1940s as Western governments sought to find solutions to the problems unleashed by the Great Depression and the Second World War. Both of these events helped convince policy-makers of the need to manage and plan the economy, protecting it from the uncoordinated and inefficient operations of the free market. Socialists, unsurprisingly, were one of the driving forces behind this re-ordering of economic thinking, which eventually culminated in

the establishment of social democracies across Europe in the post-1945 period. The principle of the right to work was embodied in the consensus social democratic view that full employment was a necessary component of a civilised society.

## Notes

1. For history's general significance to politics see John Burrow, 'All That Glitters: Political Science and the Lessons of History', in Stefan Collini, Donald Winch, and John Burrow (eds), *That Noble Science of Politics: A Study in Nineteenth-Century Intellectual History*, Cambridge, 1983, pp185-205; Martin Daunton, *Wealth and Welfare: An Economic and Social History of Britain 1851-1951*, Oxford, 2007, p57; Olive Anderson, 'The Political Uses of History in Mid Nineteenth Century England', *Past and Present*, 36 (1967): 87-105; Angus Hawkins, *Victorian Political Culture: Habits of Heart & Men*, Oxford, 2015, 53-59; for Whig history see J.W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*, Cambridge, 1983; H.S. Jones, *Victorian Political Thought*, London, 2000, pp152-155; Also relevant is Eric Hobsbawm, 'Mass-Producing Traditions: Europe, 1871-1914', in Hobsbawm & T. Ranger (eds), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, 1983, pp263-308; Emily Jones, *Edmund Burke and the Invention of Modern Conservatism, 1830-1914*, Oxford, 2017; Paul Readman, 'The Place of the Past in English Culture c. 1890-1914', *Past & Present*, 186 (2005): 147-189.
2. See Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*, Princeton, 2011, pp66-70; Paul Readman, *Land and Nation: Patriotism, National Identity, and the Politics of Land, 1880-1914*, Woodbridge, 2008, pp150-154; Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924*, Woodbridge, 1998, pp24-25; Chris Wrigley, 'The European Context: Aspects of British Labour and Continental Socialism before 1920', in Matthew Worley (ed.), *The Foundations of the British Labour Party: Identities, Cultures and Perspectives, 1900-1939*, Farnham, 2009, p80.
3. Wrigley, 'The European Context', p80.
4. Literature is usefully summarised in Stefan Berger, *The British Labour Party and the German Social Democrats 1900-1931*, Oxford, 1994, pp11-16; see also Ross McKibbin, 'Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?' *English Historical Review*, 99 (1984): 297-331; The case for Britain as a peculiar case in relation to wider European trends is also made in more recent works such as Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000*, Oxford, 2002, p65.
5. Alongside the above cited work of Berger see Duncan Tanner, 'The Development of British Socialism, 1900-1918', *Parliamentary History*, 16 (1997): 48-66.

6. *Ibid.*, pp51-52.
7. James Thompson, 'The British left in European perspective, c. 1880-1914', *Global Intellectual History*, 4 (2018): 26; see also G. Claeys, 'Non-Marxian Socialism 1815-1914, Gareth Stedman Jones & Gregory Claeys (eds), *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth Century Political Thought*, Cambridge, 2011, pp521-556.
8. On the Right to Work campaigns see Kenneth D. Brown, *Labour and Unemployment 1900-1914*, Newton Abbot, 1971; José Harris, *Unemployment and Politics: A Study in English Social Policy*, Oxford, 1972.
9. Tanner, 'The Development', p55; Andrew Thorpe, *A History of the British Labour Party*, Basingstoke, 2008, p24.
10. On the workshops see Geoffrey Ellis, 'The Revolution of 1848-1849 in France', in R.J.W. Evans & Hartmut Pogge von Strandmann (eds), *The Revolutions in Europe, 1848-1849 From Reform to Reaction, 1848-1849*, Oxford, 2002, pp27-55; Jonathan Sperber, *The European Revolutions, 1848-1851*, Cambridge, 1994, p197.
11. Thomas Paine, *Rights of Man: Part the Second: Combining Principle and Practice*, Cambridge, 2012, p50.
12. Alan Forrest, *The French Revolution and the Poor*, Oxford, 1981, pp13-15.
13. G. Claeys, 'Socialism and the Language of Rights: The Origins and Implications of Economic Rights', in Pamela Slotte & Miia Halme-Tuomisaari (eds), *Revisiting the Origins of Human Rights*, Cambridge, 2015, p223.
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16. Jonathan Beecher, 'Early European Socialism', in George Klosko (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the History of Political Philosophy*, Oxford, 2011, p378.
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22. Sewell, *Work & Revolution in France*, p246.
23. Ellis, 'The Revolution', p40.
24. Margot Finn, *After Chartism: Class and Nation in English Radical Politics 1848-1874*, Cambridge, 1993, pp68-69.
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26. *Northern Star*, 24 April 1852.
27. Harris, *Unemployment and Politics*, p7.
28. Exchange between Manning and Salisbury taken from 'The Government and the Unemployed', *The Times*, 2 February 1888.
29. Account of Morley's speech taken from 'Eye of Triumph: Mr Morley's Prediction', *Daily News*, 21 November 1905.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*
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35. 'New Penny Pamphlets', *Labour Leader*, 5 August 1910.
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54. *The Manchester Guardian*, 16 March 1908.
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56. J.A.R. Marriott, 'The "Right to Work"', *The Nineteenth Century and After*, 63 (1908): 1003.
57. *Ibid.*, 1008.
58. *Ibid.*
59. *Ibid.*
60. MacDonald, *The Socialist Movement*, p164.
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- Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880-1914*, Cambridge, 1986, p34.
62. Thomas Kirkup, *A History of Socialism*, 4th Ed., London, 1909, p49.
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