

'The difference between servitude and freedom, appreciable in a thousand details of actual life, is most glaring in this: that the free man can refuse his labour and use that refusal as an instrument wherewith to bargain; while the slave has no such instrument or power to bargain, but is dependent for his well-being upon the custom of society, backed by the regulation of such of its laws as may protect and guarantee the slave.'

So said Hilaire Belloc in *The Servile State*¹ about sixty years before the Industrial Relations Bill was proposed. The thesis of this extraordinarily interesting book is that capitalism, unless it suffers a violent revolution which might bring about socialism, will necessarily develop into what we would today call the 'Corporative State'. A state, that is, in which the few who own the means of production can regulate by law the labour of the great majority who do not; or, as Belloc himself defined it in the second issue of *Blackfriars*, 'a stable permanently established society in which the Capitalist class more strictly defined, more solidly confirmed, shall remain the beneficiaries of national production, and the Proletariat shall be sharply differentiated from them, guaranteed security and sufficiency, but also compelled by a whole new national machinery to labour for the benefit of others'.² In such a society there were to be, in his view, regulations governing the worker precisely because he is a worker which would not apply to the free men who are employers. He thought that many such regulations would be enacted for the protection of the worker and indeed he based his predictions on evidence such as the Insurance Act and compulsory minimum wages which plainly had that intention. He would not have to seek for such tenuous evidence today; Mr Carr's bill takes us firmly across the threshold into the servile state.

It would plausibly be argued by Conservatives that Mrs Castle's proposals would have had practically the same effect, but this would only reinforce Belloc's point that capitalism has nowhere else to go. Writing at the beginning of the century he could not envisage the upheavals and revolutions which were to establish socialism of a kind in some countries, and he suggests no practical means of bringing about his own preferred solution, the wide distribution of private ownership in the means of production.

It has been suggested by the government that the bill will actually strengthen the trades unions but it is hard to take this seriously when no single trade union shows any sign of believing it for a minute. In any case, enough has been written by now to show in detail how the bill would erode the structure of the unions in this country; there is no point in arguing this here. Essentially the effect of the bill is to limit the capacity of the citizen to 'refuse his labour and use that refusal as an instrument wherewith to bargain', and amply satisfies Belloc's definition of servitude.

¹2nd Edition, London, 1913, p. 17.

²'Nationalization', *Blackfriars*, May 1920.

It would be a pity to leave *The Servile State* without quoting another fragment of the lost innocence of 1912: 'Lastly, there is the obvious bludgeon of "compulsory arbitration": a bludgeon so obvious that it is revolting even to our proletariat. Indeed, I know of no civilized European state which has succumbed to so gross a suggestion. For it is a frank admission of servitude at one step, and for good and all, such as men of our culture are not yet prepared to swallow.'¹

It is interesting to find a man so little vulnerable to the charge of cranky distributism as the Professor of Law at London University speaking of the bill in what are almost exactly Belloc's terms. Professor Wedderburn says: 'Some people say that to oppose the bill, to adhere to the way of voluntarism, to the long haul of negotiation, is a "negative" attitude. History will, I believe, show this view to be wrong. I see opposition to this bill not as something negative, but as based upon the positive affirmation that only a strong, free trade union movement can secure for working people, blue collar or white, deliverance from the status of second-class citizenship at work.'²

The question of 'second-class citizenship', or of what Belloc simply calls 'servitude', is the real issue in debate. It is perfectly fair to argue that some kind of compulsory labour is at least as obviously a feature of, say, Cuba and indeed of all socialist societies at the present day, but the important question is whether decisions about work are taken by the workers themselves and imposed by their consent or whether they are imposed upon second-class citizens by another class of free men. Socialism has its own analogous problems: the Cubans are well and articulately aware of the danger of a bureaucrat class emerging to claim the privileges of the old capitalist élite and the 'cultural revolution' in China seems to have been in part a reaction to a similar phenomenon there, but we can deal with the problems of socialism if and when we establish it; for ourselves the problem is to stem, as far as we can, the dehumanizing tendency in our own capitalist society. To quote Professor Wedderburn again: 'The way to industrial democracy requires strong unions, in which members and officials participate together in ever-widening areas of decision-making at the workplace. This demand, that democracy be extended not only in political but in industrial life, is being heard across Europe; for it is an extension without which those who wield power in modern society are likely to impose increasing dehumanization on workers who live by selling their labour.'

In registering our opposition to this bill we, and we may hope the majority of our readers, appeal not to any Marxist theory or to the view of the new Christian left, but simply to the traditions that this journal has maintained for half a century.

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¹*The Servile State*, p. 176.

²The Small Print in Carr's Bill', *New Society*, January 21, 1971.