Ned Ludd

by Theo Simon

(Sung to the traditional tune "The Cutty Wren")

Oh where are you going? says Miller to Monger
We may not tell you, says Johnson to Judd
We're going t't mill, says Jack to our Jill,
We're going to the factory, says little Ned Ludd

And what will you do there? says Miller to Monger
D'ye swear to tell no one? says Johnson to Judd
We'll break the machinery, improve the scenery,
Meet in the greenery after, says Ludd

And how will you break' em? says Miller to Monger
Stick with us - we'll show you, says Johnson to Judd
With pikes and with hammers, with fire and spanners,
To teach' em some manners, says General Ludd

Cos and if we don't break 'em, our lives they will take 'em,
Our craft, our cottage, our village as well -
No freedom or laughter for those who come after
But Servant and Master in a factory hell

So the door was kicked in - and the frames were all broken
And the owner was woken and raised the alarm,
And the yeoman came riding but we were in hiding,
The people providing to keep us from harm...

From Notts up to Lancashire, Yorkshire to Derbyshire,
Eighteen eleven to eighteen thirteen,
Ludd's army enlisted, and the people resisted
The march of the more-money-making machine...

How now shall we stop it? says Owner to Ruler,
With spies and with soldiers, says Tory to Whig.
We'll hang every breaker and Luddite oath-taker,
Transport trouble-makers, - and that's what they did.

Fourteen, hung on a beam,
Ugliest justice that you've ever seen,
Fifty in all, who took a long fall ...
In the rising against the machines

And that made a way for the Age of Wage Slavery,
Hungered and homeless and bowed to the boss
Whose factories killed them and crippled their children,
And all for the worship of profit and loss.

Some call it futility - they say the future will be
What the engine of progress demands
But Ludd called humanity back to reality:
We weave our destiny with our own hands!

All hands that are ready to hold a line steady
To pull down the fences, or pull up a crop
Unlock the laboratory, build a home in the tree-tops
Till the driving and never arriving has stopped - STOP!

And some call us Vandals, and some call us Hooligans
Some call us Luddites, and some Rent-a-mob
But we're standing up proud, and we're shouting out loud,
For the sake of our family, let's finish this job.

And when the job's done and the long wars are over,
And we've all recovered the love in our blood,
Our ancestors' voices will join our rejoicing
And sing to the memory of General Ludd!

Mr Lud's Song

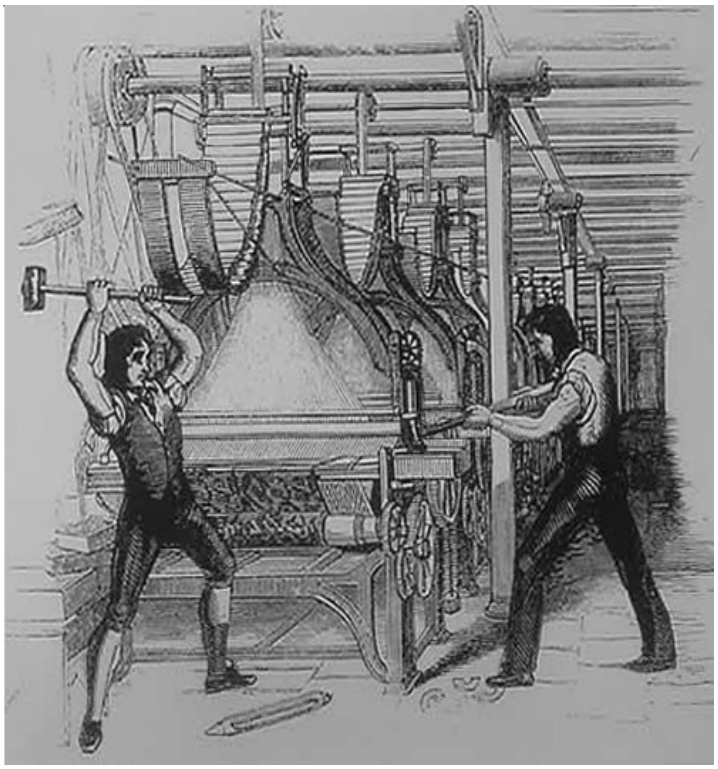
Theo Simon traces the history of Luddism through the movement's songs.

"We received him as a friend from you...& we have enjoy'd ourselves over a pot or two of Beer, & he read us Mr luds Song."

An intercepted letter from a Yorkshire weaver to his brother in Nottingham, April 1812.

November 2011 marks the 200 year anniversary of the machine-breaking campaign waged by people we now call "Luddites", but who knew themselves simply as "the luds", each one sharing in the common identity of their mythical leader Ned - aka General, Captain or Edward – Ludd. The luds' bicentenary years of 2011 to 2013 are a ripe opportunity for us to reassess their legacy and hopefully reinstate their place of honour in the annals of English political struggle.

The luds were literate but not literary men. We know them only through the public communiqués and songs which they left us, and incomplete official reports of their deeds in papers of the time. The detail of who they were and how they organised died with them, hidden under the cloak of secrecy that each swore on pain of death to uphold, and protected by the loyalty of the communities whose will they embodied.



As common people, that they managed to etch the name of Ned Ludd into the history books at all is a measure of their ferocious commitment. But as the losers in a struggle against enforced industrialisation they have paid the price of being maliciously misrepresented by the victors, so that my history teacher at school could tell us that they were "a riotous mob led by a half-wit named Ned Ludd" who, driven by ignorance and superstition, attempted to stop the inevitable and brilliant march of Progress.

History no doubt is taught differently today, and as we approach the end of the carbon-fuelled industrial capitalist epoch their defeat ushered in, the word "Luddite" now has a different ring. For some a pejorative term suggesting that anyone opposing research, road-building, biotechnology, nuclear power etc is a reactionary nimby, the label has now been proudly owned by eco-warriors, DIYers, latter-day pastoralists and anarcho-primitivists. It was largely in that spirit that, as an Earth First! activist in the 1990s, I wrote my own song of the luddite struggle reproduced here.

But while we can easily feel our affinity with their cause, wrestling as we are with the catastrophic legacy of 200 years of unrestricted technological exploitation, (or simply wrestling with our own inability to use an iphone or master facebook), we shouldn't lightly expropriate their memory to serve our own agendas, as if the luds were simply proto-swampys, engaged in a spontaneous direct action campaign of "ecotage". Willingness to resort to destructive direct action is a given for any hard-pressed people who have exhausted all other options for getting themselves heard. For the luds it came at a terrible price, risking death and exile to defend not only their livelihoods but also the very existence of English community life. Through their songs and communiqués we dimly glimpse a pre-industrialised world where social solidarity, rooted in localised production, tradition and a web of mutual obligations, defined each person's sense of self in a way that we now find near-impossible to imagine.

Machine-breaking is as old as machines. In his book "Rebels Against the Future" Kirkpatrick Sale lists at least 17 major incidents in the textile trade from 1767 to 1802, not only in what would become "the luddite triangle" of the northern counties, but also in the West Country. For weavers, cloth-finishers and stockingers, increasingly undermined by new technology, the tactic wasn't new. It had previously achieved partial localised success in persuading clothiers and hosiers to forgo the use of new techniques which drove down wages or produced inferior goods.

But by 1811, any textile worker could see that the rising class of laissez faire capitalists were determined to use the new technologies to increase their profit margins, regardless of the social cost. This was, initially at least, a labour struggle in which each section of artisans had their own particular grievance. It was against this background that a group of Notts framework knitters conceived their audacious and radical plan to turn sporadic piecemeal protests into a generalised campaign, that they hoped would intimidate the owners into submission and win attention from a parliament which had so far ignored their petitions.

On November the 4th 1811, in the village of Bulwell just north of Nottingham, a small team of men appeared out of the night. Their faces were blackened for disguise and they carried an array of heavy tools. Posting a guard outside the shuttered house of a local master-weaver, they broke their way in and smashed 6 wide-frame looms, before disappearing again into the darkness. A week later around 24 men in 2 different units struck in dif-

A Luddite dressed in women's clothes. Cross dressing has been a recurrent them in labourer's revolts – for example in the Rebecca riots of 1843, or the French anti enclosure riots known as the Guerre des Desmoiselles

ferent villages, destroying 19 more frames and sustaining their first fatality - a young weaver called John Westley– from the bullet of a hired guard. His dying words were "Proceed, my brave fellows, I die with a willing heart."

Undeterred, 2 days later more men attacked a cart that was trying to spirit 8 frames away to safety, and trashed its cargo. That night 1000 luds, including 300 armed with pistols and muskets, entered the town of Sutton and paid a visit to every premises harbouring the "noxious machines"

After that first tumultuous ten days of audacious attacks the dragoons arrived, supported by the Mansfield militia, and made some arrests. It was 2 days later that the luds announced their identity to the world in their first communiqué, addressed from "the general agitators for the northern counties" to "our well-beloved brother General Edward Ludd", and calling on the latter to "punish" a local lace manufacturer. Why they gave their fictional General the name of Ludd is unclear, but it must have had some appropriate regional resonance. "The General" and "the general agitators" were clearly one organised body, growing in strength. The purpose of such letters, posted privately to owners and publicly to all, was to announce their existence, spread propaganda, terrorise the owners, and encourage others to join Ludd's anonymous "Army of Redressers". In spite of military harassment and increasingly violent resistance by the owners, the night time attacks continued unabated into December, when the first of Mr Lud's songs, called General Ludd's Triumph, was written and sung.

Chant no more your old rhymes about bold Robin Hood,
His feats I but little admire
I will sing the Achievements of General Ludd
Now the Hero of Nottinghamshire.
Brave Ludd was to measures of violence unused
Till his sufferings became so severe
That at last to defend his own Interest he rous'd
And for the great work did prepare.

Not surprisingly, this song invokes the name of the Sherwood outlaw. In the same way, early communiqués coming from "Ned Ludd's Office, Robin Hood's Cave, Sherwood" consciously claim Ludd's place in the popular imagination. Sung in alehouses or other gatherings, probably to a popular tune called "Poor Jack", General Ludd's Triumph would have been quickly heard by hundreds as it passed from district to district. It's a song full of youthful confidence (the majority of the active luds would have been under 25) boasting that General Ludd is

by force unsubdued, and by threats undismay'd
Death itself can't his ardour repress
The presence of Armies can't make him afraid
Nor impede his career of success.

Guilty owners may fear his "Omnipotent Arm", but

His wrath is entirely confined to wide frames,
And to those that old prices abate.

The main grievance for the Notts framework knitters or "stockingers" was the use of wide-frame looms to drive down production costs and wages at a time when the hosiery trade was already in a depressed state, with foreign trade severely hit by the Napoleonic Wars, and the ongoing process of land enclosure shattering rural economies and flooding the weaving trades with men who were desperate for work. Wide-frames were used to produce "cut-ups" which were then sewn together, rather than knitting them in a single piece using a narrow frame. This had the advantage to the capitalist that one man could do the work of six, and the disadvantage to the reputation of the craft that the cut-ups would fall apart after one wearing. On top of this, the new breed of master was flouting apprenticeship traditions by "colting", or employing younger untrained workers at low rates. Stockingers argued that these practises contravened a 1663 Charter of King Charles.

According to one recollection of the average stockinger's way of life in the previous decades, "Each had a garden, a barrel of home-brewed ale, a weekday suit of clothes and one for Sundays, and plenty of leisure." As village out-workers, based at home or in small shops of 4 or 5 men, they worked to a great extent when they chose, doing piecework for the hosiers who rented them their looms or "frames" and sold the finished products. It was this modestly comfortable and autonomous existence, with plenty of time for tending vegetable plots and other activities, that the framework knitters now wanted to regain and maintain. Thus it was that

These Engines of mischief were sentenced to die
By unanimous vote of the Trade

and the singer assures us that the lud's campaign will continue

Till full fashioned work at the old fashioned price
Is established by Custom and Law ...

A Luddite mob, caricatured by Phiz

And ...colting and cutting and squaring no more
Shall deprive honest workmen of bread.

By songs like this, and by word of mouth, the news of what was happening in Notts spread quickly that December. Having established their initial success in one region, the first luds were reaching out to the larger community of textile workers, sending delegates to underground meetings in Leeds and Manchester that winter solstice, explaining and encouraging others to adopt the tactics and language of "The Sherwood Lads". By the month's end, men in Yorkshire had heard Mr Lud's Song, and were holding night-time meetings and marches on the Moors.

Although most people lived, worked and died within their own local communities, the networks of broader solidarity already existed in the national trade. Any form of workers' self-organisation had been outlawed by the combination acts of 1799 and 1800, but underground societies and committees, carried over from the guild system of yore, continued to function. They were particularly strong among the wool-cloth finishers or "croppers" of Yorkshire.

An "aristocracy of labour" in the trade, croppers had enjoyed relatively high rates for their demanding, highly skilled handiwork, which ultimately determined the value of the finished product. Unlike the stockingers or weavers, they were not outworkers but generally worked cutting and finishing cloth in workshops of 50 or so. They had "twice or three times as much money at the ale house than the weaver, the dresser or the dyer", and were "notoriously the least manageable of any persons employed in this important manufacture". Apparently working as and when they wanted, their powerful position allowed them to unofficially enforce their will upon the workshop owners through unified threats to "black" particular shops. Both in Yorkshire and among their brother wool-cloth shearmen in the West Country, older croppers had already seen forceful resistance to the introduction of "gig-mills" which raised the nap of the cloth mechanically.

Now that the profit-driven "master clothiers" were bringing in the newer technology of "shear-frames" to mechanise the cutting of cloth, the croppers readily followed the lead of the knitters to launch a campaign of mill-burning and machine-breaking which began on 19th January 1812, and gave rise

Lord Byron spoke out in defence of the Luddites in his first speech in the House of Lords, in February 1812, saying:

Whilst these outrages must be admitted to exist to an alarming extent, it cannot be denied that they have arisen from circumstances of the most unparalleled distress: the perseverance of these miserable men in their proceedings, tends to prove that nothing but absolute want could have driven a large, and once honest and industrious, body of the people, into the commission of excesses so hazardous to themselves, their families, and the community. ... their own means of subsistence were cut off, all other employment preoccupied, and their excesses, however to be deplored and condemned, can hardly be subject to surprise.

As the sword is the worst argument than can be used, so should it be the last. In this instance it has been the first; but providentially as yet only in the scabbard. The present measure will, indeed, pluck it from the sheath; yet had proper meetings been held in the earlier stages of these riots, had the grievances of these men and their masters (for they also had their grievances) been fairly weighed and justly examined, I do think that means might have been devised to restore these workmen to their avocations, and tranquillity to the country.

to another rousing song of Ned Ludd's army, "The Cropper Lads".

This song was written by John Walker following the first 2 successful operations of the West Riding luds. He sang it at a meeting of Huddersfield workers at the Shears Inn, Hightown, in February 1812, right before they marched out to Hartshead Moor to attack wagons transporting shearing frames.

Come, cropper lads of high renown,
Who love to drink good ale that's brown,
And strike each haughty tyrant down,
With hatchet, pike, and gun!
Oh, the cropper lads for me,
And valiant lads they be,
Who with lusty stroke,
The shear frames broke,
The cropper lads for me!

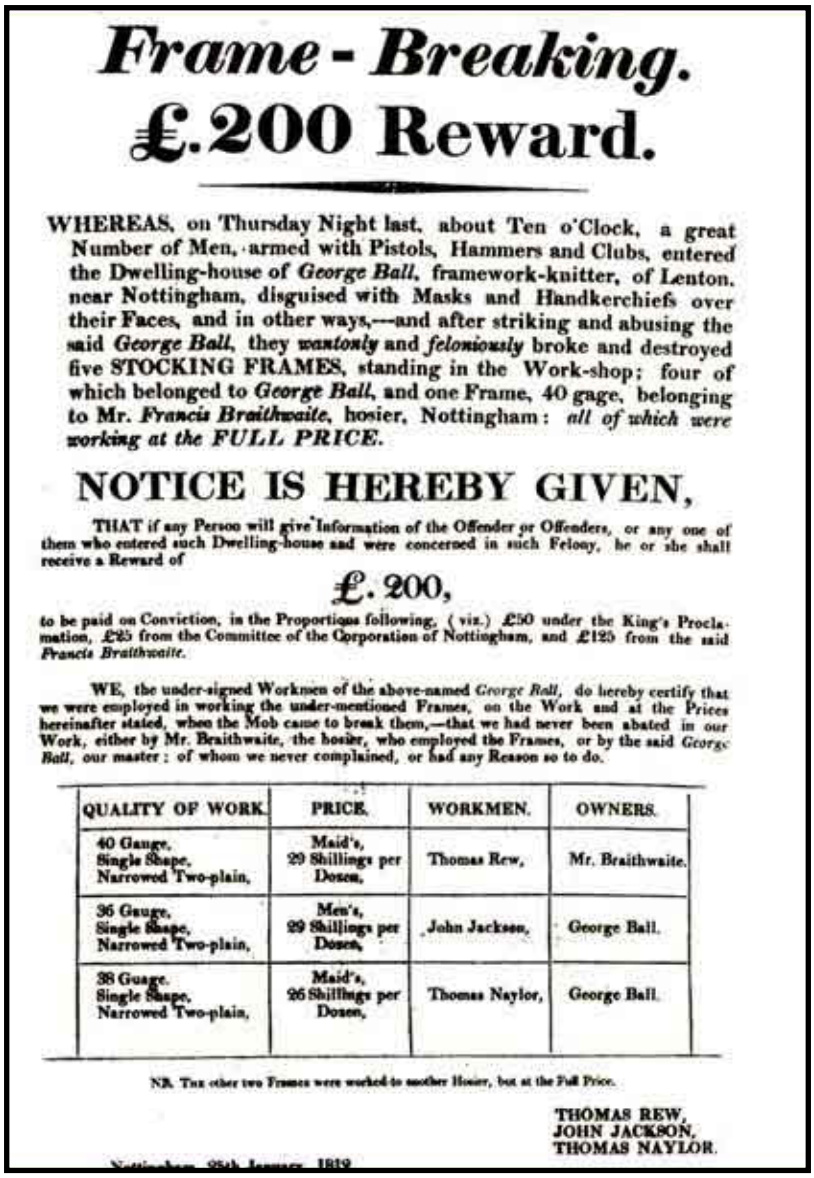
The Croppers had tremendous self-confidence and militant community support. One of their number, signing himself "the General of the Army of Redressers, Ned Ludd Clerk" looked forward to "being governed by a just republic" in a communiqué which called on parliament to pass an act to "put down all Machinery hurtful to Commonality". That phrase expresses the entirely rational human demand of the movement – that we should place the needs of our shared community life above the novel capacities of machines.

But though the Yorkshire croppers (followed 4 weeks later by the Lancashire weavers) tended from the start towards more radical politics, like the knitters they shared a belief in the legal justification of their actions, appealing to established custom and practise and ancient statutes. Of course, the new generation of laissez faire capitalists had no respect for any such restrictions on production. This was a collision not simply between a few old and new technologies, but between a semi agrarian, post-craft guild, community-based way of life, where even owners and rulers were thought to owe paternalistic duties to the people they exploited, and an emerging full-blown industrial capitalist order, where the increase of private profit was the only sacred obligation.

It was a battle which ultimately capital was destined to win. Even as the luds' campaign in Yorkshire was gaining momentum - mobilising thousands of people, burning mills and destroying hundreds of shear-frames in the spring of 1812 - the Notts campaign was waning as their region was flooded with 3,500 soldiers (backed up by local militias), patrolling the streets, protecting premises and raiding workers homes. Once their rulers understood the determined insubordination of the Notts community, they rapidly press-ganged the machinery of the state into the service of the owners of machinery, for the first time cementing the absolute bond between state violence and capitalist self-interest which has remained into the present day.

There are fragments of other songs from that spring of 1812, celebrating victories at Foster's and Horsfall's Mill, or rallying morale after defeats:

You Heroes of England who wish to have a trade
Be true to each other and be not afraid



Frame - Breaking.
£.200 Reward.

WHEREAS, on Thursday Night last, about Ten o'Clock, a great Number of Men, armed with Pistols, Hammers and Clubs, entered the Dwelling-house of *George Ball*, framework-knitter, of Lenton, near Nottingham, disguised with Masks and Handkerchiefs over their Faces, and in other ways,—and after striking and abusing the said *George Ball*, they *wantonly* and *feloniously* broke and destroyed five STOCKING FRAMES, standing in the Work-shop; four of which belonged to *George Ball*, and one Frame, 40 gage, belonging to Mr. *Francis Braithwaite*, hosier, Nottingham: *all of which were working at the FULL PRICE.*

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN,

THAT if any Person will give Information of the Offender or Offenders, or any one of them who entered such Dwelling-house and were concerned in such Felony, he or she shall receive a Reward of

£. 200,

to be paid on Conviction, in the Proportions following, (viz.) £50 under the King's Proclamation, £25 from the Committee of the Corporation of Nottingham, and £125 from the said *Francis Braithwaite.*

WE, the under-signed Workmen of the above-named *George Ball*, do hereby certify that we were employed in working the under-mentioned Frames, on the Work and at the Prices hereinafter stated, when the Mob came to break them,—that we had never been abated in our Work, either by Mr. Braithwaite, the hosier, who employed the Frames, or by the said *George Ball*, our master: of whom we never complained, or had any Reason so to do.

QUALITY OF WORK.	PRICE.	WORKMEN.	OWNERS.
40 Gauge, Single Shape, Narrowed Two-plain,	Maid's, 29 Shillings per Dozen,	Thomas Rew,	Mr. Braithwaite.
36 Gauge, Single Shape, Narrowed Two-plain,	Men's, 29 Shillings per Dozen,	John Jackson,	George Ball.
38 Guage, Single Shape, Narrowed Two-plain,	Maid's, 26 Shillings per Dozen,	Thomas Naylor,	George Ball.

NB. The other two Frames were worked to another Hosier, but at the Full Price.

THOMAS REW,
JOHN JACKSON,
THOMAS NAYLOR.

Nottingham, 25th January, 1812

Though the Bayonet is fixed they can do no good
As long as we keep up the Rules of General Ludd.

It wasn't just the courage and stamina of the new movement which alarmed the state, it was the near impossibility of obtaining any information even after making arrests and offering rewards to informants. The loyalty and solidarity of the surrounding community was the greatest protection of Ludd's Omnipotent Arm, and by March the Tory government had introduced the death penalty for machine-breakers. The luds tightened security with solemn blood-curdling oaths of secrecy, and strengthened themselves by organising raids for weapons, food and money.

In Stockport and Manchester, where cotton weaving communities had already been impoverished, food riots turned into machine-breaking riots, clothier's warehouses burned to the ground, steam-powered factories were attacked by crowds bearing a straw effigy of General Ludd holding a red flag. Colliers, bakers, hatters – men of all trades – took part in the mass actions.

Women too now participated in attacks: Mary Gibbons, arrested at a mass raid on a Sheffield arms depot; two daughters of "a venerable old weaver" who with a cry of "come, let's put a finish to this job" set fire to a mill-owner's ransacked mansion; Mary Mollineux, 19, and her sister Lydia, 15, who led the at-

tack on Westhoughton Mill shouting "now lads!" to encourage the men; and women calling themselves "Lady Ludd", who led food riots in Nottingham and Leeds that summer. Within a few months, the vision of a few Notts knitters had become a unifying symbol of mass direct action in all the struggling communities of Northern England. Anyone could claim allegiance to Ned, any autonomous group could act and speak in his name. In the words of the song Welcome Ned Ludd, posted up in Nottingham that May, "Ned is every where, And can see and hear". In Huddersfield, whenever the luddite-hunting owner and militia captain William Horsfall rode by the children would run out and tease him shouting "I'm General Ludd!"

Mr Lud's Song, shared for a brief historical moment by thousands of proud heroic souls, was a last bright flaring forth of human resistance to the Engines of Mischief . A refusal to go quietly into the Mill of Capital which robbed them first of land, then of community, and finally of autonomous life.

To put out that flame took over 16000 soldiers, countless spies, the imprisonment and transportation of 70 people and the killing of over 50 more - 24 by hanging and the rest dying in action. After the mass execution of 14 luds in York Castle on January 9, 1813, there were no new songs. Within a few decades The Croppers Song had mutated into The Gallant Poacher, (another story of bitter class struggle over land and food). By then, if any old luds had survived starvation or were able to lift their heads above the daily grind of hawking cheap wares in the crumbling streets of their decimated communities, they had moved on to new front-lines in the newly formed industrial working class - the 10 hours struggle or the Chartist Movement - spawning new songs of resistance.

Today Ludd's song is still being sung, in other languages by other communities resisting globalised industry and agribusiness. In Britain, technologically and culturally, we inhabit a different universe to the cottage artisans of Sherwood. But the social and ecological "Commonality" of our world is now in even more mortal peril from the "noxious machinery" of private greed and technophilia. With its threads of solidarity, youthful confidence, mass community action, and fearless disrespect for the sanctity of private property, Mr Lud's Song may well be worth relearning in 2011.

Theo Simon is lead singer of *Seize the Day.*

The End of the Line

Luddism dates from the uprising of 1811-12, yet there was nothing very new about machine breaking. Throughout the 18th century there were innumerable instances of textile workers destroying machinery; almost all the inventors of textile machinery whom children are taught to rever in history lessons faced violent resistance from the people who had to operate their machines.

In 1745, John Kay, the inventor of the Flying Shuttle was driven from Leeds as outbreaks of violence flared in response to his invention, and then again from Bury in 1753. Hargreaves' spinning jenny met with similar resistance in 1769 when buildings housing the machine were destroyed at Black burn and Oswaldtwistle. In the 1779 wave of anti-machinery riots, workers destroyed the Birkacre Mill at Chorley, run by Richard Arkwright, inventor of the first water-powered spinning mill. The destruction of stocking frames had been made a capital offence in 1721, yet in 1766 alone there were at least 24 incidents where this occurred.

Worker's resistance was directed not simply against particular machines, but also against the factory system as a whole which was seen as a deliberate assault on the textile worker's independence and bargaining power. Indeed there is an argument that the main benefit to capitalists from the introduction of machinery was not ergonomic efficiency, but social control. Craft workers operating hand powered equipment at home could work as little or as often as they needed to, and could bargain for rates of pay. The factory system not only reduced labour costs —it also removed workers from their domestic environment, robbed them of control over their time, and deprived them of a finished product, all of which undermined their bargaining power.

The promoters of the industrial revolution were only too aware of the connection between work discipline and social stability: Arkwright observed of his labourers that "being obliged to be more regular in their attendance on their work, they became more orderly in their conduct" (when they weren't burning the factory down). John Kay was even more blunt:

"Whilst the engine runs the people must work — men, women and children are yoked together with iron and steam. The animal machine — breakable in the best case, subject to a thousand sources of suffering — is chained fast to the iron machine, which knows no suffering and no weariness."

That, of course, was exactly what happened, and is still happening in the third world. The Luddite revolt, far from being the first uprising against textile machinery, was arguably the final convulsion from a class of independent craftsmen before they were roped into the living death of the sweat shop.

Adapted from John and Paula Zerzan, "Industrialization and Domestication", in J Zerzan and Alice Carnes, *Questioning Technology: A Critical Anthology*, Freedom Press 1988