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Wildcat
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Good Old-Fashioned Trade Unionism

Contents

farewell to their cherished union; and such was the power, eloquence, and advocacy of their leaders that the peace was not broken, even under such trying conditions". Rule 12 of the union's constitution (agreed in May 1843) stated "That this Association will not support or defend any member who shall in any way violate the laws of the country".

As well as assisting Queen Victoria's judiciary the union also attempted to suppress strikes, even legal ones, in a way which today we find very familiar. During 1844 there were strikes in almost every coalfield in Britain but the union doggedly maintained its position of opposing all "partial" strikes. Only a "general" strike of the whole industry was supposed to be good enough.

The union conference in Manchester in January 1844 was held in the midst of a strike wave in the South Lancashire coal-field. There had been 20 strikes and 100s of men had been out for 5 months. Since the last conference had condemned partial strikes they had not received a penny in strike pay, and union officials had been sent to try to get them back to work. Not surprisingly, thousands left the union over the next few months. In many cases the men had succeeded in winning large pay rises through their unofficial action!

But the union didn't have things all its own way. As well as the unofficial strikes (many of which it had to officialise) there were numerous occasions where the veterans of 1842 failed to fully observe the spirit of Rule 12. During a strike in Yorkshire in 1844, scabs had been brought in from Derbyshire in large numbers. At the Soap House pit near Sheffield they were housed in a barracks in the pityard. A large crowd scaled the walls, broke open the doors, smashed every window and gave the scabs a good kicking. During the same strike, at Deep pit in the same area, strikers blew up the engine boiler. These sorts of incidents, though, had already become few and far between by 1842 standards. The Miners' Association largely disappeared after the anti-Chartist repression and recession of 1848, but the damage had been done.

The year 1842 was a very significant one for the proletariat of the British Isles. On the positive side it was the occasion of a great struggle against wage cutting and on the negative side it marked the formation of the first modern national trade union. This was the Miners' Association of Great Britain and Ireland, an organisation every bit as anti-working class as the trade unions today, which used almost identical methods to undermine the workers' struggle for their interests. This was an event of significance for the proletariat of the whole world since the trade union form (once perfected) was one which was to be exported across the globe. Unionisation was not the only important event in the "domestication" of the proletariat of Britain but it is one of the clearest examples of a general trend from the uncontrollable mobs of the 18th Century to the passivity of the modern Labour Movement.

But first let's start as we mean to go on, with mass strikes and uprisings. In mid 1842 conditions for the working class were even more desperate than usual. In some industrial towns half the population was unemployed and those "lucky" enough to be in work were often on short-time and subjected to frequent wage cuts and speed up. The first sign of a fight back was in West Bromwich in May when miners went on strike. The strike was smashed by the police and army and the workers were forced to accept a 10% wage cut but the strike had only been over a fortnight when more than 10,000 iron and coal workers struck in the Black Country. From here trouble quickly spread to North Staffordshire, and by the end of July all the North Staffordshire mines were closed and industry ground to a halt across the whole of the Midlands. This was just the beginning.

In the textile towns large crowds of strikers and other proletarians roamed about emptying the factories and filling the streets. Many had sticks and did not hesitate to use force to extend the struggle. They pulled plugs from factory boilers so in Lancashire and Yorkshire the strike became known as the Plug Plot Riots. At Shelton, North Staffs., Lord Granville's pits had two furnaces blown up. They still had not been replaced two years later. At Bingley in Yorkshire strikers threatened to burn down any mill that carried on working. They meant it.

At this time the police force barely existed. In the Scottish town of Airdrie, for example, one superintendent and four constables attempted to control a mining community numbering 33,000! The total force in Staffordshire was 184 men. Rescue of prisoners was very common. On 6 August a large crowd surged through Burslem, North Staffordshire, in response to the arrest of three colliers for begging. They broke into the police station, freed the men and then smashed all the windows in the Town Hall. A few days later in the same town Thomas Powys, a magistrate and deputy lord lieutenant of the county, ordered troops to fire on a strikers demo in the market square. One was killed and many wounded. A crowd of 500 set off to burn Powys' house. Later various rich scumbags had their homes pillaged and burnt. Coal owners and magistrates were singled out for special treatment. So were the clergy — as well as most of them preaching in support of coal owners, some of them actually were coalowners. God may forgive, the proletariat doesn't!

Many of the early clashes occurred because of attempts by the authorities to crack down on poaching and the stealing of vegetables, which occurred on an enormous scale. In Cheshire a special mounted force was formed to ensure that information about attacks on farms was quickly sent to the army.

When the strike movement ended in September, it was a partial victory for the workers, despite the vicious repression meted out by the state — hundreds were imprisoned and sentences of over 20 years transportation were common. But employers were not able to impose the large-scale wage cuts (around 25%) which they had intended. Some workers (such as the spinners of Bolton) even won small increases. The situation was summed up well by Richard Pilling, a mill worker on trial for calling his fellow workers out on strike when the bosses announced a wage cut. In court he said, "If it had not been for the late struggle, I firmly believe thousands would have starved to death".

It was clear that the workers had won this victory not through peacefully withdrawing their labour but through the traditional methods of rioting, freeing prisoners, plundering and burning the houses of the rich, theft, sabotage and undemocratically spreading

treasurer, for example, was a pub landlord from Newcastle. A particularly important role in the union was played by WP Roberts, a solicitor from Bath, who was the union's legal officer.

In so far as Roberts and his friends had a political program for the union it can be summed up as the Right to Strike. That is, a class deal whereby the bosses allow the workers to struggle by peaceful, democratic means in return for guarantees that they won't go any further than that, that they won't threaten the bosses property rights or control over the production process. The right to strike implies the right to manage. It also implies that the Rule of Law should, to some extent, apply to all classes. Obviously, workers will only have any respect for the law if they can sometimes win court cases. This is where Roberts came in.

The Miners' Association was the first union in Britain to use the law courts in a systematic way to defend its members. Roberts became known as the "workingman's Attorney General". He used to travel up and down the country representing miners, and often other workers, in magistrates courts. "We resisted every individual act of oppression, even in cases where we were sure of losing", he explained. He was very good at his job, winning many small victories against the employers, here freeing a man imprisoned for leaving work without permission, there taking back wages illegally withheld. He once boasted that he had taught the magistrates law and how to make legal warrants. He regularly had the decisions of magistrates overturned by the Court of Queen's Bench in London. The fact that the authorities allowed him to get away with all this shows how much the ruling class were prepared to make concessions to integrate the proletariat into civil society.

The commitment of the union to the rule of law was nothing short of fanatical. They always told miners to be peaceful, even when they were being evicted from their homes. This happened on a massive scale during the strike in Northumberland and Durham in 1844. The Northumbrian miners' union leader Thomas Burt (later to become a Liberal MP) describes how families "stood with tears in their eyes and saw villainous wretches throwing to the door articles to which the memory of past years had given sanctity; but they had been taught by their leaders that if the peace was broken, they might bid

secrets; all is done openly and to any of our meetings all are invited. Manufacturers! Traders! and Shopkeepers! You are deeply interested in our welfare".

The legalisation of certain forms of organisation such as the repeal of the Combination Acts in 1824 is not something which enabled the working class to organise itself better — the Luddites were pretty well organised and everything is legal if you don't get caught! What it did do was enable the recuperators, particularly middle class ones from outside "impenetrable" working class communities, to become better organised. The attitudes which the working class had had towards rich reformers was summed up by Francis Place: "The laws against combinations . . . induced [working people] to break and disregard the laws. They made them suspect the intentions of every man who tendered his services".

The Recuperators

It would be a mistake to think that the development of trade unionism and parliamentary politics was just a middle class conspiracy. If petty bourgeois and even bourgeois elements had an influence out of all proportion to their numbers it was because, for the most part, the proles saw nothing wrong with this. As EP Thompson says in *The Making of the English Working Class*:

> "Only the gentleman — Burdett, Cochrane, Hunt, Feargus O'Connor — knew the forms and language of high politics, could cut a brave figure on the hustings, or belabour the Ministers in their own tongue. The reform movement might use the rhetoric of equality, but many of the old responses of deference were still there even among the huzzaing crowds".

But the role of middle class types should not be underestimated. Most of the top leaders of the Miners' Association had never worked in the coal industry despite the continual cry from the members for the appointment of sacked miners as officials. The Association's

strikes through going directly to other groups of workers. The numerous unions founded shortly after this time set about blatantly suppressing all of these activities in favour of legality, peaceful behaviour and, sometimes, the myth of the "General Strike" in which the workers would redress all their grievances without a shot being fired.

The Miners' Association was not the only union formed at this time. The Potters' Union was formed in 1843, so was the Cotton Spinners' Association. In 1845 the local bodies of the printing trade were united as the National Typographical Association. The tailors and shoe makers were being enrolled into national societies as were glass makers and steam engine makers. It was the most significant though, given its size (at one stage it may have had 100,000 members) and the important role played by miners in the strike/riot wave.

The trade unions, including the Miners' Association, openly opposed all forms of struggle apart from the peaceful withdrawal of labour. At one of the founding meetings of the Miners' Association at Wakefield in November 1842, every pit was asked to appoint delegates and urged to make "unity, peace, law and order" its motto. This meant accepting the logic of capitalist economics since obviously workers are less able to achieve anything by peaceful strikes when there is a surplus of labour. This doesn't mean they can't fight at all — it means they have to use different methods. The struggles of 1842 were against economic logic, taking place in the middle of a "recession" and succeeding where peaceful strike action would undoubtedly have failed. This wasn't the only way unions attempted to impose economic logic — the Miners' Association made regular appeals to employers to unite with the workers in demanding higher coal prices!

This period wasn't just critical for the development of modern unions but modern social democratic politics as well. The National Association of United Trades for the Protection of Labour, formed in 1845, even seriously debated launching a Labour Party. Fortunately this particular attack on the proletariat had to wait another half century or so.

It was also an important time for the state reform of working conditions; that is, for planned preemptive concessions to the working

class designed to buy social peace in the long term. This was the year of The Midlands Mining Commission Report and the First Report of the Commission on Children and Young Persons — this was the first official exposé of the widespread employment of children (often sent down the mines at the age of four or five) and the appalling conditions under which they worked. There was renewed parliamentary agitation for the ten-hour day for women and juveniles in the cotton industry. This was led by Tory philanthropists such as Lord Ashley (later Lord Shaftesbury) and finally became law in 1847. In 1848, when many bourgeois commentators thought that Britain was on the brink of revolution, the Secretary of State wrote to Lord Ashley saying "I shall declare without hesitation . . . that the passing of the Ten-Hours Bill has kept these vast counties at peace during this eventful period". In 1864 Gladstone declared in the House of Commons that the law had been beneficial "both in mitigating human suffering and in attaching important classes of the community to Parliament and the Government". At first sight it may appear that this "movement" had very little connection with what was actually happening within the working class but in fact there were numerous links between trade unionism and philanthropic reformers. The Miners' Association passed many resolutions praising Lord Shaftesbury's work and continually plied him with data. He once replied to them, saying he was "only an instrument, and possessed little power unless the working classes stood at his back".

Chartism

Most of those involved in setting up and running the unions in this period, particularly the Miners' Association, would have described themselves as "Chartists". This meant they supported the "six points of the People's Charter" on the reform of parliament. These were: adult male suffrage, no property qualification, annual parliaments, equal constituencies, salaries for MP's and the secret ballot. This was first formulated for a specifically working class audience in 1836 by the London Workingmen's Association, a small society largely formed on the suggestion of the rich radical MP, Francis Place.

But the ending of the bosses' recession didn't completely kill the movement. Luddism in Yorkshire and Lancashire largely gave way to preparations for an insurrection. During the summer of 1812 there were numerous raids for arms. Lead for making bullets was also being taken, in the form of pumps, water-spouts and guttering. The conspiracy extended well outside the Luddite areas but, unfortunately, never got as far as an actual uprising.

Over the next two or three decades the tactics of Luddism did much to inspire other movements of class warfare.

In the early 1820s in Monmouthshire, Wales there existed a secret organisation known as the "Scotch Cattle" based on the colliers. They claimed that Ned Ludd was their founder. Like the Luddites they had a well developed system of threatening letters, night meetings and military-style signals. They specialised in blowing up furnaces and terrorising scabs. Their leader was said to be Lolly, obviously Lol — the Lord of Misrule.

In 1830 the discontent of agricultural labourers exploded through the southern and eastern counties of England in marches from village to village, breaking threshing machines and demanding higher wages. Night time arson and machine-breaking were very widespread. "Captain Swing" was the signature most often attached to the threatening letters sent to landowners, farmers and parsons. Wages were successfully raised for a time but the main lasting effect was that the widespread introduction of threshing machines in rural England was delayed until the 1850s.

An important feature of all these movements was the commitment to secrecy. The clandestine hit squads of the day were premised upon a mass culture of non-cooperation. Whole working class communities refused to collaborate with the authorities. Often secret mass meetings were called which were only occasionally infiltrated by the state. This is why so few Luddites were ever caught despite the affected areas being saturated with troops and the extensive use of spies from outside the areas. The harsh sentences imposed by the judiciary were a sign of the desperation of the authorities.

Contrast this with a statement made by the executive of the Miners' Association in 1844 to the employers. It began: "We have no

were wounded, two of them mortally, and they had to be left behind. The first blood had been shed and it did not go unavenged. Later the same month the other notorious owner, one William Horsfall from Ottiwell, was shot dead.

In Lancashire the movement was more one of open mass riots. On 20 March the warehouse of one of the first manufacturers to use the power-loom was attacked at Stockport. In early April there were numerous riots aiming to force down the prices of potatoes and bread. On 20 April in Middleton a power-loom mill was attacked by several thousand. Its defenders fired muskets; three attackers were killed and many wounded. The next morning the crowd assembled in even greater strength. They were joined by a body of men armed with muskets and picks with an effigy of General Ludd and a red flag at their head. Finding the mill still impregnable the crowd burned the mill-owner's house instead. Four days later a large mill was successfully burnt down in Westhoughton.

April-May 1812 was a real high point in the class war. Outside the Luddite areas there were serious food riots in Bristol, Carlisle, Leeds, Sheffield and Barnsley. In Cornwall the miners struck and marched into the market towns demanding reductions in food prices. In Sheffield a militia arms store was broken into. On May 11 the Prime Minister, Perceval, was assassinated in the House of Commons. Joy amongst the proles was unrestrained. In London large crowds gathered outside the Commons and cheered the assassin as he was led away. In Nottingham order could only be restored by military force and the reading of the Riot Act. It was widely assumed that Perceval's death must be the result of some revolutionary conspiracy. There was widespread disappointment when it turned out to be the work of a solitary hero.

One of the factors which brought this movement to an end was more repression: more troops, more spies, more arrests and an increasing number of executions. But probably more important was a major concession. This was the repeal of the so-called Orders In Council in June 1812. This was the policy of blockading France as part of Britain's war effort. Its repeal led to an immediate improvement in trade, greatly relieving the famine conditions existing in many parts of the country.

Their program was hardly original — 58 years previously one Major Cartwright had introduced a Bill in the Commons containing the same six points.

As can be imagined, Chartism was a very broad church indeed, encompassing everyone from those who thought that adult male suffrage would somehow enable the country to be run a bit better to those, such as James Bronterre O'Brien, who honestly believed that it would lead to the abolition of private property. Numerous progressive historians have written that it was a "revolutionary demand" — in "the context of the times", of course. We won't waste time trying to refute this absurd idea except to ask a rhetorical question: how come the famous Chartist leader Feargus O'Connor was actually elected to parliament in 1847 by the middle class electors of Nottingham and with a comfortable majority? It is often described as the "first working class organisation". It would be more accurate to describe it as a middle class movement dedicated to recuperating working class struggle. The intention of Chartism was always to divert working class anger into demands for an extension of the franchise. In 1848 when the working class urban centres of much of Britain were engulfed in strikes and riots, their response was . . . a massive petition to parliament, though they couldn't quite make up their minds whether to appeal to the Cabinet or directly to the Queen.

As might be expected of a movement with such conservative aims, its main activities consisted of organising petitions to parliament (with millions of signatures) and mass peaceful demos and rallies (hundreds of thousands of people). The fact that it was possible to assemble this many proles peacefully shows how much the working class had been tamed by the 1830s. This had not gone unnoticed by Francis Place: "Look even to Lancashire" he wrote a month after the vicious pig massacre of a pro-democracy demo at "Peterloo" (St. Peter's Fields near Manchester) in 1819:

> "'Lancashire brute' was the common and appropriate appellation. Until very lately it would have been dangerous to have assembled 500 of them on any occasion. Bakers and butchers would at the least have been plundered. Now 100,000 people

may be collected together and no riot ensue, and why? . . . The people have an object, the pursuit of which gives them importance in their own eyes, elevates them in their own opinion, and thus it is that the very individuals who would have been the leaders of the riots are the keepers of the peace."

There were, however, those who believed in achieving the goals of the Charter by insurrectionary means. These were known as "physical force" Chartists, as opposed to "moral force" Chartists. Sometimes they were as good as their appellation. One night in November 1838, for example, several thousand workers marched into Newport intending to free the imprisoned Chartist leader Vincent. They were led by Frost who had just been sacked from his post as a magistrate and was the chairman of a Chartist Convention which had just dissolved. They were attacked by troops and special constables and ten workers were killed. Violent rhetoric was also very common. The famous Chartist "extremist" Julian Harney once advised his audience to carry "a musket in one hand and a petition in the other" — an early example of "the armalite and the ballot box"! This was, after all, an age in which the state had very little legitimacy and the idea of taking up arms was very widespread amongst the working class. Harney wrote of the winter of 1838–9:

"In small villages lying out from Newcastle, the exhortation to arms was being taken quite literally . . . a strong tradition of owner-paternalism had been replaced by an extremely class-conscious Chartism, and fowling pieces, small cannon, stoneware grenades, pikes and 'craa's feet or caltrops — four-spiked irons which could be strewn in a road to disable cavalry horses — were being turned out in quantities. It was localities like this which, on hearing rumours that troops would be present at the great meeting in Newcastle on Christmas Day, sent couriers to find out if they were to bring arms with them."

The Insurrectionary Tradition

The Levelution is begun,

in a letter from "the Captain" of attempting to force his women workers into prostitution by paying them such low wages. After the inevitable defeat of the Bill a union was set up. The prime movers of the union were Henson and Coldham. Henson was an experienced activist in the secret "Institution" to which all framework-knitters belonged. Coldham was the Town Clerk of Nottingham! It had an effective existence for two years and seems to have been powerful enough to prevent a serious resurgence of Luddism.

The Nottingham events directly inspired the Yorkshire croppers. Luddism appeared modeled on the existing tactics but accompanied by a much greater number of threatening letters. A leaflet was distributed in Leeds which was far more insurrectionary than anything seen in Nottingham:

". . . You are requested to come forward with Arms and help the Redressers to redress their Wrongs and shake off the hateful Yoke of a Silly Old Man, and his Son more silly and their Rogueish Ministers, all Nobles and Tyrants must be brought down . . ."

These Luddites expressed solidarity with struggles in Ireland and elsewhere. One letter goes:

". . . the Weavers in Glasgow and many parts of Scotland will join us the Papists in Ireland are rising to a Man, so that they are likely to find the soldiers something else to do than Idle in Huddersfield and then woe to the places now guarded by them . . ."

Many of the smaller manufacturers just gave in, destroying or storing their own shearing-frames. After six or seven weeks only a few substantial mills were still holding out. In particular there were two owners who were notorious for their determination to defy the Luddites; they both kept armed company goons and troops on the premises day and night. According to tradition, the luddites drew lots to decide which mill to attack. The choice fell on Rawfolds in the Spen Valley. Around 150 Luddites attacked it. They failed. Many

Only those frames were attacked which were associated with reduced wages or the production of lower quality goods. This "reformist" spirit of the Nottingham Luddites is expressed well by the popular ballad of the time, General Ludd's Triumph:

The guilty may fear but no vengeance he aims

At the honest man's life or Estate,

His wrath is entirely confined to wide frames

And to those that old prices abate.

These Engines of mischief were sentenced to die

By unanimous vote of the Trade

And Ludd who can all opposition defy

Was the Grand executioner made.

The Luddites were masked and had a well developed system of signals, sentinels and couriers. Whoever led the raiding party on the particular night would be referred to as General Ludd. They also had "inspectors" who went around investigating pay and conditions and collected money for the workers made unemployed by the frames being broken.

At the beginning of February 1812 this phase of Midlands Luddism quickly died away. There were three main reasons for this. Not least of these was the fact that the use of terror by the workers had been quite successful, and wages had risen. Secondly, there were now several thousand troops in the area. Thirdly, there was now a Bill before Parliament to make frame-breaking punishable by death. This didn't stop the movement but did cause considerable panic in the workers' ranks. It also created a space for parliamentarism and trade unionism. A quasi-legal association, the "United Committee of Framework-Knitters" was formed to petition parliament for a Bill to protect pay and conditions. The Committee tried to suppress machine-breaking but feelings were running high in Nottingham, where seven Luddites were sentenced to transportation. In April a hosier was shot and wounded outside his house. He was accused

So I'll go home and get my gun,

And shoot the Duke of Wellington

(an 1820s street song from Belper, Derbyshire)

Since the 18th Century, there had been an almost unbroken tradition of organised violent resistance to capital. The 19th Century was ushered in with a rash of riots across England against high food prices caused by Britain's war with France. Much of the rioting seems to have been organised in advance with handbills being distributed. One, from London in September 1800, said: "How long will ye quietly and cowardly suffer yourselves to be imposed upon, and half-starved by a set of mercenary slaves and Government hirelings? . . . We are the sovereignty, rise then from your lethargy. Be at the Corn market on Monday". Six days of rioting at the Corn Market followed. Another called upon "Tradesmen, Artizans, Journeymen, Labourers &c." to meet on Kennington Common. The meeting was prevented only by the use of troops.

For the first two decades of the century rural Ireland was swept by one revolt after another. Secret societies — Threshers, Caravats, Shanavests, Carders — used various forms of violence to defend tenant rights, to force down rent and prices, resist tithe payment and drive out landlords. In 1806 the Threshers virtually controlled Connaught. According to the Irish Solicitor-General in 1811 the countryside suffered from the "formidable consequences of an armed peasantry, and a disarmed gentry". The Lord Chief Baron, sentencing a teenage boy to death for stealing arms, declared: "Can it be endured, that those persons who are labouring by day, should be legislating by night?"

The Luddites

"In the three counties, the agitation for parliamentary reform commenced at exactly the point where Luddism was defeated."

— EP Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*

The information in the following section is almost entirely taken from EP Thompson. This is because he seems to be the only lefty historian who's written anything decent about them. Many of the academics who deign to mention the Luddites are such blatant brown-noses of the bourgeoisie they're not worth reading — for example, one hack describes them as "simple-minded labourers . . . smashing the machines which they thought responsible for their troubles" (*The Age of Revolution*, E Hobsbawm, p55). EPT, on the other hand, regards Luddism more as an honest mistake made by the workers on the long and tortuous path which led to the election of Harold Wilson. As you can see from the above quote, though, he is honest and often gives factual examples which contradict his progressive, social democratic ideas. From a communist perspective there is nothing "outmoded" about the forms of action described here. Some kind of Luddite-style community organisation would be appropriate for workers in small, scattered work-places today and, as for Captain Swing, perhaps a few burning hayricks and smashed farm machines might be just what rich farmers need to persuade them to share some of their fat EC subsidies with their miserably paid labourers.

The Luddite movement was focused around three main industrial objectives: the destruction of power looms in Lancashire, the destruction of shearing frames in Yorkshire and resistance to the break-down of custom in the Midlands framework-knitting industry. But the movement went well beyond these objectives, drawing in proletarians from outside these sectors and raising all kinds of political demands. It was a movement of such strength that for several months it could successfully resist 12,000 troops, not by military confrontation but social means — unbreakable community solidarity and spreading disaffection in the troops' own ranks. In June 1812 the Vice-Lieutenant of the West Riding declared ". . . except for the very spots which were occupied by Soldiers, the Country was virtually in the possession of the lawless . . . the disaffected outnumbering by many Degrees the peaceable Inhabitants."

The "croppers" of Yorkshire were highly skilled (and highly paid) wool cloth finishing workers whose status was threatened by two important inventions, the gig-mill and the shearing frame. The gig-mill was a device for raising the surface of cloth by passing it between

rollers. It was at least as old as the mid-16th Century since there was a statute of Edward VI prohibiting its use. Workers had prevented its widespread use ever since. Who says you can't stand in the way of Progress? This struggle had been particularly intense at the end of the 18th Century. In the West Country bodies of rioters 1,000 or 2,000 strong had attacked the hated mills. In 1809 Parliament repealed all the protective legislation relating to the woolen industry — covering apprenticeship, the gig-mill and the number of looms which could be owned by one master.

The grievances of the framework-knitters of the Midlands (mostly Nottingham, Derby and Leicester area) were a bit more complicated. They mostly worked in small industrial villages in workshops containing three or four looms. These were rented from their employer. Since the end of the 18th Century they had suffered a severe worsening of general conditions as the development of uncontrolled prices and shoddy goods had undermined their earnings and craft status. The cotton weavers of Lancashire were also used to an artisan status which was directly threatened by the factory system.

The movement began in Nottingham in March 1811. A large demonstration of framework-knitters was dispersed by the army. That night 60 frames were broken in the village of Arnold by rioters who didn't try to disguise themselves. They were cheered on by the crowd. For several weeks similar incidents occurred throughout north-west Nottinghamshire. Despite the presence of troops and special constables, no arrests could be made.

In November of that year Luddism appeared in a more organised form. Frame-breaking had become the work of disciplined bands who moved rapidly from village to village at the dead of night. From Nottinghamshire it spread to parts of Leicestershire and Derbyshire, and continued without cease until February 1812. On 10 November a hosier in Bulwell defended his premises with arms. A Luddite was killed but, after taking away his body, his comrades returned, broke down the doors and smashed the frames. Three days later a large force of Luddites armed with muskets, pistols, axes and hammers destroyed 70 frames at a large workshop in Sutton-in-Ashfield.