International Journal of Education and Humanities
ISSN: 2770-6702 | Vol. 21, No. 3, 2025

Engels' Early Criticism of the Poor Law in England

-- Based on "The condition of the Working-Class in England"

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Abstract: In his youth, Engels paid close attention to the poor life and working conditions of the working class, and took Britain, a typical capitalist country, as an example to witness and criticize the "oppression" of the poor people by the British "Poor Law" based on his own observation and reliable materials, pointing out that capitalism was unable to solve the poverty problem between urban and rural areas. Therefore, a comprehensive criticism of the British "Poor Law" is launched, which has important practical enlightenment for China to improve its social security system.

Keywords: Engels, Poor Law, The State of the British Working Class.

1. Introduction

The Situation of the British Working Class is a classic work written by Engels from 1844 to 1845 based on his personal experience in Britain from 1842 to 1844 and a large number of reliable materials. This book truly depicts the miserable living conditions of the British working class and exposes the exploitation and oppression of the proletariat by the British bourgeoisie. Engels pointed out that the condition of the working class was the real basis and starting point of all social movements at that time, because it was the sharpest and most explicit manifestation of all the disasters in our present society. Engels made a comprehensive study of the living conditions of the British working class, such as life, work, education, housing and family relations, and criticized the British "Poor Law" in an all-round way, which also included a large number of social security ideas, such as public health security, housing security and so on. Although the age of Engels is quite different from the current social situation in China, it is still of great theoretical and practical significance to understand Engels'criticism of the British "Poor Law" in The Condition of the British Working Class for China to improve the social security system and realize the free and comprehensive development of human beings.

2. Engels' Research on the Current Situation of the Working Class

(1) The physical condition of the working class is extremely poor

Engels demonstrated how bad the physical condition of the working class was from the aspects of food, clothing, housing and labor of the working class. In terms of work, the working class worked almost from morning to night, and women worked in factories even when they were suspicious of fast production. Children begin to work from the age of nine, working 12-14 hours a day; In terms of diet, Engels pointed out that the food the workers ate was inferior, indigestible and adulterated. "Most of the potatoes the workers bought were of poor quality, the vegetables were not fresh, the cheese was old goods of bad quality, the lard was smelly, the meat was lean, old and hard, and it was the meat of old animals, often the meat of sick or dead animals, often half-rotten." [1]-351 ; In terms of dress, the workers' clothes were often broken, draughty or not warm. Workers often have to exchange their unwarm clothes for money in pawnshops to buy inferior food to satisfy their hunger. In terms of housing, workers often live in cold and damp basements, caves, small houses, etc. Many workers do not even have a fixed place to live, and these workers temporarily lodge in "nightclubs". Their houses are very crowded, often living in the same room with their families, and even some workers live with livestock. The environment inside and outside the house is extremely bad and dirty, which is totally harmful to the health of the workers.

It is impossible for the working class to keep healthy when they live in a situation where their basic living needs cannot be met, where they work hard for a long time and where the environment is extremely harsh. The poor living environment made tuberculosis and epidemics occur constantly in the working class, and the health of the working class deteriorated rapidly. But the working class can't get timely treatment, and they usually can't get any medical assistance. As a result, the working class gets sick, gets old and dies quickly.

(2) The spiritual condition of the working class is extremely bad

Engels pointed out that the working class not only suffered physically, but also could not get good spiritual comfort. The first is the lack of education, Engels pointed out that "the number of educational facilities in Britain is very small compared with the number of people." [1]-395 Only a few of the few day schools have access to school, and these schools are not only dilapidated, but their teachers do not even have the most necessary basic knowledge and moral character; because children have to work in factories, the so-called compulsory education in Britain exists only in name, and the content of compulsory education is religious knowledge; The second is the neglect of moral education. Engels pointed out that the only thing that the British bourgeoisie prepared for the working class was the law, which adopted rough ways such as whips, and did not treat the working class as "human beings" at all, but as "irrational animals" and "cattle".

3. Engels' Criticism of the British Poor Relief System

The British working class is extremely poor in both physical and mental conditions, especially a large number of working class can not even achieve the most basic living

security, they are in a state of extreme poverty, which is not caused by the working class, but "the inevitable result of the modern social system". [1]-561 The bourgeoisie and the working class have formed two distinct destinies in such a system, the bourgeoisie is extremely rich and the working class is extremely poor. Faced with the miserable situation of the working class, the bourgeoisie is either "calm and indifferent" [1]-419 , or the implementation of the "poverty relief system" which is more harmful to the physical and mental health of the working class. The British bourgeois does not care whether his workers starve or not, as long as he can make money himself.

In 1531, Henry VIII promulgated the Relief Goods Act, which opened the prelude of the government's relief to the poor, broke the previous civil relief and religious relief, and made the state participate in the ranks of social relief. In 1601, Elizabeth I promulgated the Poor Law, which legislated private voluntary lodgings and mutual aid within guilds to be implemented by the state, marking the formation of the modern social security system. From then on, the poor system continued until its abolition in 1834, and the New Poor Law was promulgated in the same year. But the situation of the English working class "has not been improved by the new Poor Law". In this regard, Engels launched a fierce criticism of the Poor Law.

(1) Criticism of the relief principle of the new poor law

The New Poor Law provided that "all relief, pecuniary or in kind, was abolished; only one form of relief was recognized - the admission of the poor to the training houses which had been rapidly established everywhere." [1]-576 he new Poor Law eliminated relief in cash and in kind and sent only workers in need of relief to the Institute of Arts, whose rules were enough to "scare off everyone who had a little hope of living without such social charity." [1]-576 First of all, the conditions of food and accommodation in the training center were very poor. In the training center, the working class ate worse than usual and lived very poorly. They often slept four, five, six or even eight children in one bed. Secondly, the workers who received relief in the training center had to take part in more arduous labor than workers usually did. Finally, workers who receive relief at the Institute must "wear the uniform of the Institute and be completely at the mercy of the administrator" [1]-576 . There is no freedom for workers in the Institute. Workers cannot freely enter and leave the Institute. Workers who want to meet with their families outside the Institute can only do so with the permission or supervision of the administrator. Engels particularly emphasized that according to the provisions of the Poor Law, workers receiving relief should be treated humanely, but the spirit of the law regards workers as prisoners, and the essence of the law is to treat the poor as prisoners, as people outside the law and human beings. Engels concluded that the new poor law system "essentially regards the poor as prisoners, the art Institute as a prison to punish prisoners, the people living in the art Institute as people outside the law, as people outside the human race, as the embodiment of all ugliness." [1]-577

(2) Criticism of the purpose of the poor law

In the primitive accumulation stage of capitalism, the bourgeoisie, on the one hand, used violence to deprive the people of all means of survival and livelihood, making them "proletarians", some of whom were attracted to the factories run by the bourgeoisie and transformed into wage labor, creating surplus value for the bourgeoisie while barely maintaining their own lives and those of their families; On the other hand, the bourgeoisie, while depriving the people of the means of subsistence, destroyed the original patriarchal social and family relations of the people. "The medieval guild organization that gave certain relief to its members in the funeral of the sick and the old has disintegrated." [2] -30The health of the employed labor force and the life of the proletarians such as the vagrants and beggars can not be guaranteed. The resistance of the proletarians threatens the interests and rule of the bourgeoisie to a certain extent. At the same time, the problems of the vagrants and the life of the working class have come to a time when they must be solved.

The bourgeoisie was one of the founders of the miserable life of the proletarians, but the poor law was not implemented from the standpoint of the proletarians, but to maintain the political rule of the bourgeoisie and extract more surplus value from the proletarians. Engels clearly pointed out in his book The Situation of the British Working Class that the bourgeoisie would pretend to be "merciful" only after their own interests needed it. Therefore, the purpose of the British bourgeoisie in implementing the poor system is, first of all, to safeguard its own interests. The bourgeoisie regards the poor tax as a business, and they choose to do this business in order to "buy the right not to be disturbed by you, and you have to stay in your dark doghouse." Don't irritate my sensitive nerves with your poor looks! " [1]-567 The British bourgeoisie only ignored the" crow's nest "of the working class for the sake of a comfortable living environment, but they did not know that the" crow's nest "of the working class was caused by the selfish nature of the bourgeoisie.

(3) Criticism of the Poor Law for its contempt of human rights

Engels pointed out that the British working class must give up personal reputation, freedom and political freedom to get the relief of the new poor law, and only the working class who accepted these three conditions and whose living conditions were worse than those of the lowest level of self-supporting workers could accept the relief of the poor law. The Poor Committee believes that the working class, that is, the poor, has only the right to live, but not the right to live as human beings, but the right to exist as animals. First of all, the working class must give up their personal reputation when they accept the relief, because receiving the relief will be regarded as a stain on life by the society. Secondly, the working class will lose their personal freedom when they accept the relief. As discussed earlier, the working class was not free to go to the workhouse, they were supervised as prisoners, and they could only see their families with the consent of the supervisor. Finally, the working class must lose political freedom, especially the right to vote, to receive relief from the poor. Engels cited a large number of cases of humiliation of the working class by the British art Institute, such as workers often being asked to strip naked and put in the detention room.

The implementation of the poverty relief system did alleviate the poor living conditions of the working class to a certain extent, such as alleviating poverty, providing labor protection for employees and safeguarding the health of women and children, but it could not change the development of the objective situation, especially the harsh conditions of the new "poverty relief law" and the neglect of the human rights of the working class. This greatly aroused the indignation of the workers. "The establishment of the Institute of Learning Arts has aroused the strong hatred of the proletariat against the propertied class more than any measure

of the ruling party." The law caused a unanimous outcry of anger from the workers. [1]-581 The new poverty relief system has also become a system that sucks the last drop of blood of the proletariat, so the working class would rather seek help from the poor brothers than go to the "Bastille".

4. Contemporary Enlightenment of Engels' Social Security Thought

First, strengthen the basic security function of the state in the social assistance system. In the long-term practice, China has always emphasized and effectively played the "bottom-up" role of the state in the social assistance system. Based on the systematic summary of the experience of social assistance policies at home and abroad, the optimization of social assistance policies in China should focus on the following aspects: First, while insisting on the government's basic responsibility, we should actively promote the transformation and deepening of the government's functions. With the realization of the goal of building a well-off society in an all-round way by 2020 and the decisive victory in the battle against poverty, the relatively poor groups have become the main target of social assistance work. Therefore, "building a long-term mechanism to solve relative poverty" [3] has become a new orientation of the national social assistance function in the new era. Secondly, we need to further clarify the division of powers and expenditure responsibilities between the central government and local governments in social assistance, strengthen the macro-management functions of the central government in policy formulation, overall coordination and cross-regional resource allocation, and expand the autonomous decision-making space of local governments in the implementation of assistance in accordance with the law and regulations. The system constructs a "central-local collaborative governance mechanism with clear powers and responsibilities, efficient operation and compatible incentives". [4]

Secondly, we should promote the transformation of the concept of social assistance and actively build a "development-oriented" social assistance system. Establish the principle of development-oriented assistance with "assistance as the main and rescue as the supplement", and promote the transformation of social assistance from survival-oriented to development-oriented. Engels pointed out in The Situation of the Working Class in Britain that the implementation of the old poor law might encourage the dependence of some recipients and affect the social fashion of diligence. Modern social assistance, as a mechanism of social solidarity and risk sharing, not only requires the government to fulfill its statutory security responsibilities, but also emphasizes the reasonable return of individual responsibility, and advocates stimulating the initiative and initiative of the recipients through system design.

Thirdly, we should accelerate the legislative process of social assistance and realize the legalization and standardization of social assistance work. The rule of law is the fundamental guarantee for the steady operation of the social assistance system. With the profound changes in China's economic and social structure and the transformation of poverty patterns, it has become a consensus to promote special legislation on social assistance. The social assistance law in the new era should be based on the realistic background of the transformation of the structure of the poor population from absolute poverty to relative poverty, and take the establishment of a normalized and institutionalized relative poverty governance system as the core goal. By clarifying the basic principles, object scope, implementation procedures, responsibility subjects and supervision mechanism of social assistance, the law will provide a solid legal basis for building a fairer and more efficient relief system, and then promote the high-quality development of social assistance in China on the track of the rule of law.

5. Conclusion

This paper systematically examines Engels' early critique of the "Poor Laws" in Britain, based on his work *The Condition of the Working Class in England*. Engels profoundly reveals that under the capitalist system, the Poor Laws not only failed to alleviate the dire conditions of the working class but also institutionalized oppression and human rights violations through institutions like workhouses, serving essentially as a tool to uphold bourgeois rule. The article extracts three implications for the development of China's social security system: strengthening the state's fundamental welfare function, transitioning from a "relief-oriented" to a "development-oriented" approach in social assistance, and accelerating the legislative process for social aid. These insights hold significant theoretical and practical value for building a fairer and more effective social assistance system in China.

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