
Friedrich Engels
(1820-95)

No one can be complacent about a situation which injures and cripples so many workers for the benefit of a single class. It is tragic that so many industrious workers are injured in the factories and are condemned to a lifetime of poverty and hunger. Their middle-class employers must bear the sole responsibility for this disgraceful state of affairs.

A fine list of diseases and injuries due solely to the revolting greed of the middle classes! Simply in order to fill the pockets of the bourgeoisie, women are rendered unfit to bear children, children are crippled, while grown men are stunted and maimed. The health of whole generations of workers is undermined, and they are racked with diseases and infirmities. Let us recall a few of the more barbarous cases [brought to light by the Factories Enquiry Commission’s Reports.]

Stuart reports that children were dragged naked out of bed by overseers and driven with blows and kicks to the factories, their clothes over their arms. Blows had at first aroused them from their slumbers, but before long they were asleep again over their work. A case is reported of a wretched child being roused by a shout from the foreman, when the machinery had stopped working. Still half asleep, the child, with eyes still closed, automatically went through the motions of working the silent machine. We read of children who were too tired [when the day’s work was over] to go home, but hid themselves under the wool in the drying room, only to be driven from the factory by blows from a strap. We read of hundreds of children who come home from the factory every evening so tired that they cannot eat their supper from lack of sleep and lack of appetite. Their parents found them on their knees at their bedside, where they had fallen asleep while saying their prayers. . . Should one not detest the middle classes, who so hypocritically boast of their humanity and sacrifice, while really they are concerned solely with filling their pockets?

... When I speak of the ‘bourgeoisie’ in this chapter I am referring not only to the middle class proper but also to the so-called aristocracy. This is because the privileges enjoyed by the aristocracy affect their relations with the middle classes rather than with the workers. Since all other privileges sink into insignificance when coupled with the privilege of property, the workers regard both bourgeoisie and aristocracy together as a single property-owning class. The only difference between the middle classes (in the narrower sense) and the aristocracy is this: the former come into direct contact with the factory workers, some of the miners and (if they are farmers) with the agricultural labourers. But the latter have relations only with certain miners and with the farm workers [but not with the factory operatives].

I have never seen so demoralized a social class as the English middle classes. They are so degraded by selfishness and moral depravity as to he quite incapable of salvation. And here I refer to the bourgeoisie proper. . The middle classes have a truly extraordinary conception of society. They really believe that all human beings (themselves excluded) and indeed all living things and inanimate objects have a real existence only if they make money or help to make it. Their sole happiness is derived from gaining a quick profit. They feel pain only if they suffer a financial loss. Every single human quality with which they are endowed is grossly debased by selfish greed and love of gain. Admittedly the English middle classes make good husbands and family men. They have also all sorts of so-called ‘private virtues’. In the ordinary daily affairs of life they seem to be as respectable and as decent as the members of any other middle class.
One finds them better than Germans to deal with in business. The English do not condescend to that petty haggling which characterises the German trader with his pathetically limited horizon. But what is the use of all that? When all comes to all what really matters to the Englishman is his own interest and above all his desire to make money.

One day I walked with one of these middle-class gentlemen into Manchester. I spoke to him about the disgraceful unhealthy slums and drew his attention to the disgusting condition of that part of the town in which the factory workers lived. I declared that I had never seen so badly built a town in my life. He listened patiently and at the corner of the street at which we parted company he remarked: 'And yet there is a great deal of money made here. Good morning, Sir'....

The middle classes in England have become the slaves of the money they worship. Even the English language is permeated by the one idea that dominates the waking hours of the bourgeoisie. People see ‘valued’ in terms of hard cash. They say of a man: ‘He is worth £10,000’, and by that they mean that he possesses that sum. Anyone who has money is ‘respectable’. He belongs to ‘the better sort of people’. He is said to be ‘influential’, which means that what he says carried weight in the circles in which he moves. The spirit of petty bargaining permeates the whole language. Everything is expressed in commercial terms or in the categories of the science of economics. The English judge every aspect of life in terms of ‘supply and demand’. The English middle classes believe in absolutely unbridled freedom of competition, consequently the principle of ‘laissez faire’ is allowed to dominate government and administration, medicine, education and even religion—for the authority of the Established Church is rapidly declining. The bourgeoisie believe that free competition should be absolutely unchecked. The State should have no power whatsoever to interfere with this holy principle. The bourgeois ideal is a society in which there is no ‘State’ at all to exercise any authority—a state of anarchy comparable with that in friend Stirner’s ‘society’, where everybody can exploit everybody else to their heart’s content. But the English middle classes cannot do without the State just as they cannot do without the workers. They need the State to keep the workers in order. Nevertheless the bourgeoisie do everything to prevent the State from interfering in any way with their own affairs.

Questions:

1. What working class conditions in the factories and at home were described by Engels?
2. Whom did Engles blame for this? What was there motivation?
3. What did Engles describe as the relationship between the Middle Class and the State?