

A BACKGROUND HANDBOOK

# British Trade Unionism

ALLAN FLANDERS

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THE BUREAU OF CURRENT AFFAIRS

# BRITISH TRADE UNIONISM

by

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THE BUREAU OF CURRENT AFFAIRS

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# BRITISH TRADE UNIONISM

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## ITS GROWTH AND TRADITIONS

*"Trade Unions are born, not made. This is a truth that must be firmly grasped by those who wish to understand the complex structure, multifarious activities, and oft-times illogical policies of the Trade Unions of today. Their growth has been a spontaneous, healthy process arising out of the needs of the common people."*

*"Those needs—for fellowship between craftsmen, for mutual help, for improvement in the remuneration and conditions of labour, for an increasing measure of control over the circumstances of daily life—gave rise to that voluntary organization and that group spirit which we know as the Trade Union Movement."*

(W. Milne-Bailey in his introduction to the volume of *Trade Union Documents*, 1929, which he compiled and edited.)

British Trade Union history is one of the most fascinating and exciting stories there is to tell. It is a story with a thousand, maybe a million heroes—and heroines. It deals with great hopes and great disappointments, with sacrifice and endurance, with bold experiments which sometimes failed and at other times succeeded. But it is above all a record of the patient work, largely unrewarded, of generations of ordinary people who were determined to establish their own organizations in their own way, despite the hostility and active opposition of the rich and powerful.

This story has been told—at least up to 1920—by our great social historians, Sidney and Beatrice Webb. It seems rather like sacrilege to try to condense it into a few pages, but there is one advantage in doing so. For it is by looking at the bare bones of history that its structure is most clearly revealed. This assumes, of course, that history has a structure. Lord Chesterfield once described it as being "only a confused heap of facts". Unfortunately it is often presented in a form which seems to confirm this description and loses as a consequence its meaning and its interest. Looked at as a process of evolution, however, determined by the constant interplay between human purpose and social opportunity, much that would otherwise be obscure becomes understandable. We realize, for example, why there is so strong a preference for a particular form of organization

or a disinclination to change a certain method of dealing with a problem.

Tradition is one of the most powerful forces in British social life, and our Trade Unions, because they are a creation of the common people, are in this and most other respects decidedly a British institution. But traditions are only the product of experience, lessons of the past which may have become rather too solidified as influences on the present. They may in a rapidly changing world become serious obstacles to progress, but if they are to be modified, it will only be by those who know and understand the circumstances which brought them into being. In order to think rationally about the ways in which the organization, activities and policy of present-day Trade Unionism can be changed, we need to study its history.

### **When Combination was a Crime**

Trade Unions are a product of the growth of industry. Accordingly they first appeared in this country in the early 18th century. This was the time before the use of power machinery had brought the factory system into being. Manufactures were developing under the so-called "domestic system". Capitalist middlemen, supplying raw materials and purchasing the finished goods, financed production which was carried on in the workers' homes. Textiles and metal goods were produced in this way, but in addition coal and other minerals were already being mined.

The conditions under which the workers employed in these industries laboured and lived were such that today we cannot properly conceive them. The length of the working day was anything from fourteen to seventeen hours, and children of all ages were freely employed. There was no protection against the exploitation of human labour. In these circumstances local Trade Clubs were formed for mutual help, but only among the more skilled workers, such as the silk weavers, gold beaters, cutlery workers, hatters, printers, coach-makers, carpenters and bricklayers. Even the miners were unorganized at this time. These bodies sought with little success to protect the wage standards of their members, based on custom and apprenticeship, against the devastating effects of unlimited competition. They were not only local and isolated from each other, but virtually illegal. A long series of Acts of Parliament had made it a criminal offence for workmen to combine in order to change their wages and conditions. The doctrine of the Middle Ages still prevailed that it was the prerogative of the State to regulate such matters, although it no longer attempted to do so.

The Industrial Revolution, already under way at the beginning of the 19th century, greatly extended and intensified these conditions of economic anarchy. The population grew with an incredible rapidity; the workers crowded into the towns, which for the large part became dirty and melancholy assemblages of factories and hovels (read Dickens' description of Coketown in *Hard Times!*);

productivity soared; great fortunes were made by some; but the great mass of working people became wholly the slaves of the new machines and lived in squalor and degradation. With the example of the French Revolution close at hand, the main reaction of the Government to these social developments was one of fear. The Combination Acts, passed in 1799-1800 to prevent any unlawful combination of workmen, far exceeded in severity all previous restrictive legislation.

The period of industrial relations which followed was marked by violence and repression. Despite their lack of organization, the Lancashire cotton and wool workers, the miners of Northumberland and Durham, and the Scottish weavers were all involved in large-scale strikes. In 1811 the Luddite Movement started its campaign of machine-wrecking in the hosiery trade of the Midlands, and this desperate method of calling attention to their wrongs soon spread to workers in other parts of the country. Blood was shed at the infamous Peterloo Massacre (1819), when eleven people were killed and hundreds injured by the yeomanry used to disperse a peaceful meeting in Manchester.

### **The Struggle for Existence and Recognition**

The first break in this policy of repression was a strange affair—an example of how silently history can sometimes be made. Francis Place, a tailor of Charing Cross, and Joseph Hume, a radical M.P., managed to steer a Bill to repeal the Combination Acts through Parliament as a side-issue, without the Government realizing what was contemplated; it became law without either a debate or a division. Its sponsors believed that Trade Unionism was only a reaction to repression, so that, if freedom to combine were granted, the new movement would soon disappear. The reverse proved to be true. Encouraged by this success, new Unions were formed and strikes broke out in many parts of the country. Thoroughly alarmed, the Government tried to replace the 1824 Act by a measure more drastic than the Combination Acts. The final result was a compromise. The new Act passed in 1825 did make it possible for the workers to organize without committing an illegal act, but there was hardly a thing which the Unions could do to carry out the purpose of their existence without coming into conflict with the law. Nevertheless new organizations continued to spring up, and Unions of engineers, shipwrights, miners, carpenters and joiners were formed at this time.

#### **Failure of early attempts at organization**

These early Trade Unions had all the grand ambitions of youth. For the first time the conception of a common purpose gained ground among working people. Efforts were made to form national Unions in place of the small local bodies and to set up federations. There was one attempt to establish a general Union for the workers in all

trades known as "The Philanthropic Hercules", but despite its name this organization perished soon after it was born. The Trade Unions also directed their attention to more radical methods of improving the lot of their members than the seemingly hopeless process of bargaining with the employers; they aspired to change the economic structure of society, and, under the influence of Robert Owen, looked particularly towards the advantages of co-operative production.

All these new ideas and endeavours culminated in 1834 in the founding of the Grand National Consolidated Trade Union, with Owen as its leader. This organization had a phenomenal growth and recruited half a million members within a few weeks. The employers retaliated by insisting on their employees signing "the document", an undertaking to leave or not to join a Union. The true nature of the 1825 Act now became apparent in a series of prosecutions of Trade Unionists, which resulted in convictions and heavy sentences. The most notable of these was the case of the Dorchester labourers in 1834. For wholly peaceful attempts to build up a Union for agricultural workers at Tolpuddle, without threats or even secrecy, six workers were arrested and sentenced to seven years transportation. The great outburst of indignation to which this vicious punishment gave rise resulted in five of these workers being brought back from Botany Bay by 1838. The Grand National, however, after a series of abortive strikes, declined as rapidly as it had grown and came to an untimely end. After this collapse of their hopes, the radically minded workers concerned themselves with the Chartist Movement and joined in its agitation for an extension of political rights.

#### **Firm foundations laid after 1850**

These short-lived and vaguely revolutionary developments in the Trade Union world had taken place against a background of economic depression. From 1850 onwards there began a long period of industrial expansion, which gave the Trade Unions an opportunity to consolidate themselves on a sounder financial basis. In 1851 a number of Unions organizing skilled workers in the metal trades formed the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. This was subsequently known as the New Model, since its form of organization served as a pattern for new national Unions in other trades. According to the Webbs it had a permanent paying membership of 11,000 and a regular income of £500 a week. Such financial stability was without precedent, and the new association was the most powerful Trade Union in the country. This new form of organization was also characterized by a strongly centralized and businesslike administration. Subscriptions were high by any previous standards, but in return provision was made for various friendly benefits. Needless to say, it spread only among the craftsmen and skilled workers, who could afford such payments and were now looked upon in some quarters as "an aristocracy of labour".

This centralization of control within the new Unions also made possible greater co-ordination between them. A group of five powerful leaders, named by the Webbs "The Junta", exercised for a time almost undisputed sway in the Trade Union Movement. They were extreme only in their caution and moderation. Nevertheless the Movement was not static, and a closer unity was growing up from below as well as from above. The strike of the London builders in 1859-60 over a claim that their hours should be reduced to nine per day brought behind them the support of many other Trade Unions and led to the formation of the London Trades Council. In Glasgow, Sheffield, Liverpool and Edinburgh similar bodies had already been created as voluntary local federations of Trade Union branches meeting together for mutual support. In 1868 the Manchester and Salford Trades Council took the initiative in calling the first Trades Union Congress of Trades Councils and Trade Unions. Less than 120,000 members were represented, but in six years this number was multiplied tenfold. It is this Congress which has continued to meet annually (with two exceptions, 1870 and 1914) until today. For a very long time, however, it was little more than a debating society which, according to one description, talked "about every subject under the sun except Trade Union policy and organization in the industrial field".

#### **How Unions secured a proper legal status**

The growing power and solidarity of the Trade Union Movement produced the usual reaction of alarm on the part of the governing classes. In 1867 a Royal Commission was appointed to investigate the organization and rules of the Unions and to inquire into allegations of intimidation and outrage, which they were accused of encouraging. "The Junta" now made their outstanding contribution to Trade Union history; they went into action in defence of Union rights and secured the assistance of a gifted team of writers and lawyers. The results were not disappointing. The majority report of the Royal Commission made recommendations which fell far short of what the employers had been demanding, and the minority report proposed giving the Trade Unions legal protection to enable them to safeguard their funds, whilst leaving them in all other respects voluntary organizations. Between 1871 and 1876 a series of Trade Union Acts were passed, which defined the legal status and powers of Unions in a way which remains substantially unaltered unto this day. In their total effect they provided: that Trade Unions could no longer be declared unlawful because their objects were in restraint of trade; that they could protect their funds by taking legal proceedings, if necessary, against defaulting officials; and that they could engage in peaceful picketing in trade disputes. Although they could also acquire a definite civil status by registration with the Registrar of Friendly Societies, this action was voluntary, and generally they were accorded a large measure of freedom from legal



proceedings in regard to their internal affairs. In short, it seemed that they had secured the mixture of freedom of action and legal protection which they desired. They had been recognized, if rather grudgingly, as an essential social institution.

## **New Unionism and Political Representation**

That British Trade Unionism was now established on firm social as well as legal foundations, was soon demonstrated by its weathering of the severe trade slump which followed swiftly upon its political success. Membership declined—it was more than halved—but only for a time, and all the larger Unions emerged without their resources being seriously impaired. But if those foundations were firm, they were also still extremely narrow. And equally narrow was the prevailing conception of the tasks of the Trade Unions. The next main phase in their history is concerned with a great widening process in both respects, and the discovery by the British Trade Union Movement of all its latent possibilities.

In this period there were two main developments within the Trade Union world, which were closely interwoven, and a third outside it on which the other two greatly depended. This third development was the revival of socialist ideas. The Marxist Social Democratic Federation and the Fabian Society were founded in the early 'eighties and Keir Hardie's Independent Labour Party in 1893. Although their political views differed considerably, they were all agreed on two things: that the *whole* of the working class should be organized; and that it should as an *independent* factor play a decisive part in industry and politics. From this side there came a new impulse to spread Trade Union organization to the semi-skilled, unskilled and black-coated workers, and New Unionism was the name given to this development. These classes had not the same possibilities of improving their conditions by the steady pressure of industrial action in the manner of the craftsmen, who could also exercise some control over the supply of their labour. They had perforce to resort to more radical action and were attracted more strongly by the socialist conceptions of an egalitarian society. In the terminology introduced by the Webbs, the method of "legal enactment" held out greater hopes than that of "collective bargaining" to the previously unorganized workers. The idea of breaking with the two established political parties and building up an independent political representation of labour interests rapidly gained ground. New Unionism and new politics went hand in hand.

### **Rivalry between the new Unions and the old**

Just as the formation of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers had proved to be the turning point in the previous period, so did the successful strike of London dockers in 1889 become a signal and a portent for this phase of Union development. With the victory of the dockers under the leadership of Ben Tillett and the successful

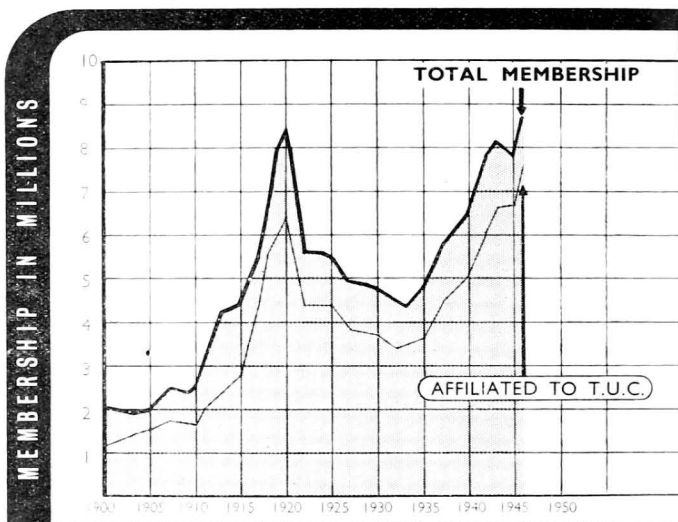
organization of the gas-workers by Will Thorne and others, there was a burst of enthusiasm for bringing Trade Unionism into all those occupations as yet untouched by it. In 1890 the National Union of Clerks came into existence, and shortly after two Unions were formed for distributive and allied workers.

Although the growth of Unionism among the previously unorganized workers reacted favourably upon the membership of the older Unions, there was a continual tussle between the old conservative and the new radical forces in the Trade Union world. The first victory of the latter was won at the Trades Union Congress in 1890, which committed itself to a programme that included the demand for an eight-hour day and a number of near-socialist resolutions. The former retaliated in 1894, when they commanded a sufficient majority at Congress to exclude the Trades Councils from affiliation. The reason given was that the existing method involved a dual representation of the workers, but the Trades Councils were in fact more closely associated with the new trends. By the end of the century, however, a socialist majority prevailed at Congress again, and subsequently the marked divergence of outlook largely disappeared. An alliance between a number, but not all, of the Trade Unions and the various socialist political societies produced the Labour Representation Committee, which in 1906 changed its name to that of the Labour Party.

### **Consolidation and expansion prior to the first World War**

Expansion, confidence, militancy and success were now—and for two decades—among the main attributes of British Trade Unionism. Membership grew from roughly two millions at the turn of the century to four millions by the outbreak of war in 1914. There were many strikes and lock-outs which were national in scope. Not all of them achieved their immediate objectives, but they frequently led to the establishment or improvement of the machinery for settling disputes. In the field of legislation the Trade Unions were able to associate themselves with the first important social reforms in matters of wage regulation and social insurance. In 1909 the Trade Boards Act was introduced and in 1911 the National Insurance Act. Both of these measures, judged by present standards, did not go very far in providing protection against the worst forms of poverty and distress. (When the 1909 Act was passed, it applied only to four "sweated" trades.) But they established two principles, the application of which has since been greatly extended. The responsibility of the State for protecting the weak and unfortunate was acknowledged, and equally the right of the Trade Unions to be associated with the administration of such legislation as this responsibility might require.

In the same period the Trade Unions were also successful in repulsing, or rather counteracting, two major attacks upon their freedom which came this time from the Law Courts. In 1901 a



## GROWTH OF THE TRADE UNIONS, 1900-1946

Figures are for Gt. Britain and N. Ireland

judgment was given in the case *Taff Vale Railway Co. v. Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants*, which threatened completely to undermine the position which it was thought had been gained by the 1871-76 legislation. It was decided in this case that the employer was entitled to recover damages from a Union for losses sustained as the result of a trade dispute, an interpretation of the law which virtually deprived the Trade Unions of the power to strike and reduced them to impotence. The Trades Disputes Act of 1906 removed this liability and legalized inducement to breach of contract and peaceful picketing as methods of collective bargaining. The political activities of the Unions were next threatened by the Osborne Judgment in 1909, in which the House of Lords, as the highest Court of Appeal, held that it was illegal for a Trade Union to spend its funds on other purposes than the industrial objects specified in previous Acts. This decision would have crippled the Labour Party, which relied greatly on the Unions for financial support, but a sustained agitation brought about the Trades Union Act of 1913. This Act laid down the conditions under which political objects could be included in the rules of a Union, namely, that they must be approved by ballot vote of the members, that the political funds

must be kept separately and that members must be free to "contract out" of contributing to the funds.

## **Syndicalism and the Impact of War**

The main effect which the first World War had on British Trade Unionism was to enhance its strength and social standing. The co-operation of the Trade Unions was indispensable for military and industrial mobilization, and wartime full employment greatly improved their bargaining position. The Unions voluntarily declared an industrial truce on the outbreak of hostilities. Most of them reluctantly agreed to a suspension of those workshop practices which might lead to a limiting of production, though on the understanding that they would be restored at the end of the war. At the same time a form of compulsory arbitration was agreed upon for the ultimate settlement of all trade disputes, and the Government promised to limit the profits of the employers in the munition industries.

This policy of close co-operation with the Government for the prosecution of the war was not accepted so readily by some of the more radically-minded Trade Unionists at the lower levels of organization. Their dissatisfaction increased when it became apparent that the cost of living was rising rapidly and wages were not increasing proportionately. The South Wales miners went on strike in the Summer of 1915 and proved by their example that a system of compulsory arbitration cannot be maintained merely by legislation. There were many more unofficial stoppages of work organized by "Workers' Committees", "Shop Stewards' Committees", "Vigilance Committees" and similar bodies which sprang up in many localities, but especially in the munition industries. These local organizations formed themselves into a National Workers Committee Movement, which became an alternative, unofficial leadership in the Trade Union world. Dissatisfaction with wartime conditions and a definite anti-war spirit contributed much to the dynamic of this Movement, but it also gave expression to a purpose which had been steadily gaining ground in the pre-war years. This purpose was summed up by the popular slogan "Workers' Control". In 1912 the South Wales miners had published *The Miners' Next Step*, which propagated the syndicalist view that the mines should be run by the miners. Industrial Unionism and Guild Socialism were the names of some of the current doctrines which, though they fell short of pure syndicalism, all emphasized the part to be played by the Trade Unions in the running of industry.

### **Hopes of a new era in industrial relations**

The dichotomy of attitude which had developed during the war between the official and unofficial leaderships largely disappeared at the end of hostilities. The engineers incorporated the shop steward system into their Trade Union organization. The claim of the

workers to have a voice in the way their industries were conducted seemed to be taken seriously. The Whitley Report in 1917 recommended the setting up of Joint Industrial Councils in all industries, with equal representation from Trade Unions and employers' associations, to consider a wide range of industrial problems in addition to those which had been dealt with by collective bargaining. The agricultural workers were greatly assisted by the statutory wage boards set up in 1917, and the extension of Trade Boards under the Act of 1918 promised better conditions to the workers in other badly paid and poorly organized trades. There had also been an immense growth in Trade Union membership, especially in the numbers affiliated to the Trades Union Congress, which increased from 2½ millions in 1913 to 6½ millions in 1920.

It was in a mood of supreme optimism, and with a belief in the revolutionary role they were destined to fill in social reconstruction, that the Trade Unions met the great post-war depression which engulfed this country at the end of 1920. They suffered a rude awakening. From then onwards the hopes of the workers were dealt a series of crushing blows which culminated in the collapse of the General Strike in 1926.

#### **Post-war unrest and disillusionment**

Industrial strife on a national scale began with the Railway Strike in 1919, which for nine days paralysed the whole of the railway systems of the country. This ended in a victory for the Unions and was notable for the publicity campaigns carried on by both sides—the Government was, at the time, still in control of the railways and therefore in the position of employer. Equally spectacular was the Engineering Lock-out in 1922, but the economic tide had turned and the employers were successful, at least for the time being, in that their claim that the Trade Unions should have no say whatever with regard to “managerial functions” was settled wholly in their favour. Though industrial unrest and conflict were widespread, it was the miners who were the hardest hit and who occupied the centre of the stage in this stormy era.

The miners' first battle in 1921 against wage reductions and a return to district wage agreements led to the collapse of the Triple Alliance. This was a powerful alignment formed in 1914 between the Trade Unions of the railwaymen, transport workers and miners for mutual support in industrial action. It was looked upon as a great pillar of strength for the whole of the Movement and, by the syndicalists, as the main weapon with which to capture power for the workers. The Triple Alliance issued notices for a strike of all their members in support of the miners, but for a variety of reasons these notices were postponed and finally withdrawn on April 14th—a date known afterwards as “Black Friday”. The miners continued their strike on their own, but in the end suffered a heavy defeat.



## TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP AND UNEMPLOYMENT (1920-1946)

Black Friday foreshadowed an even blacker event. Five years later the strike called by the Trades Union Congress also in support of the miners and involving one and a half million workers ended in failure. The history of this nine-day General Strike, the most momentous event in the development of British Trade Unionism, is too intricate a subject for brief comment. It must suffice here to say that it demonstrated two things: the strength of the feeling of solidarity which pervades the organized workers; and the futility of the syndicalist approach to industrial problems. The Government retaliated by passing the Trades Disputes and Trade Unions Act of 1927 (since repealed by the Labour Government in 1946), which made a sympathetic strike or lock-out for the purpose of coercing the Government illegal, severed the connection between the Civil Service organizations and other Trade Unions, and imposed new restrictions on the Unions' political activities and their conduct of trade disputes.

### Changed Relations with the State

Their failure to resist wage reductions and to stop the wave of victimization which followed the General Strike weakened the Trade

Unions more than the drain on their resources, which prolonged industrial conflict had imposed. They now settled down in a new spirit of sober realism to build upon the solid foundations they had gained in other ways. The employers, at least the more enlightened among them, had also learned their lesson. The constant trials of strength between themselves and their workpeople were undeniably very bad business and were losing them their markets in the world. "Peace in Industry" was the new slogan readily accepted by the Government and by most of the leaders on both sides of industry. In 1928 a series of conferences was initiated between the General Council of the Trades Union Congress and a group of leading employers. These conferences, usually known as the Mond-Turner conversations, ranged over an incredible number of subjects of joint concern, but their immediate outcome was indecisive. Although joint reports were produced, neither of the two main employers' organizations, the British Employers Confederation and the Federation of British Industries, considered themselves bound by the recommendations. The importance of the conferences lay more in the new co-operative approach to industrial relations to which they gave expression.

#### **Tendency towards increased integration**

Before describing the further development of this changed conception of Trade Union policy, it is necessary to glance back at what had been happening in the post-war years in regard to the organization of the Trade Union Movement. Firstly, a number of important amalgamations had taken place, and loose federations had been replaced by more compact and centralized bodies. Many of the large Unions of today were formed by this process, among them the Amalgamated Engineering Union, the Transport and General Workers' Union, the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers and the Union of Post Office Workers. Secondly, in 1919-21 the Trades Union Congress had been reorganized. Its old Parliamentary Committee had been replaced by a General Council with greater powers to act as a central co-ordinating authority and to represent the whole of the Trade Union Movement. The growing authority of this executive body, now equipped with a proper administrative staff headed from 1926 onwards by an enterprising and energetic General Secretary, Walter Citrine, became a major factor in the world of labour. These two developments, the formation of large Unions and the increased influence of the T.U.C., were inter-related; for within the counsels of the latter a few of the former had a decisive voice.

#### **A new conception of partnership**

What the main trend in Trade Union policy was now to be, was clearly and prophetically envisaged by the General Secretary of the T.U.C. In a lecture which he delivered at the T.U.C. Summer School

in 1929 can be found a statement of what in fact became the guiding conception in the next two decades. The development of the economic system, he argued, was towards concentration of ownership and central direction of industry. This growth of the regulative in place of the competitive principle should be welcomed and encouraged by the Trade Unions. Without it the control of industry which they had advocated would be impossible; with it the claim of the Trade Unions to participate in such control would be irresistible. The Unions should boldly declare that the efficiency and prosperity of industry was their immediate concern and for this reason demand a greater say in deciding how it was to be conducted. There was a decided irony in this new situation. The claim of the revolutionary-minded Trade Unionists for "Workers' Control" had not been abandoned, but was now to be pressed in an entirely different context to the one in which it had been conceived. No longer linked with the doctrine of class warfare, it was to be placed on a more realistic footing by the acceptance of responsibilities within the existing economic order.

This radically changed conception of Trade Unionism as a willing and essential partner in the conduct of the nation's economic affairs gradually gained acceptance both within the Trade Union Movement and in society at large. It was not, however, until the second World War acted as a powerful catalyst to this development that the new relationship between the Trade Unions and the State became a reality. Shortly after the outbreak of war the Prime Minister (then Mr. Neville Chamberlain) directed all government departments to consult with the T.U.C. before taking action on any matters likely to affect workpeople. In the years which followed, in the vast and complex structure of Councils, Boards and Committees (national, regional and local) which was created to advise the Government in the formulation of policy and assist in the handling of wartime problems, the representatives of the Trade Unions played their part usually on an equal footing with those of the employers' associations. The tripartite form of organization (Government, Employers' Associations and Trade Unions)—first developed most effectively by the International Labour Organization—became the order of the day.

### **Wartime co-operation with the Government**

The effect of the second World War upon British Trade Unionism was similar to that of the first, but with two extremely important differences. This time the Trade Unions were fully united at all levels in their attitude to the war. The day after this country declared war on Nazi Germany the Annual Conference of the T.U.C. opened at Bridlington. Of the 659 accredited delegates only 490 were able to attend, but of these only two dissented from the resolution pledging full support to the war effort. Consequently there was no appreciable political opposition in the Trade Union



world to whole-hearted co-operation with the Government (although the Communists tried to stir it up in the period prior to Russia's entry into the war). Of equal significance was the sensible way in which the wartime economy was controlled so as to avoid inflation and profiteering and other of the troubles which showed themselves in 1914-18. Thus the Trade Unions were able to give reasonable protection to their members and even improve their conditions without industrial conflict developing on any serious scale.

## The Lessons of History

It was suggested at the outset of this brief survey of the growth of the British Trade Union Movement that it might help to gain a proper understanding of the traditions which are of influence today. No outside observer, however sympathetic, finds it easy to understand the inner life of that Movement, but he will fail completely if he forgets that "Trade Unions are born, not made" and begins to theorize about what they should do without a knowledge of their history. In a thousand ways that history asserts itself, in constitutions and practices, but, above all, in attitudes of mind. So let us attempt to formulate a few simple generalizations on the traditions of British Trade Unionism.

The first is so obvious that one would apologize for mentioning it were it not so frequently forgotten in the modern world ; it is the tradition of **struggle**. The importance of the Trade Unions is recognized today both by the organized employers and by the Government, whatever its political complexion. Trade Unionism is, in two words, respectable and respected. It is not noticeably militant and it is certainly not revolutionary. With insignificant exceptions the Trade Unions for many years have not employed the sanction of force at their command, the strike weapon, as a deliberate instrument of policy. It would be a mistake to conclude from this fact that they have lost sight of the major lesson of their history, namely that they have gained nothing except that for which they fought. They know and continue to keep firmly in mind that their rights and achievements have been established by their own strength.

Closely associated with this first tradition is a second, that of **independence**. That Trade Unions should be independent of the employers is taken for granted ; company Unions have always been regarded with bitter animosity, and apart from a few remnants among the professional classes they no longer exist. The assertion of independence, however, applies equally to the relations between the Trade Unions and the State. The attitude of successive Governments towards Trade Unionism has developed through three phases : hostility, toleration and, finally, partnership. The Unions have accepted an ever-widening range of administrative tasks on behalf of the Government. They have strongly advocated economic planning and desire to participate in its execution. They are fully

integrated into our modern democratic society and are, in this sense, an indispensable part of the State. But with all this they have never been willing to surrender anything of their freedom to criticize and oppose the Government—not even in wartime. They have been prepared to accept self-imposed restrictions and to co-operate fully in a national effort, but the basis of their relationship remains a voluntary one. Even today they would on no account merge their organization into the machinery of government or accept any outside control over the exercise of their essential functions.

The third tradition which, like the two already mentioned, is a great source of strength to British Trade Unionism is that of **unity**. It is easy to see that the Trade Unions in this country, unlike their counterparts on the European continent, have not been divided by political and religious differences. In contrast to the United States, the extension of Trade Unionism from its narrow craft beginnings to the broad mass movement of today was accomplished without any division in their ranks or permanent conflict. This might be put down to the spirit of tolerance and the readiness to compromise which has been so outstanding a characteristic of British social life. But it is more, since this tradition of unity has its positive as well as its negative side. It can, perhaps, best be illustrated by two facts : the solidarity shown in the General Strike which was only called in support of the miners ; and the extent to which the authority of the T.U.C. has been built up on so little real executive power. Admittedly all manner of contrary evidence could be cited about rivalries between Unions, but that is largely beside the point. The natural tendency of all separate social groups is to squabble and conflict, if they are not held together by force. A voluntary unity is only achieved by some over-riding conviction. If its history is any guide, British Trade Unionism has a strong sense of common purpose. Although it seems sometimes to be lacking in everyday affairs, it never fails to assert itself in times of crisis.

The fourth tradition is less easy to define. For want of a better term let us call it a sense of **social responsibility**. The British Trade Unions have always had both feet on the ground ; the hard facts of industrial life as they affect their members—wages, hours, factory conditions, security of employment, etc.—have been their immediate concern. If they could not secure improvements or at least resist a deterioration, they lost their members and their *raison d'être*. In seeking to alter those facts, however, they have usually been guided by a broader purpose than results only from a desire to secure a greater share of the national cake. They have concerned themselves continually with economic, political and educational reforms. They are today for working people the main gateway to public responsibility in many fields. British Trade Unionism, in other words, has always been occupied not only with better conditions for their members, but also with a better society.

## HOW IT IS ORGANIZED

Any generalizations which are made about the internal workings of the British Trade Unions are almost certain to be rash. It is here that their heritage from the past is most apparent, and the result defies comprehensive analysis. The reader need only take up the latest Annual Report of the Trades Union Congress and look at the list of affiliated organizations to form an impression of this diversity. He will notice that side by side with the Trade Union giants, like the Transport and General Workers' Union with more than a million members, there still exist local societies with as few as thirty. Today at the top of the scale twelve large Unions, with more than 100,000 members, are responsible for a good two-thirds of the T.U.C.'s affiliated membership, but there are nevertheless still forty-three affiliated Unions with less than 1,000 members.

### Types of Organization

Size is at least something which can be measured. If the investigation is pursued with the question, "What groups or classes of workpeople do the various Unions organize?" it is impossible to reduce the answer to manageable proportions. In some cases it is perfectly clear, especially in the case of craftsmen. A compositor working in London (or more exactly within a fifteen mile radius of the General Post Office) would join the London Society of Compositors, or a patternmaker working anywhere, the United Patternmakers' Association. In the coal industry nearly all the workers employed in or about mines who are Trade Unionists are members of the National Union of Mineworkers; but there also exists a National Association of Colliery Overmen, Deputies and Shotfirers (with 16,000 members), some of the skilled craftsmen employed at collieries belong to their own association, and there are yet other Unions which organize officials and clerical workers in particular sections of the industry.

Theoretically the main distinction has been drawn between craft and industrial Trade Unionism. A craft Union is one which organizes the workers in a particular trade regardless of the industry in which at the time they may be employed. An industrial Union aims at including all the workers in a given industry or service irrespective of their occupation. For many years a battle royal was

waged over the comparative merits of these two forms of organization, but it produced few constructive results ; by the very character of the British Trade Union Movement it was bound to remain an academic problem. Even if the view were generally accepted that industrial Unionism is to be preferred (and there is little doubt that in a modern industrial society the balance of argument lies on that side), no authority exists which could impose upon the Trade Unions the drastic reorganization which would be required to achieve this objective.

But that is not all. The British Trade Unions by no means fall into two clear categories. There are a number of pure craft Unions still in existence, like those already mentioned, some national and some local in scope. Many of the larger craft Unions, however, have in varying degrees opened their ranks to less skilled workers employed in close connection with their trades. Bodies like the Amalgamated Engineering Union or the Electrical Trades Union, which at one time were composed only of craftsmen, have gradually extended their membership until they have come to resemble industrial Unions. Other Unions, established from the beginning with the claim to organize any and every worker in a particular industry, have not succeeded in becoming the only representative body there. The National Union of Mineworkers comes nearest numerically to a realization of its claim. Another important industrial Union, the National Union of Railwaymen, although claiming to organize every grade and type of worker in the railway service, shares its province with two powerful bodies which so far have shown themselves strongly disinclined to amalgamate with it, the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen and the Railway Clerks' Association, whilst the A.E.U. has a substantial membership in the railway workshops.

The biggest complicating factor in British Trade Union organization has not yet been mentioned, namely the existence of two large "general labour" Unions, the Transport and General Workers' Union and the National Union of General and Municipal Workers. Neither of them is confined to the organization of unskilled labour. The T. & G.W.U. caters, in the first place, for practically all workers engaged in transport other than the railways and the merchant navy. It extends, however, on its general labour side into agriculture, power production, the metal and engineering trades, building, textiles, rubber, chemicals, food-processing and many other industries. The N.U.G. & M.W. might more aptly be described as a general labour Union, but a large proportion of its members are employed, as its name implies, by municipal authorities.

In these circumstances disputes between Unions as to the extent of their domain are, of course, inevitable. The remarkable thing is rather the rarity of these conflicts and the peaceful way in which most

of them are settled. Every year the Disputes Committee of the T.U.C. General Council has a number of such conflicts brought before it for advice and voluntary arbitration; a code of "main principles" which should be observed to avoid inter-Union competition for members has been laid down. Explicit and implicit agreements also exist between many Unions as to their relative spheres of organization, and demarcation lines are sometimes drawn on a geographical basis. Nevertheless a recent report of the T.U.C. admitted that inter-Union competition "is a lasting source of trouble", and the Minister of Labour, Mr. Isaacs, when he addressed a Trade Union Conference on production problems in March, 1946, had to express the hope "that demarcation disputes between Unions would not be brought to the Ministry of Labour or to the Government".

### **Unity in Diversity**

In view of this diversity of organization, so strongly rooted in the past, it has been a continual problem how to secure sufficient unity of action on those matters which are the concern of the Trade Union Movement as a whole. Since its reorganization in the early 'twenties the Trades Union Congress has undoubtedly been the main co-ordinating agency. There exists as well a Scottish T.U.C., but this body mainly concerns itself with special Scottish interests. The General Federation of Trade Unions was set up in 1899 by the Trades Union Congress for the purpose of providing financial assistance to affiliated Unions involved in trade disputes. But its strength and importance have continued to dwindle as the authority of the T.U.C. itself has grown, and as the strike has come to be used less and less as a means of gaining Trade Union objectives.

### **Authority and functions of the T.U.C.**

It would be appropriate at this point, therefore, to explain something more about the powers and the functions of the T.U.C. Its present authority is so considerable that what is frequently forgotten is the limit of its powers. That limit is easily defined by the fact that a Trade Union in affiliating to the T.U.C. does not yield up any part of its autonomy. To take an important illustration, not only has the T.U.C. no control over the action of affiliated Unions in wage negotiations, but it cannot even compel them to supply information about their activities in this or any other field. Its authority is purely a moral one. If it condemns or upholds, it does so in the name of the whole Trade Union Movement.

The main functions of the T.U.C. are therefore those which cannot be exercised adequately by the separate Unions. The most important of these concern the relations between the Trade Union Movement and the Government. The representation of the Trade Union view on any proposed legislation or administrative action likely to affect the interests of workpeople is undertaken by the

T.U.C., or more exactly by the General Council as its executive body acting in accordance with the resolutions passed by the Annual Congress. Similarly evidence to Royal Commissions and Government Inquiries or other statements of general policy are prepared by the General Council. But even here the T.U.C. has no exclusive rights. If the Government prefers in certain matters to approach a particular Union, or if a Union decides to make its own independent representations to the Government, the T.U.C. cannot prevent this happening. All that it can do is to insist that, if a co-ordinated Trade Union view is required on any question, no other body can provide it, and to try to persuade its affiliated organizations that a co-ordinated view is possibly to be preferred to several conflicting ones.

### **Composition of the T.U.C. General Council**

Naturally these functions have extended more and more, both with the increasing participation of the Government in economic life and with the acceptance on the part of the Trade Unions of an ever-widening sphere of responsibilities in public affairs. The enhanced authority of the T.U.C. General Council has in other words been a reflection of the evolution of society as a whole. One need only glance at the long list of Joint Councils, Boards and public institutions on which the T.U.C. is represented to gauge the measure of its present responsibilities. It should be realized, however, that the General Council is composed almost entirely of General Secretaries or full-time Presidents of affiliated Trade Unions, who are greatly involved in their own Union affairs. This presents an obvious difficulty for which no solution has yet been found. The only people who can devote their time wholeheartedly to the affairs of British Trade Unionism, as distinct from the interests of one particular Union, are the small administrative staff of the T.U.C. headed by its General Secretary which even today numbers less than 30.

The composition of the General Council has also been criticized from another point of view, the method of its election. The Unions affiliated to the T.U.C. are divided into 18 trade groups, each of which has allocated to it a number of seats on the General Council. Election of these representatives is not, however, confined to the members of each particular group, but is undertaken by a general vote at Congress. As a result the biggest Unions decide the selection of the members of the General Council, not only in their own, but for all other groups as well. This system tends to preserve the same outlook within the General Council.

### **Role of the Trades Councils**

There are in addition the local counterparts and representatives of the T.U.C., the Trades Councils, composed of delegates elected by affiliated Union branches ; these are also grouped into federations.

Their importance has waxed and waned since first they created the T.U.C. and then subsequently were disaffiliated. There still is a great deal of confusion and some bitterness over the part which they should play in the Trade Union Movement. The T.U.C. itself regards them with favour, but as bodies for executing, not making, policy. They are in fact the only organizations through which it can work directly to influence the attitude of rank-and-file Trade Unionists. The tendency of some Trades Councils on the other hand is towards exaggerating their own powers. Where the members of a Trade Union branch feel frustrated by their incapacity quickly to influence the policy either of their own Trade Union or that of the Movement as a whole, the local Trades Council seems to provide the obvious and easy opportunity for doing so. It frequently happens therefore that Trades Councils pass resolutions on matters of general policy, although owing to their lack of representation at Congress they can do little to affect it. It should be added that usually their funds are small and their officials unpaid.

That they are an essential part of Trade Union organization and that their importance has increased in the same way as that of the T.U.C. does not need to be argued. But many Trade Union executives still display a marked lack of enthusiasm for their activities. Only in a few cases do they impose an obligation on their branches to affiliate and in a few more encourage them to do so. This attitude may change in so far as the Trades Councils settle down realistically to their local functions and demonstrably become a disciplined part of the general Trade Union Movement. This is the direction of their present development under the firm guidance of the T.U.C. Any substantial improvement in their status, however, will probably wait upon a strengthening of the powers of the T.U.C. itself.

#### **Amalgamation and federation of Unions**

Apart from the growth of the co-ordinating role of the T.U.C., the other main development which has helped to bring about a closer unity in British Trade Unionism has been the organic process of amalgamation and federation of individual Trade Unions. There has been no wave of amalgamations at the end of this war comparable to that experienced after the last. The two most important changes have been the transformation of the Miners Federation of Great Britain, a federation of district unions, into the National Union of Mineworkers at the beginning of 1945, and the creation of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers from the two main Unions in the distributive trades in 1946. But in the inter-war years there was a steady, if gradual, absorption of smaller Unions by larger ones.

Admittedly, if we compare the number of Unions represented at the Trades Union Congresses in 1920 and 1945, when their total membership was approximately the same (6½ millions), the decrease,

from 215 to 191, is small enough. The process of concentration is, however, greater than these figures seem to reveal. For this has also been achieved by the growth of federations between Unions organizing workers in the same industry. Of these the three most important are the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, the National Federation of Building Trade Operatives and the Printing and Kindred Trades' Federation. All these bodies co-ordinate the industrial policies of the affiliated Unions, *i.e.*, present a common front on wages and conditions to the employers in their respective industries. They also help to overcome the difficulty presented by the "general labour" Unions; the T. & G.W.U. is, for example, affiliated to the first two of these federations in its representative capacity for unskilled labour in both the engineering and building industries. Joint action in collective bargaining is also promoted by the machinery which has been established for wage regulation and the settlement of disputes. The Civil Service Unions, for example, act together on the Staff Side of the National Whitley Council. When in 1943 the National Arbitration Tribunal rejected wage claims submitted separately by each of the three main Unions catering for railwaymen, the latter decided to set up the National Joint Council of the railway Unions to co-ordinate their industrial activities.<sup>1</sup>

#### **Towards a common policy for each industry**

It is an interesting reflection that, although the passionate campaign which once was waged on behalf of industrial Unionism has largely vanished, its purpose, to unify Trade Union policy in each industry, has approached realization. A more organic approach to the problem has produced better results. If we take coal-mining, railways, road transport, engineering and shipbuilding, building, printing, the clothing and boot and shoe industries, distribution and the Civil Service—and together they cover the greater part of the organized workers—in none of these industries can it now be said that lack of unity on the Trade Union side presents a serious problem. Least progress has been made in textiles, particularly cotton. In the latter industry there are still some 150 self-administered, autonomous local and district associations. With insignificant exceptions they are all members of one of six federations, known as "amalgamations", built up on an occupational basis (the largest is the Amalgamated Weavers' Association with about 72,000 members). These amalgamations work together for certain purposes. They are all members of the United Textile Factory Workers' Association, for example, but this body was formed primarily for political action. In industrial matters each amalgamation negotiates directly with the employers.

Even so, granted that the industrial unity of the British Trade Unions still has a few serious gaps and may not in some cases be

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1. The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen has since withdrawn from the National Joint Council.



established as firmly as would be desired, the main organizational problem which they face today is the wider one of their relationship to the T.U.C. The full significance of this problem can only be seen when we come to consider their present functions and activities. Organization is not an end in itself, but a condition required for the achievement of social purposes. The question which subsequently must be considered is whether the present loose grouping of wholly autonomous bodies which the T.U.C. still represents, seriously hampers British Trade Unionism from fulfilling the tasks it is called upon to perform in present-day society.

### **Union Democracy**

The differences in the internal organization of the various Unions are as plentiful as those in their general size and shape. Here again history plays its part and baffles the social student who would like to draw a few general conclusions. Rates of contribution,<sup>1</sup> the kind of benefits and services provided, the way in which policy is decided or executives or officials are elected or appointed, the frequency of branch meetings and delegate conferences, not to speak of the actual structure of the organization, varies from Union to Union. Every Trade Unionist who wants to play an active part in his association has to acquire a specialized knowledge of its workings, which will give him little assistance in understanding the organization of other Unions. This fact is important because it helps to explain the rather self-contained attitude which prevails in most Trade Unions and forms a barrier to the development of wider loyalties.

The one generalization it is safe to make about the British Trade Unions is that they are democratic organizations. Their direction and dynamic comes from below; they are not the instruments of outside forces, of the State or—despite their close relations with the Labour Party—of any political party. This generalization, though perhaps important in the international field at the present time, does not take us very far in assessing the part which they play in British social life. The question frequently raised is: How democratic? And it receives conflicting answers. Sometimes the Trade Union leaders are accused of failing adequately to lead their members, of yielding too easily to various pressures instead of trying to bring about a more responsible attitude. But they are also charged with being too bureaucratic, with having lost contact with their rank-and-file and responding inadequately to their interests.

#### **Varying types of constitution**

Certainly in their constitutions the Trade Unions compare favourably with any other institutions of British democracy. The

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1. Rates of contribution range generally from 6d. to 2/- a week according to the benefits to which the member is entitled, but there are a few craft or professional workers' Unions with considerably higher rates. Many Unions have several grades of membership with varying scales of contribution. The political levy is usually  $\frac{1}{4}$ d. a week or 3d. or 6d. a quarter.

structure of the Transport and General Workers' Union may be taken as an example. Apart from the more obvious characteristics, common to any democratic body, such as the supreme authority of the Biennial Delegate Conference, which alone has the power to make constitutional changes, there are a number of special features, all of which are designed to ensure that a full and fair representation of the members' interests takes place. In the first place there is the division of the membership into both territorial and trade groups. Each trade group is able to work out its own methods for dealing with the particular problems with which it is confronted, so that it cannot be swamped by the possible indifference of the other Union members. There is also the provision that the General Executive Council and the Biennial Conference are composed solely of "lay" members, i.e., those who are not permanent officials but still engaged in their trade. Finally an Appeals Committee is elected by the Biennial Conference to hear and decide upon any appeals lodged against decisions of the General Executive Council.

The constitutional problem in British Trade Unionism is the same which faces every democratic organization, namely, how to establish procedures which will encourage responsibility and leadership on the one hand, and responsiveness and democratic control on the other. The Unions in their varying histories have obviously weighted these two sides of the balance differently. The Iron and Steel Trades Confederation places great powers in the hands of its Executive Committee, which is part-time. Not only does it appoint the General Secretary for life and all other full-time officials, but even the Delegate Assembly—the governing body—is held at its discretion. The Amalgamated Engineering Union goes to the other extreme. Its General Secretary is elected every third year by ballot of all the members; its Executive is full-time; all its full-time officials are elected periodically by all the members; its National Committee meets annually to consider all aspects of Union policy; and there is in addition a special Appeals Committee (elected by the members) empowered to reverse decisions of the Executive. Every sort of variation between these two extremes can be found in the constitutions of other Unions.

#### **Who is to determine policy ?**

The living reality of democratic life in British Trade Unionism—as in every other social institution—does not depend wholly or even mainly upon the rule book. Constitutions apart, there are two main elements in the working of every modern Trade Union, and the relationship between them has a great influence on its vitality and purpose. They are the corps of full-time, permanent officials and the active membership.

Probably more than four-fifths of the members of the British Trade Unions pay their dues and claim their benefits, and otherwise take little or no part in Union affairs, unless an important wage claim or

dispute affecting them personally is pending. It is customary to bemoan the poor attendance at branch meetings, but the existence of this passive membership is as inevitable as the much greater percentage of citizens who take no active part in politics in between election times. It still remains true that there is no other institution in the country which brings as many people into voluntary or part-time service on behalf of their fellows and gives them a first-hand experience of the democratic methods of discussion and administration as do Trade Unions. If, as one recent estimate suggests, there are more than 50,000 Trade Union branches, it is a safe guess that the number of workers holding some kind of office in their Union is on the top side of half a million. (In some Unions, as in the case of the Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, there are from fifteen to twenty branch officers.) It is this active membership which counts, in determining the policy of the Union. What then is the significance of its relationship to the permanent Trade Union officials?

It lies in the nature of things that the official usually exercises a restraining influence on the active members, and they in turn have a stimulating effect upon him. He is conscious of the difficulties of negotiation, of the balance of forces and the economic facts on which the successful execution of policy depends. They are conscious of their interests and claims and are less hampered by the burden of responsibility. It should be recognized that both factors contribute to a healthy Trade Union organism; it is when the equilibrium, which has to be established between them, is seriously upset that disease sets in. In the one case the Trade Unions become "bureaucratic", in the other they become "irresponsible".

#### **The place of the permanent official**

The function of the full-time official has changed a great deal with the character and activities of the Trade Unions. Charles (now Lord) Dukes, the retired General Secretary of the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, aptly described that change in speaking to the Biennial Congress of his organization in 1941. "Every officer in this Union," he said, "knows that, whereas some thirty years ago your job was at the street corner, today it is in the conference room." The earlier Trade Union leader had to stir up a fighting spirit and lead his men in battle; he had to be an orator and to possess, above all, great force of character. These qualities are still required, but they are not sufficient. Today he is concerned primarily with conducting negotiations through established machinery, with stating a good case before arbitrators and winning over public opinion to his side. Most of his work is done in the office. He must be a capable administrator and spend a great deal of his time in explaining and interpreting agreements and regulations. He is in fact the member of a highly-skilled profession, and one which requires a long apprenticeship.

The methods by which the Unions appoint their officials have therefore become of increasing significance. Where they are chosen by ballot and are not appointed for life, this method still has the advantage of ensuring that they hold the members' confidence, but it encourages demagogues and, unless other provisions are made, takes no account of their qualifications for entering so skilled a profession. That is why many Unions today insist upon candidates for full-time positions having passed their own examination and rely upon the National Executive or a special selection committee making the appointments rather than employing the method of election. It is difficult to see how educational work is to produce results and raise the standard of Trade Union leadership unless some such practice is adopted; but it becomes the more important to ensure that policy decisions are made by "lay" representatives of the members, acting upon the advice of the officials, if the growth of a bureaucracy is to be avoided. The position of the General Secretary, which is a very powerful one in any large Trade Union, is different. (A few Unions, like the National Union of Mineworkers and the Amalgamated Engineering Union, also have a full-time President whose influence is as great.) There is a very strong case for his election, and usually the candidates have already given proof of their capacities to most of the members over a long period.

### **Branch and Workshop**

The main field in which the members actively participate in the work of their Trade Union and help to determine its policy—and in which, let us add, the full-time official usually begins his apprenticeship—is its basic unit, the local branch. From here he may be elected to serve on higher or wider authorities in the Trade Union world and enter the whole network of district, area, divisional, regional and national committees and councils. Unfortunately the average branch meeting is: (a) a very dull affair; and (b) rarely enjoys the presence of a permanent official, who could speak with authority on the work and policy of the Union. Much of this is unavoidable. There is a great deal of routine business to be transacted, and the officials cannot indefinitely extend their working day. It is a pity all the same that more attention is not given by Union headquarters to improving branch life. The member who is beginning to take an interest in Union affairs is often discouraged and put off by his first experiences in branch meetings. The T.U.C. has suggested that "the right type of educational work is the thing most suited to revitalize branch meetings and keep the member in touch with what is happening in his Union and also in the Movement generally".

### **A weak point in Union organization ?**

One of the main criticisms which has been levelled against the traditional form of organization of the British Trade Unions has been its emphasis upon the branch as opposed to the workshop or

alternative place of employment. In the case of some Unions this distinction does not arise. The miners are organized in lodges, one for each colliery, and the printers in "chapels" based on their workplace, even although they also belong to branches according to their place of residence. In other industries and services, notably tailoring, railway transport, the Civil Service and the fire brigades, and amongst busmen and electricians, the "place-of-employment" principle of organization prevails. In the greater part of manufacturing industry, however, this is not the case, and the branch is a geographical rather than an industrial unit. The deeper Trade Union, as distinct from political, significance of the various Shop Stewards' Movements was the latent desire which they expressed for a stronger representation of Trade Unionism "at the point of production". There is a great deal to be said for the view that either the Trade Unions mean something in the workshop or they mean nothing at all. It is here that they draw their strength and ultimately exert their influence. A friend of mine—a shop steward practically the whole of his working life—was fond of describing a certain type of Trade Unionist as one "who roars like a lion in the branch and squeaks like a mouse in the shop"; it is easy to move resolutions, but it requires courage, ability and a capacity for leadership to stand up to the employer and, when they are being unreasonable, to one's fellow workmen every day at work.

#### **Role of the shop stewards**

It is in the engineering and allied industries that shop stewards have played and continue to play an important part. The rules of the Amalgamated Engineering Union or the Electrical Trades Union, for example, require the appointment of stewards in each working unit, and their range of duties is wide. Piecework prices, and such questions as can only be satisfactorily regulated on a workshop basis, are one of their main concerns. But generally it is their job to ensure that Trade Union agreements are observed and other conditions established by local custom maintained, as well as to inspect the membership cards and encourage one hundred per cent. Trade Unionism. In the A.E.U. they are not only agents of the Union, but are, in addition to the branches, directly represented on the District Committees; quarterly meetings of all stewards in each district are also held at which reports on the state of membership, on changes in wages, hours and conditions within the district are discussed. The National Federation of Building Trade Operatives also organizes monthly meetings of "card stewards" on a district basis from all the Unions in the Federation.

Many Unions, however, though not organized on the "place-of-employment" principle, make no provision for the appointment of shop stewards, or, if they do so, employ them only as collectors of membership dues. There is still a deep-rooted suspicion of any proposals for developing workshop organization or enhancing the

status of shop stewards, partly because of the attempts which have been made by the Communist Party and other political groups to develop unofficial movements for their own ends, but generally because it is thought that, as a consequence, the authority and discipline of the Trade Unions will be undermined from below. It must be remembered that one of the main purposes of the Trade Unions has been to settle wage-rates and conditions on a national basis; to make, in other words, bargaining as collective as possible. But the risks involved in the growth of any kind of "factory patriotism" must be weighed against the disadvantages of neglecting to influence adequately what is taking place in the workshops. Conditions of full employment and the need for a greater productive effort have increased, not decreased, those disadvantages.

### **The Voluntary Principle**

So far, in considering how British Trade Unionism is organized, we have been concerned with the application of two principles, unity and democracy. There is a third, fundamental to the whole of its past existence, which has been implicitly accepted in considering the other two, namely its voluntary character. There is a widespread impression today that this is now being challenged by a demand on the part of some Trade Unions for a "closed shop". But before considering this particular controversy let us look at some consequences of the voluntary principle.

The most obvious is the uneven development of Trade Union organization. The lack of a tidy structure in British Trade Unionism makes it impossible to calculate its strength in various industries and services. It is known, however, that whilst it is particularly strong in coal-mining, railways, most other forms of transport, printing, public services and amongst the skilled workers in industry, it is weak in agriculture, distribution, catering and among the vast mass of clerical workers outside of national and local government, and is almost non-existent in domestic service. In between we have the greater part of manufacturing industry with considerable variations; cotton textiles and the boot and shoe industry, for example, have a high degree of Trade Union organization, whilst in the potteries and a good deal of the new light industry it is low. Outside of textiles and the professions, women are poorly organized, usually less than half as well as the men. These differences may be due in part to traditional attitudes, as in the case of black-coated workers, who are inclined to think of Trade Unionism as being beneath the dignity of their occupation. But such prejudices are rapidly disappearing, and in recent years great progress has been made in the organization of non-manual workers. The main barriers to Trade Union organization lie in the character of the industry or occupation, in such inherent factors as the size of the units of production or service and their geographical distribution. The question naturally arises, therefore, whether, if

Trade Unionism is to be regarded as an essential social institution, its effective operation should be left to chance.

### **Should Union membership be made compulsory ?**

Those who favour some system of compulsory Trade Union membership are also supported by a moral argument. Someone who refuses to join a Trade Union is naturally regarded with dislike and resentment by his fellow workmen who are members. In their eyes, and in fact, he is accepting all the benefits of Trade Union negotiation and of their efforts and is contributing nothing in return. His attitude is anti-social.

It is one thing, however, to say that every worker has a duty to join his Trade Union, and another to conclude that the fulfilment of this obligation should be made compulsory by law. Before such a conclusion can be accepted, it is necessary to consider the other consequences of statutory enforcement and to decide whether on balance it is the best method of attaining the aim—in itself desirable—of one hundred per cent. Trade Union membership. It is difficult to see how the Trade Unions could maintain their position of independence in relation to the State and their present freedom from legal proceedings in regard to their internal affairs if the practice of enforcing Trade Union membership by public authority became widespread. If the State compels its citizens to join a Trade Union, then it is entitled and indeed obliged to place the Unions under sufficient control to ensure that the power which they thus gain is not abused. Moreover, it can by threatening to withdraw its support hold them in a position of dependence. There are further consequences to be anticipated in the life of the Trade Unions themselves. As voluntary bodies their interest in extending membership by producing results is a continual spur to effort in defence of the workers' interests. Once their strength was assured regardless of their policy or activities, there is good reason to fear that their vitality would be threatened. The danger of an entrenched "bureaucracy", which is often exaggerated by the enemies of Trade Unionism today, would be increased.

### **The "closed shop" controversy**

It is as well to investigate fully both the advantages and disadvantages of the voluntary principle, although in fact the question of the "closed shop" is largely an academic one for the British Trade Union Movement. It is true that since the repeal of the 1927 Trades Disputes Act a number of local authorities have introduced membership of a Trade Union as a condition of employment. The Co-operative Movement has for years maintained a similar provision. Implicit and explicit agreements to the same effect have also been established in private industry. In the South Wales coalfield, for example, it was not only established by agreement that colliery workers must belong to the South Wales Miners' Federation (now a

part of the National Union of Mineworkers), but their dues were even deducted from their wages by the employer. The Trade Unions could never have achieved their present position unless they had been prepared to battle against non-Unionism with all the means at their disposal, and this point should be borne in mind by those outside the Trade Union Movement who are inclined to criticize the workers for withdrawing their labour merely because they take exception to working alongside non-Unionists, whom they regard as a threat to their conditions. The obtaining of an agreement with the employers that they will not employ non-Union labour is only the culmination of these efforts. A distinction must be drawn, however, between a voluntary agreement and legislation. The British Trade Union Movement has never sought to bring about legislation which would make Trade Union membership compulsory. Other considerations apart it would not be possible without a legal definition of a *bona fide* Trade Union, a subject which the Trade Union Movement has preferred to leave within its own jurisdiction. In most industries it would also be difficult to determine which particular Union or Unions should be recognized as empowered to negotiate on behalf of the workers. As the present General Secretary of the T.U.C., Vincent Tewson, declared at the 1946 Congress, "a 'closed shop' in the sense of an establishment in which only members of a particular Union can be employed to the exclusion of members of other Unions is alien to British Trade Union practice and theory"; it might be added that it is equally incompatible with British Trade Union structure.

### **The issues involved**

Why then, it may be asked, did the public controversy over the "closed shop" develop in 1946? It may be remembered that it was started mainly as the result of the decision of the London Passenger Transport Board to require its employees, as a condition of their employment, to be members of the Transport and General Workers' Union. This action, brought about by T. & G.W.U. pressure, was taken not to initiate any general policy of compulsory Unionism, but to eliminate the influence of a breakaway Union, the National Passenger Workers' Union, which was founded in 1937, following upon the unofficial busmen's strike. The splitting-off of a dissident section of a Union to form a new organization is looked upon as one of the deadly sins against Trade Unionism, for if such developments were allowed to proceed unchecked, the strength and unity of the Trade Union Movement would be rapidly undermined and ultimately its existence as a voluntary institution imperilled.

The question undoubtedly arises whether the T. & G.W.U. were wise to choose this way of dealing with a breakaway, whether they placed their feet on a slippery slope which leads eventually to compulsory Unionism. The problem is raised more acutely by the clause



in the nationalization Acts which empowers the public corporations thus created to recognize for collective bargaining those Trade Unions which represent a substantial number of their employees. The National Coal Board has granted the National Union of Mineworkers an agreement which gives that Union, which is also endeavouring to secure the enforcement of membership as a condition of employment, sole bargaining rights. If within nationalized industries compulsory Trade Union membership becomes the accepted thing, even if it is not embodied in legislation, the voluntary principle upon which British Trade Unionism has been based may be endangered, with the consequences already outlined.

## ITS ACTIVITIES AND POLICY

“Collective bargaining” is probably the hardest worked term in the Trade Union vocabulary. This is not surprising, since it describes what has been and remains the chief activity of British Trade Unionism. It is worth pausing, then, to consider carefully what it means. Collective bargaining is the process whereby workpeople, instead of settling individually with their employers, the conditions of their employment, do so jointly through the agency of their Trade Union. It eliminates the kind of competition between them for a job which would arise from offering their services at a lower price than their fellow-workers.

One of the main functions of a Trade Union, therefore, is to protect the interests of their members by setting limits to the conditions under which their labour can be employed. Such limits can also be imposed by law, as the various Factory Acts testify. But although the British Trade Unions have resorted to this second method of “legal enactment” for the same protective purpose, they have always regarded it as subsidiary to the first. Where they have been strong enough to regulate wages and conditions by direct negotiation with the employers, they have preferred to dispense with assistance from Governments. Only in those industries and among those categories of workers where organization was weak or non-existent, have they turned to industrial legislation. That is why it is not illegal in this country to employ an adult male twenty-four hours a day outside of a few special industries like coal-mining and road haulage; the Factory Acts apply only to the hours of employment of women and young persons.

This constant reliance, where possible, upon their own strength is the basis of the independent spirit and organization of the British Trade Unions. There are, however, other reasons why the voluntary system has become so firmly established and meets with such general approval. It has the great merit of flexibility. It would be impossible for industry to operate with a sensitive regard for the varied human interests of all the equally varied categories of workers by means of regulations imposed by an outside authority. Industrial processes are constantly changing and with them the conditions of employment. In every workshop there is a host of detailed problems which affect

and interest the workers, which can only be settled satisfactorily by organizations intimately connected with them.

There are two further aspects of the process of collective bargaining which should be kept firmly in mind. The one is that its natural evolution is always towards widening the scope of its operations. It began historically with agreements or, perhaps, customs, which settled the terms of employment for one trade in one particular factory. Today national agreements are signed which apply to all classes of workers engaged in the whole of an industry. At the same time there are still district agreements or those which relate only to one firm. The other important characteristic of collective bargaining relates to the sanction upon which its effectiveness depends. The economic power of the Trade Unions, which they employ in industrial negotiations, is derived from their collective exercise of the will to work or abstain from working. That power is as much in evidence in negotiating an agreement as it is in the conduct of a strike. The natural desire of the Trade Unions is to avoid strikes, which deplete their funds and bring deprivations to their members. For this reason it has always been one of their objects to develop machinery for the peaceful settlement of disputes. But without the ultimate sanction which the right to strike provides, they would be powerless to protect their members.

These preliminary remarks help to explain the complicated system of industrial relations which has grown up in this country. The main features of this system can conveniently be summarized as follows:

1. **Methods of regulating wages, etc.**
  - (a) Established procedures of negotiation (voluntary).
  - (b) Joint Industrial Councils (voluntary Whitley system).
  - (c) Wages Councils and Wages Boards (statutory).
  - (d) Enforcement of "recognized" standards.
2. **Methods of settling disputes.**
  - (a) Conciliation.
  - (b) Arbitration.
  - (c) Special Inquiry.
  - (d) Strikes and Lock-outs.

## **Regulation of Wages and Conditions**

According to one recent estimate, the wages and conditions of work of more than 60 per cent. of the insured workers in Great Britain are settled by one of the many forms of voluntary machinery which have been established for this purpose by joint agreement between the Trade Unions and the employers' organizations. The product turned out by this machinery is the collective agreement. Such an agreement is in theory applicable only to the members of the one or more employers' associations and Trade Unions whose

representatives have signed it. In practice it is usually adhered to by the whole of the trades or industries which it covers. It is not a contract in the legal sense, although its terms may expressly or by implication become the terms of the individual contract of employment. Despite the lack of penalties, however, it is invariably honoured by both parties. Collective agreements do not deal exclusively with wages, but may cover the entire range of labour conditions and relations, including hours, overtime, holidays, relations between management and men, procedure for avoiding disputes, distribution of work, apprenticeship and training arrangements.

### **Industries with their own machinery for negotiation**

Most of the older, basic industries of this country have evolved their own characteristic procedures for negotiation. In some cases there are no national joint negotiating committees or councils, but only certain practices established by agreement or custom. In that large complex of industries and occupations which is usually described as "Engineering and Shipbuilding", for example, although powerful and all-embracing Federations exist both on the workers' and the employers' side, the practice is to call local and national joint conferences when new demands are advanced by either party. There is also no agreement upon arbitration procedure in the event, say, of a wage claim being rejected by the employers. At the same time there is a well-defined and comprehensive procedure for the settlement of disputes in particular workshops, firms or localities, which may arise in regard to the interpretation of existing agreements.

In the coal-mining industry it was not until 1943, and then as a result of the recommendations of a government-appointed Board of Investigation, that a Joint National Negotiating Committee was set up. This continues to operate in the nationalized industry, together with a National Reference Tribunal, composed of three permanent members having no connection with the industry and two assessors from each side of the Negotiating Committee, which adjudicates on questions where there has been a failure to agree. But wages and working conditions in this industry are still determined by the combined effect of colliery, district and national agreements and various legal provisions.

In the building industry, however, the National Federation of Building Trades Employers, comprising many local associations, and the National Federation of Building Trades Operatives, which includes both the craft and general Unions, have operated a National Joint Council since 1920. This body has dealt successfully with general wage questions and many other problems, and brought about a growing degree of uniformity in conditions of employment despite the diverse character of the industry.

### **Joint Industrial Councils**

The more standard form of voluntary negotiating machinery is the system of Joint Industrial Councils (J.I.C.s). The Whitley Committee on Relations between Employers and Employed, which was appointed by the Government in March, 1916, recommended in its report that there should be established in each industry national and district councils and Works Committees composed of representatives of employers and workpeople to discuss and regulate matters of joint concern. There was considerable doubt how far under this system the workers' representatives were to participate in the traditional functions of management, but the discussion of production and welfare problems was clearly envisaged. The Works Committees were in any case to be excluded from interference in the settlement of wages and working conditions, this being the prerogative of the national and district councils. These recommendations were accepted by the Government, and the Minister of Labour was charged with putting them into practice.

In the immediate post-war years more than a hundred J.I.C.s were formed (some were called Interim Industrial Reconstruction Committees because of their provisional character), but less than half of these survived the period of industrial conflict which ended with the General Strike. Similarly, although between 1917 and 1922 more than 1,000 Works Committees were formed, by 1925 the great majority of them had ceased to function. Moreover most of the J.I.C.s which survived throughout the inter-war years only concerned themselves with regulating wages and working conditions. The most thorough and successful application of the Whitley system was in the sphere of public employment.

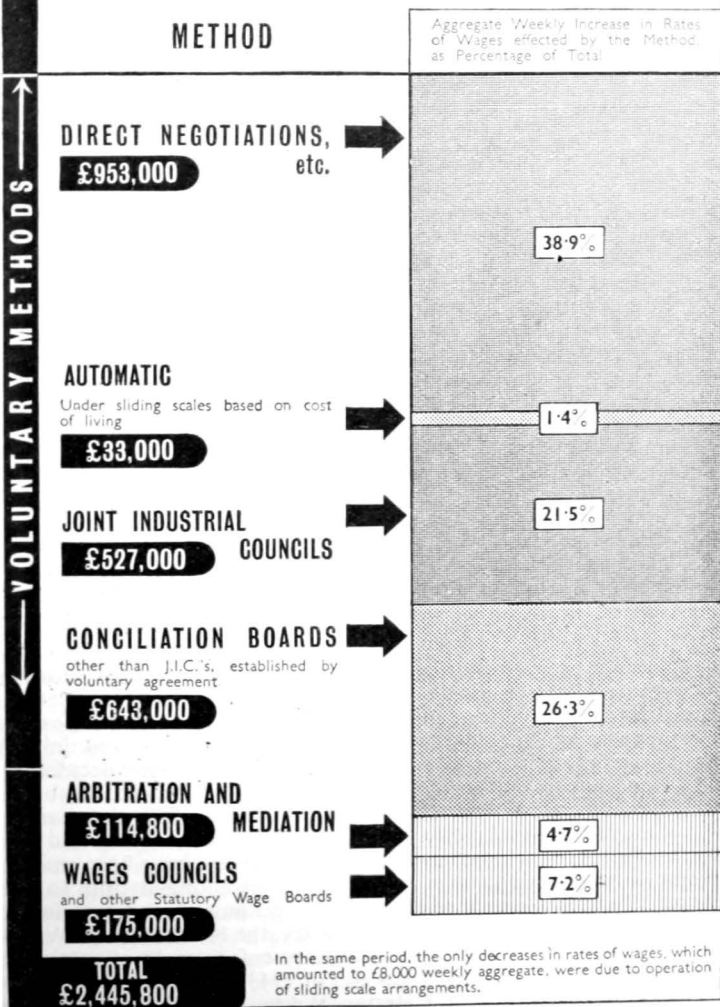
The second World War brought a new crop of J.I.C.s, since organized industrial relations were required and promoted in so many ways. By May, 1947, in all 114 of them were functioning. The more important industries covered by them are bricks, wool and worsted, hosiery, boots and shoes, printing, pottery, docks, chemicals, shipping, national and local government services and certain branches of retail distribution. These employ some 30 per cent. of the insured workers, or roughly half of the total of those catered for by collective agreements. In no case has an industry with its own established procedure of negotiation on a national scale switched over to the J.I.C. model. On the workers' side they have been developed mainly by the general labour Unions.

### **Statutory regulation of wages**

The Wages Councils, of which there are now over 50 operating for various branches of the clothing, textile, food and drink, and metal-ware industries, distribution and other services, are the modern version of the old Trade Boards, first set up under the 1909 Act to deal with the problem of "sweated" trades. The Wages Council

# METHODS OF EFFECTING WAGE CHANGES

July 1945—June 1946



Act of 1945 did not only rename the Trade Boards, but it greatly extended their powers and their scope. The Councils, like the Boards they replaced, are composed of employers and workpeople in equal numbers, together with a smaller number of independent members having no personal connection with the industry, and are empowered to fix minimum wages which, subject to the approval of the Minister, are enforceable by law. But their jurisdiction on wages is no longer confined to "minimum rates"; it has been widened to "minimum remuneration" including payment for a guaranteed week; paid holidays may be fixed above the previous maximum of six days; they may also advise the Minister on other problems relating to the industry, such as training, recruitment and working conditions.

When the Trade Boards were first formed, they were regarded with serious misgiving by the Trade Unions. It was thought that any form of statutory regulation of wages would tend to weaken Trade Union organization by encouraging the workpeople concerned to rely upon authority rather than their own efforts for the improvement of working conditions. Experience has on the whole mitigated those fears. The Trade Boards have only fixed a floor for wages, thus eliminating the worst forms of undercutting; the Trade Unions could extend their organization by securing higher rates through collective agreements with the best firms in the industry. Their vigilance was also required, in addition to that of the government inspectors, to ensure that nothing less than the statutory rates was paid. Nevertheless the efforts of the Trade Unions are naturally directed to lifting a trade or industry out of the Wages Council class. Under the new Act, where a majority of employers and workers in any industry covered by a Wages Council consider that statutory backing for wage agreements is no longer necessary, they may ask the Minister of Labour to abolish the Council. This has happened in the case of the furniture manufacturing industry, where voluntary arrangements were strengthened by the formation of a J.I.C.

There are in addition three important industries where statutory regulation of wages has been the subject of special legislation: agriculture, road haulage and catering. The problem in each case is the predominance of a large number of small and scattered units in the industry. Before the war agricultural wages were decided by 58 autonomous County Agricultural Wages Committees, but under the Agricultural Wages (Regulation) Act of 1947 the Central Agricultural Wages Boards (one for England and Wales and one for Scotland), established as a wartime necessity, have been made a permanent institution. In road haulage, after a long attempt to give statutory encouragement to collective bargaining which was defeated by the lack of organization in the industry, the Road Haulage Wages Act of 1938 was passed for the statutory enforcement of minimum wage rates. The Catering Wages Act of 1943 provided for the establishment of a permanent Catering Wages Commission, which is

empowered to examine the arrangements for the regulation of wages in any branch of the catering industry and, where such arrangements are found to be inadequate, to recommend the setting up of a Wages Board. These Wages Boards, of which five had been established covering all the important sections of the industry between 1944 and 1947, have similar constitutions and powers to the Wages Councils. Taking all the legislation providing for statutory wage regulation into account, it can be said that roughly another 30 per cent. of the insured workers are covered by this system, so that in all there remain today only some 10 per cent. of them whose wages and conditions are subject to little or no form of control.

#### **Other ways in which the State has intervened**

In re-enforcing the voluntary system of collective agreements the State has come to the assistance of the Trade Unions in other ways. It has increasingly used its influence to compel recalcitrant employers to accept recognized standards of remuneration. One of the means employed has been the "fair wages clause", which since its adoption by the House of Commons in 1911 has been a condition laid down for the granting of government contracts. This clause, which was further amended by the House in October, 1946, now stipulates that all government contractors and the sub-contractors employed by them shall pay rates of wages and observe hours and conditions of labour not less favourable than the recognized terms which obtain in the district concerned. On one occasion legal force has been given to voluntarily negotiated agreements, under the Cotton Manufacturing Temporary Provision Act, 1934. But this was an exceptional measure applied to an industry faced—in the words of the Board of Inquiry's report—"with the possible collapse of the whole principle of collective bargaining".

Of greater general significance was the new principle introduced by the Conditions of Employment and National Arbitration Order, 1940. Under the Order it became obligatory for every employer in any trade or industry to observe the terms and conditions of employment "recognized" in that trade or industry in the district—"recognized" meaning those which have been agreed by substantial proportions of the workers and employers in that district, or decided by a J.I.C. or similar body, or awarded by arbitration. It should be noted that the initiative remained with the Trade Unions (or employers' organizations) to see that this obligation was fulfilled. There was no system of inspections or prosecutions (as with the Wages Councils). If any employer appeared to be infringing the regulation, he could be reported to the Ministry of Labour who had then to refer the question to arbitration. If a favourable award was given, the workers concerned could sue the employers for the amount their wage packets were short of the recognized remuneration. This arrangement proved to be of great value to the Trade Unions in enabling them to bring into line employers who had formerly



remained outside their agreements. On the assumption that the wartime Order would lapse with the termination of hostilities, the Wages Council Act provided for a continuation of this particular regulation until 1950.

## Settlement of Disputes

It has already been pointed out how in many industries collective agreements lay down the procedure to be followed in the case of disputes, and in some cases, as in coal-mining and railways, provide for a special system of arbitration. The State itself has gradually extended its provisions for bringing about a peaceful settlement of industrial conflicts. The first step was taken with the passing of the Conciliation Act of 1896. This, together with the Industrial Courts Act of 1919, gave the Ministry of Labour authority to assist in the prevention and settlement of disputes, by employing any of three methods: conciliation, arbitration, or special inquiry—and usually in that sequence. The Ministry employs Conciliation Officers, whose job it is to help both parties to settle their differences amicably if their advice or assistance is requested; usually they do not intervene before an attempt has been made to reach a settlement without their help. Apart from the special exigencies of wartime, compulsory arbitration has never found favour in this country. But under the 1919 Act an Industrial Court was established (built up according to the conventional pattern of employers' and workpeople's representatives and some independent persons) to which disputes can be referred for arbitration. Despite its name it is no part of the British judicial system, and its decisions are not enforceable. Nevertheless it has gained the reputation of being a genuinely independent tribunal—it is not subject to any form of governmental control—and only on rare occasions have the disputants refused to accept its findings. In addition to this permanent institution the Ministry of Labour can also appoint single arbitrators or special *ad hoc* Boards of Arbitration to adjudicate in a dispute, if this is likely to prove more acceptable to the contesting parties. The third method, the appointment of a Court of Inquiry, is primarily a means of informing Parliament and public opinion of the facts and underlying causes of a dispute when agreement has been sought in vain. It may be a post-mortem examination of a strike which has taken place; it may also be last-minute action to avert an impending stoppage.

Experience has shown that these three methods applied in favourable economic conditions, i.e., when large fluctuations in prices and employment are not taking place, can help considerably to maintain peace in industry without blocking the way to the progressive elimination of grievances or robbing the Trade Unions of their vitality. There are few countries in the world in which persuasion and compromise, impartial examination of the facts and independent judgment have played so big a part in industrial relations as here,

at least during the last two decades. Since 1933, when the economic depression had passed its worst point, each insured worker in this country has lost, on an average, less than *one* working hour a year in industrial disputes.

### **The workers' attitude to arbitration**

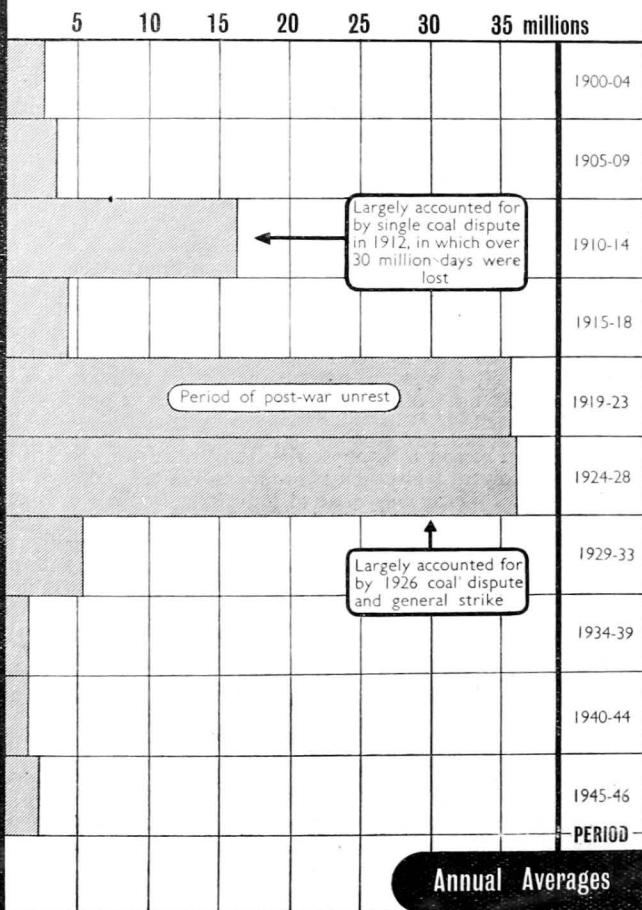
It is true that since 1940 there has been a system of compulsory arbitration. The Conditions of Employment and National Arbitration Order was introduced to prevent work from being interrupted during the war by trade disputes. It prohibited strikes and lock-outs unless the difference had been reported to the Minister of Labour and National Service and had not been referred by him for settlement within the subsequent three weeks. It also established, as a final authority for the settlement of disputes, a National Arbitration Tribunal composed on lines similar to the Industrial Court. Contrary to expectations at the time when it was introduced, this Order has so far been retained in the post-war period, and the T.U.C. General Council reported to the 1947 Congress that there had been no requests from affiliated organizations during the previous year for any alteration in this position. At Congress itself, however, a resolution was moved by the Amalgamated Engineering Union expressing the opinion that the usefulness of the Order had now passed and asking the General Council to seek its withdrawal. It is difficult to say how much support there is for this view since the resolution was not voted upon, but remitted by Congress to the General Council.

There is no reason to suppose that the British workers will ever be willing to regard arbitration as the *final* solution for the settlement of all disputes which may arise in industry. In the words of the Ministry of Labour's *Industrial Relations Handbook*: "The right to strike is bound up with the conception of employment as a civil contract between equals. Workers seek to maintain this principle and regard the right to strike as the expression of their individual and collective rights in industry." Moreover few people outside the Trade Union Movement will disagree with the view expressed by Lord Beveridge in his report on *Full Employment in a Free Society* that "just as . . . in a free society in peace, mere refusal to work by an individual should not be the subject of criminal proceedings, the same should apply to refusals which are not individual but collective".

### **Changed significance of the strike weapon**

Nevertheless there has been a great shift in the significance of "the strike weapon" in Trade Union policy. By and large it is now regarded not as an instrument to be deliberately employed on a national scale for the achievement of Trade Union purposes, but as something which must be held in reserve as a condition for the effective functioning of the firmly established machinery for collective bargaining and the peaceful settlement of disputes. The small-scale

## WORKING DAYS LOST IN INDUSTRIAL DISPUTES



local strike, which may often be "unofficial" even when arbitration is no longer compulsory, serves an entirely different function in a planned but free society. It is essentially a kind of safety valve. No negotiating machinery is perfect, and when huge organizations are involved, serious grievances affecting, perhaps, only a small number of workers may be neglected or dealt with too tardily. A spontaneous outburst of protest, even if it is contrary to the "rules", is greatly to be preferred to smouldering resentment. To the outside observer the grievance which has led to a strike often appears too trivial to justify the loss or inconvenience which other people have to suffer. It is well to remember, however, that what may seem unimportant to the unaffected when measured only in pounds, shillings and pence may be of great concern to the aggrieved persons in terms of fair treatment. Moreover, a wave of unofficial strikes is a necessary warning that something is wrong either with the organization of the Trade Union concerned or with its machinery for the settlement of disputes.

Summing up, it can be said that the success of arbitration depends primarily upon: (a) the confidence and goodwill which the arbitrating authority enjoys on both sides of industry; and (b) the economic background against which it has to operate. Given relatively stable conditions and confidence on the part of the workers that their claims will be fairly judged, arbitration—even though voluntary—is likely to continue to grow in importance as a method regulating wages and resolving industrial differences. If, however, those conditions are not fulfilled, then any system of arbitration will break down.

## **Development of Economic Policy**

Throughout the greater part of their history the purpose followed by the Trade Unions in bargaining with the employers and in undertaking political action was straightforward enough. It was to increase the wages, to shorten the working week and generally to improve the conditions of employment of their members. That they had other and wider aspirations is true, but in the 19th century these aspirations had little influence on their immediate objectives.

The development of industrial and economic policies on the part of the British Trade Union Movement only began to take place in the inter-war years. Mass unemployment, the effect of financial measures, such as the restoration of the Gold Standard in 1925, on the whole of their activities, and the extended influence of the Government on economic life compelled the Movement to give more attention to "the politics of industry". The closer unity which had been achieved both by amalgamations and federations and by the enhanced authority of the T.U.C. made this possible. It only remained to achieve a sufficient measure of common agreement on the new role of the Trade Unions.

### A choice of three alternatives

The main architects of the "new approach" were Ernest Bevin and Walter Citrine, and under their influence the basic issues which had to be faced were plainly stated by the General Council in its report to the 1928 Congress on the Mond-Turner conferences. The decisive passage in this historic document is still worth quoting in full:

"Broadly speaking, there were three possible lines of policy open to the Trade Union Movement. The first was to say, frankly, that the Unions will do everything possible to bring the industrial machine to a standstill, to ensure by all possible means the breakdown of the entire system, in the hope of creating a revolutionary situation on the assumption that this might be turned to the advantage of the workers and to the abolition of capitalism. That policy the Trade Union Movement has decisively rejected as futile, certain to fail, and sure to lead to bloodshed and misery.

"The second course was one of standing aside and telling employers to get on with their own job, while the Unions would pursue the policy of fighting sectionally for improvements. The objections to this course are that it is entirely inconsistent with the modern demand for a completely altered status of the workers in industry, and that it is a futile policy, a confession of failure, for Unions to say they are going to take no hand in the momentous changes that are taking place in the economic life of the nation.

"The third course is for the Trade Union Movement to say boldly that not only is it concerned with the prosperity of industry, but that it is going to have a voice as to the way industry is carried on, so that it can influence the new developments that are taking place. The ultimate policy of the movement can find more use for an efficient industry than for a derelict one, and the Unions can use their power to promote and guide the scientific reorganization of industry as well as to obtain material advantages from that reorganization."

The third course has been followed, and there has been a steady development in the range of economic problems with which the Trade Unions have actively concerned themselves. These problems fall mainly into two inter-related groups: those relating to current policy on production, employment and prices; and those which bear on the economic structure of society in respect to ownership, control and planning. It is not possible to do more in this Handbook than indicate the direction which Trade Union thought has taken in these matters. The reader who wishes to acquire further information is particularly advised to consult the *T.U.C. Interim Report on Post-War Reconstruction* (1944).

### The reason for "restrictive practices"

Production and employment problems are inseparable for the Trade Union Movement. At a time when unemployment is widespread Trade Unions cannot be expected to display much enthusiasm for increased production. Whatever theoretical arguments may be advanced, the average worker, whose daily experience suggests that machines replace men, says to himself that an improvement in industrial organization or technique will as likely as not put him out of a job. For this reason Trade Union employment policies before the war either concentrated on sharing out the

available work among a larger number of people (a shorter working week, an increase in the school-leaving age and the introduction of retirement pensions were measures given prominence), or else tended to be sectional in the sense that each Union endeavoured to protect the employment of its own members. This was the origin of many of the so-called "restrictive practices" on the part of those Unions which were in a position to maintain them. They took the form of demarcation rules (by which only a fully trained man and often a member of a particular Union would undertake the type of work for which he had been trained and none other), limitations on the number of apprentices who might be permitted to enter a trade, and even self-imposed restrictions upon individual output. It has now been recognized that the maintenance of Full Employment is a responsibility of the Government, and one which it alone can discharge. The problem for the Trade Unions is to avoid putting obstacles in its way by adjusting their own policy and practice to the resulting change in labour relations. It would, however, be foolish to expect them to abandon their own defensive arrangements until they are fully convinced that mass unemployment will not recur.

#### **A more constructive approach to production**

The changed situation brought about by the war, when shortage of work gave place to shortage of labour, gradually revolutionized the Trade Union attitude towards production. From the beginning the Trade Union leaders demanded from the Government a more active production policy in which the Unions could participate. Significantly enough, it was a committee under the chairmanship of Sir Walter Citrine, who was then the General Secretary of the T.U.C., which worked out plans for the reorganization of war production. After the Ministry of Production had been formed in 1942, a three-level system of organization was adopted to assist the Government in this respect. A National Production Advisory Committee was created at the centre, with various industrial panels; eleven Regional Boards were created, assisted by District Committees in important towns and localities; and the setting up of Joint Production Committees was encouraged according to a well-defined procedure at the workshop level. By June, 1944, as many as 4,565 J.P.C.s were operating in private firms in the engineering and allied industries. Not all or even the majority of them were an unqualified success, but they undoubtedly helped to bring about a far more co-operative and constructive approach to production problems on the part of management and workpeople. At the regional and national levels a great deal was done to remove bottlenecks and supply the Government with valuable industrial advice. There was parity of representation of employers and workpeople on all these bodies.

Most of the wartime machinery has been retained with modifications in the post-war era. The National Production Advisory Council

of Industry and the National Joint Advisory Council to the Minister of Labour now exist as two of the most important central bodies advising the Government on the carrying out of its economic plans. The tasks of the Regional Boards have also been adjusted to peacetime requirements. The weakest link in the chain of consultation and co-operation is the J.P.C.s. Many of these have ceased to function, and the question has been seriously discussed whether their establishment in private industry should be made compulsory by legislation. Their success and usefulness depend, however, mainly upon two factors which laws cannot create: a readiness on the part of the management to give adequate information to the workers' representatives in the factory and reasonable consideration to the proposals which they advance; and sufficient knowledge of technical problems and experience in committee procedure on the workers' side to make consultation worth while.

#### **Different interests as producers and consumers**

The price policy of the Trade Unions has also been dependent on the economic health of the country. The catastrophic fall in prices in times of trade depression usually meant equally drastic wage cuts. In these circumstances there was a strong temptation for individual Unions to engage in sectional policies, to support their particular group of employers in their attempts, by marketing agreements and other monopolistic devices, to raise prices. The growth of private monopoly was not looked upon as a bad thing, at least by those Unions for which it provided an opportunity for increasing the wages of their members. The general view of the Trade Union Movement, as expressed by the T.U.C. in its evidence to the Macmillan Committee, was that "the stabilization of the general price level is extremely desirable". Neither inflation nor deflation appeals to the Trade Unions.

After the outbreak of war the problem was one of inflation. The T.U.C. was now greatly interested in preventing a rise in the cost-of-living. It was part of its policy—as summed up in the General Council's Report in 1942—"to urge the extension of rationing and price control on the widest possible scale". A T.U.C. Rationing and Prices Committee, which began as an advisory committee to the Ministry of Food, extended its functions to deal with clothes rationing and price control in 1941, and has continued to operate since the war. It is clear that the Trade Unions have had to look at wages more and more in real as distinct from monetary terms. For the individual Trade Unions engaged in collective bargaining, however, the emphasis is upon actual remuneration. Only the T.U.C. can represent the general interest of all workers in stable or lower prices. The extent to which it can assume this function depends upon its authority over affiliated Unions. It was interesting to note that in the General Council's Report in 1940 mention was first made

of the representative capacity of the Trade Union Movement in regard to "consumers as well as producers".

#### **Policy with regard to the control of industry**

We have seen how the Trade Unions throughout the greater part of their development have interested themselves in the economic structure of society, influenced at various times both by socialist and by syndicalist ideas. It was not until 1932 that an attempt was made by the T.U.C. to resolve the problems resulting from these conflicting conceptions of social organization, and to state in practical terms the kind of industrial reorganization the Trade Union Movement should try immediately to achieve. The Report on the *Public Control and Regulation of Industry and Trade*, which was submitted to Congress in that year, concluded "that the change from undiluted private enterprise in many industries and services will be by way of general governmental regulations leading to operation by Public Corporations". Operation of publicly-owned industries by Government Departments on the model of the Post Office was rejected in favour of Public Boards "not susceptible to party-political pressure and interference". The report left two questions unsolved, however. It did not define the industries which were "ripe for socialization", although it laid down certain criteria; and it failed, at least to the satisfaction of Congress, to deal adequately with the part which the Trade Unions should play in management and control of these industries.

The second point led to lively debates at both Trades Union Congresses and Labour Party Conferences in the next few years. At the 1933 Congress a resolution was moved which claimed that fifty per cent. of the representation on the Boards running the socialized industries should be accorded to workers' nominees as a statutory right; a resolution to this effect was actually passed by the Labour Party Conference in the same year. By 1944, however, this semi-syndicalist view no longer found supporters. The *Interim Report on Post-War Reconstruction*, which was unanimously accepted, only proposed that on the Public Boards there should be at least some persons who had a wide experience of the Trade Union Movement. It was suggested that this "might best be secured by nomination by workers' organizations of candidates from whom the Minister shall select a number of the Board members". In addition it was proposed that there should be a series of consultative councils at all levels of organization in the publicly-owned industries, on which the Trade Unions would be directly represented, so that their experience and the interests of the workers would be adequately considered in the conduct of the industries. The industries selected as being of first priority for public ownership were Fuel and Power and Transport, a view which was accepted by the Labour Party in its 1945 election programme.



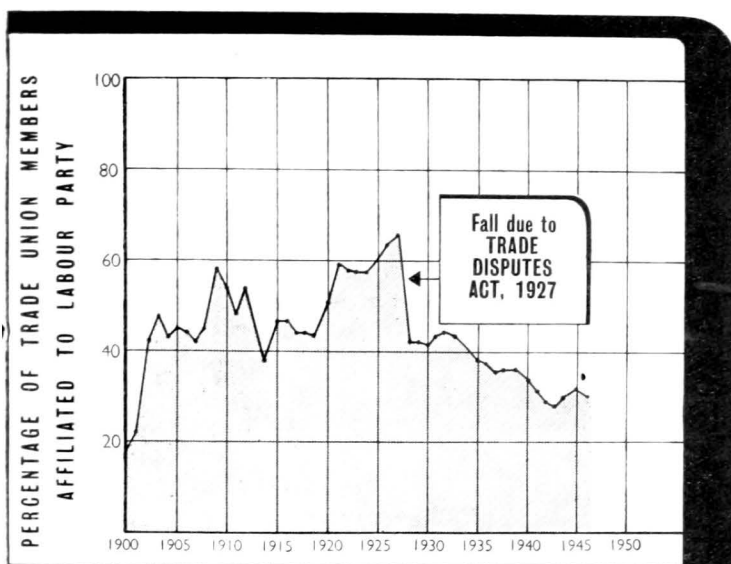
### **Support for Development Councils**

The proposals of the T.U.C. and of individual Trade Unions in their own post-war reconstruction plans in regard to the planning and control of economic life cannot be elaborated here, but one common feature requires special mention. The T.U.C. considers that many of the industries which remain under private ownership and management require some form of public regulation and machinery through which the economic objectives of the Government can be applied at the industrial level. It proposed for this purpose a series of Industrial Boards composed of representatives "of workpeople and employers in equal proportion and an impartial chairman and other independent members appointed and paid by the Government". By the end of 1947 about a dozen of the Working Parties set up by the President of the Board of Trade to investigate the organization of some seventeen important industries had produced their reports, and nearly all of them recommended the establishment of a Development Council for the industry concerned. The Industrial Organization and Development Act passed in the summer of 1947 provides the necessary legislation for this purpose. The Trade Union Movement has strongly supported the measure, which substantially coincides with its own proposals, but the employers' organizations have raised numerous objections, so that progress in its application has been slow.

### **Political Action and the Labour Party**

The close association between the Trade Unions and the Labour Party, which they helped to create, has meant that they have relied largely upon that party for the realization of their economic policy. The very idea of a Labour Movement with its three sides, political, industrial and co-operative, has implied a similarity of purpose and led to mutual support between the main representative bodies in each of these, the Labour Party, the Trades Union Congress and the Co-operative Union. The National Council of Labour is composed of eight representatives from each, including the three joint chairmen and secretaries. One of its stated purposes is "to endeavour to secure a common policy and joint action, whether by legislation or otherwise, in all questions affecting the workers as producers, consumers and citizens". It does from time to time issue common declarations of policy and achieve some co-ordination in the activities of the three sections of the Labour Movement. But the co-operation between them is not as close as many socialists would desire, or as members of the general public are inclined to imagine.

In the case of the T.U.C. and the L.P., although their headquarters are located in the same building, they lead a surprisingly independent existence, sharing only a common library. The ties between the Trade Unions and the L.P. are extremely complex. This may explain the conflicting views which are sometimes advanced with regard to



## AFFILIATION TO THE LABOUR PARTY

this relationship. Angry critics are apt to say that the Labour Party controls and exploits the Trade Unions for its own purposes. This is certainly not true. The Trade Union Movement follows political objectives which are derived not from any particular theory, but, as has been shown, from its own basic purposes; it is not uncommon for the T.U.C. and the L.P. to take a different view upon a subject, although they then endeavour to reach agreement. The contrary criticism is also brought forward that the Labour Party is controlled by the Trade Unions. It is usual in this connection to refer to the "block vote" of the Trade Unions at Labour Party Conferences. This criticism might be valid if all the Trade Unions voted in the same way and formed a solid block of opinion in Conference debates. In fact, as a study of Conference reports would show, the differences of opinion and the voting on resolutions cuts right across the division between Trade Union and local party delegates.

### Links between the Unions and the Labour Party

What, then, are the main links between the Trade Unions and the L.P., apart from representation at the Annual Conference? Of the twenty-seven members of the L.P.'s National Executive Committee there are twelve in the Trade Union section, and it is probably

true to say that their actual influence upon its decisions is less than this numerical proportion might suggest. At all levels of L.P. organization down to the management committees of Constituency L.P.s, delegates coming specifically from Trade Unions are included. In some towns there are still Trades and Labour Councils which combine political and industrial functions.

The Parliamentary Labour Party includes a number of Trade-Union-sponsored M.P.s. The sponsoring of candidates for Parliament has been a part of Trade Union practice since 1874, but with the creation of the Labour Party all of them became gradually absorbed in it. With the exception of the National Union of Teachers, which is not affiliated to the T.U.C., and the Civil Service Unions, which are not affiliated to the Labour Party, all of the Trade Union candidates stand for election under the banner of the Labour Party today. There are two facts which should be noted, however, about the Trade Union group of Labour M.P.s. The first is the decline in their numbers as compared with those who are sponsored by Divisional Labour Parties. Of the total number of Labour M.P.s 30 per cent. were predominantly Trade Union nominees after the 1945 General Election, as compared with 86 per cent. in 1918. The other significant fact is that the greater part of the Trade Union group is sponsored mainly by the miners, the railway workers and the two general labour Unions. (In 1945 they accounted for 82 of the total of 120.) The particular interest of these groups both in the nationalization of their industries and generally in the method of legal enactment is the main explanation for this weighty representation.

#### **The political levy and the Trades Disputes Act**

Under the 1913 Trades Union Act, Trade Unionists who had other political party allegiances or who for other reasons did not wish to contribute to the political funds of their Unions were able to "contract out" of paying this extra due. The Trades Disputes and Trade Unions Act of 1927 reversed this procedure; individual members who wished to pay the Union's political contribution had to "contract in" by signing a written undertaking to this effect. This change had an adverse effect on the membership and financial strength of the Labour Party, as it was intended to have. The proportion of Trade Union members who were also affiliated to the Labour Party fell from 65 per cent. in 1927 to 42 per cent. in 1928. With the increase in total Trade Union membership which has taken place since its lowest point in 1933 there has not been a similar expansion in the Trade Union membership of the Labour Party, so that this proportion has continued to fall until in 1946 it was only 30 per cent. The repeal of the 1927 Act has meant a reversion to the previous procedure of "contracting in", but it is too early to say what effect this will have on the numerical strength of the Labour

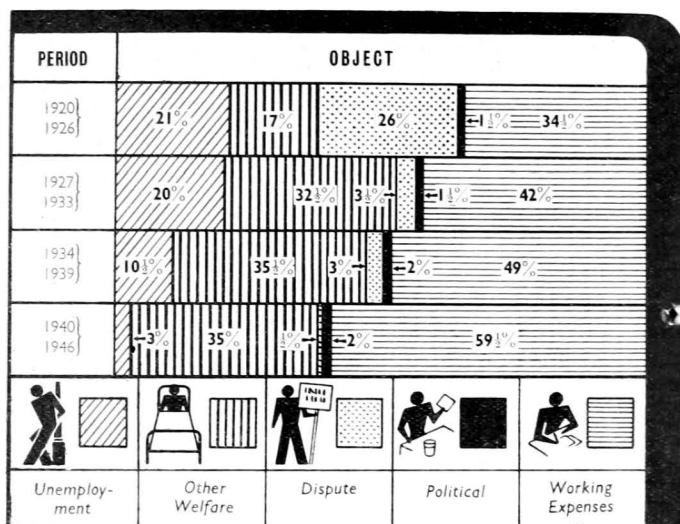
Party. The varying degrees of political interest in the different Unions is shown by the number of their members paying the political levy. The following table relating to the twelve largest Unions affiliated to the T.U.C. (with the exception of the Civil Service group) illustrates how greatly this proportion varied in 1946.

Name of Union	% of Members Paying the Political Levy
National Union of Mineworkers	77
Union of Shop, Distributive & Allied Workers	67
National Union of Agricultural Workers	57
National Union of Railwaymen	53
The Iron & Steel Trades Confederation	43
Transport & General Workers' Union	37
Amalgamated Engineering Union	32
National Union of Tailors & Garment Workers	31
National Union of General & Municipal Workers	30
Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers	22
National Union of Public Employees	17
Electrical Trades Union	15

### New Times—New Tasks

The survey so far given of the activities and policy of the Trade Unions as regards industrial relations and economic and political organization covers the greater part of British Trade Unionism which meets the public eye. From the point of view of the average Trade Union official, however, it gives a false impression of how he has to spend most of his time. Recruitment and administration claim a great deal of attention. The Trade Unions provide legal advice and assistance to their members in many ways, and these services have had to be extended with the growth of industrial legislation. It should be remembered that they are not only engaged in obtaining agreements or pressing for legislation, but also in helping to ensure that the agreements and legislation are respected, once they have been secured.

Historically an extremely important function of the Trade Unions, not yet mentioned, has been that of mutual insurance. The benefits provided by Trade Unions vary considerably according to their membership subscriptions. Funeral allowances are one of the oldest forms of Union benefit; sickness and accident benefits are of somewhat later origin; superannuation allowances represent a form of mutual insurance for old age which only the richer and strongly established Unions can maintain. In addition to these allowances, similar to those made by Friendly Societies, there are the trade benefits, mainly in respect of unemployment and disputes, but including such matters as the insurance of members' clothes and



### TRADE UNION EXPENDITURE

Showing proportions of total expenditure of registered Trade Unions devoted to various objects.

tools against fire and loss, assistance to members who wish to emigrate, and benevolent grants in cases of exceptional distress.

A glance at the development of Trade Union finances (see diagram above) shows the enormous changes which have taken place in their expenditure. In the last two decades the relatively peaceful state of industrial relations has reduced payments of dispute benefit to a very small proportion, and full employment since the early days of the war has similarly reduced expenditure on unemployment benefit. The outlay of funds on the various welfare benefits, which increased substantially after 1926, has been maintained at a high level. The rise of the State system of social insurance has reduced the significance of the provident functions of the Trade Unions, but they are likely to continue to provide those benefits which have become an established part of their activities.

#### Education, research and publicity

If with industrial peace, full employment and a comprehensive social insurance system "from the cradle to the grave", the welfare activities of the Trade Unions have declined in importance, others

have grown, notably those concerned with education, research and public relations. Education and research are required to equip the Trade Unions for the discharge of their present responsibilities. When they were mainly engaged in fighting for recognition and higher wages, it was not important to see far beyond the immediate results of their decisions or to understand all the economic and social problems which might be involved. Today a great deal of knowledge and trained capacity is demanded from every representative of a Trade Union, whether he be arguing a case before an Arbitration Court or participating in a Joint Production Committee. The powerful influence which the Trade Unions now have in the nation's affairs, and their own increased dependence on public opinion for the achievement of their objects, have also made it more essential that they explain the reasons for their actions in a way that can be understood and appreciated by the general public.

Unfortunately progress in each of these three fields has been extremely slow. It would be expected that today every large Trade Union or Federation would have its own education, research and publicity officers. This is largely the case in the United States, but in Great Britain outside of the T.U.C. such officers hardly exist and, if they do, they are invariably regarded as the Cinderellas in the organization. Publicity has probably shown the greatest improvement, but the various Trade Union journals, though some of them have brightened their appearance in recent years, still make very dull reading in the mass, and the T.U.C. has amazingly few publications of any kind. Not half a dozen Trade Unions have a research department, and those that have employ it largely on fact-providing and not on working out the implications of policy.

Until recently British Trade Unionism had left the education of its members and potential officers mainly to three separate institutions, to which it gave a very modest amount of financial support (less than 1 per cent. of its total expenditure has been devoted to educational purposes): the Workers' Educational Association, the National Council of Labour Colleges and Ruskin College. During the war the T.U.C. considered the possibility of establishing a permanent residential Trade Union College under its own auspices, but this was rejected as too ambitious a project and instead it made two other provisions. A university course of one year's duration has been arranged for Trade Unionists at the London School of Economics, for which the T.U.C. and some Unions provide scholarships; and a series of training courses lasting four weeks have been organized on similar lines to the T.U.C.'s Summer Schools where tuition is undertaken by officers of the T.U.C. These are hopeful developments, but they do not go far enough.

## ITS PLACE IN PRESENT-DAY SOCIETY

"It may be said that British Trade Unionism has not reached its present position of importance as a consequence of the power of a definite and complete social ideal. It has grown empirically, it has toughened its fibre in practical struggles, it has gained social recognition by its mood of restraint, it has built its loyalty on the comradeship of branch life and a familiar and personal type of leadership. To look at externals, it appears lacking in system, in common consciousness, and in the possibility of consistent action. But there is a deeper current that must be noted: a current drawn from the depth of British life, which runs subtly and powerfully through the whole record of trade union development. The Trade Union Movement may have lacked a coherent set of principles but it has not lacked a sentiment of common purpose. It has generated loyalty, induced sacrifice, deepened its grip on the public life because it has dimly sought to be a 'sword of justice' . . . Justice in every aspect of the human relations of industry: this is the broadest way of stating the objects of Trade Unionism."

(J. I. Roper in *Trade Unionism and the New Social Order*—a W.E.A. Study Outline.)

It may seem strange to leave until now an examination of the aims of British Trade Unionism. There is a reason for this however. It would have been possible to begin by looking at the statement of objects which is contained in the constitution of every Trade Union, but the result would be rather confusing. They differ a great deal according to the conditions prevailing at the time when they were originally framed, and whilst they have common features, there would still remain the question whether their activities had in fact lived up to the expectations of their founders. With a living, changing, social institution of this kind its purpose can only be inferred from what it does, from the sum total of its activities, past and present, and the relationship between them.

### How is a Trade Union to be defined?

There is general agreement today that the classic definition of a Trade Union given by the Webbs in their *History of Trade Unionism* is too narrow. For them a Trade Union was "a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives". But Trade Unions now bring together other than wage-earners; they concern themselves with more than the working lives of their members; and their tasks are not confined only to maintaining and improving conditions of employment. Milne-Bailey suggested in his *Trade Unions and the State* that it would be more in keeping with the trends of the time to describe any body "having as its purpose the advancement of the

vocational interests of its members " as a Trade Union. " By their vocational interests," he explained, " is meant their interests as persons following a specific vocation, whether a trade or profession, as distinct from their interests as inhabitants of a particular locality, as believers in a particular religion . . . or as owners of land or capital." This definition is wide enough and at least indicates the permanent value of Trade Unionism in any social system. But it leaves entirely out of account the broader social purpose of British Trade Unionism. It would cover organizations like the British Medical Association and the National Farmers' Union. Admittedly they have in certain respects similar functions to Trade Unions, but they have never been considered as an integral part of the Trade Union Movement, and presumably because they are not animated by the same common purpose. The passage quoted at the head of this chapter makes a different approach to the problem by seeking to explain the implicit rather than explicit purpose which has unified the Trade Union Movement and given it its present strength. To many people, however, it will probably seem to represent a too idealistic view of what Trade Unionism stands for.

### **Protection and representation of the workers**

Perhaps the wisest course is not to attempt a compact definition, but rather to take note of the truth which lies in each of the above explanations of the purpose of British Trade Unionism.

The Webbs were mainly concerned with the protective functions of the Unions, which were undoubtedly the most prominent part of their activity throughout their history and remain of outstanding importance today. The State itself, partly as a consequence of Trade Union pressure, has increasingly provided protection for the weaker members of the community. But it has done so mainly by filling in the gaps left by voluntary effort. In the whole field of collective bargaining workpeople continue to depend upon their own organization to maintain or improve their wages and working conditions. Moreover, the growth of labour and economic legislation and of an organized and regulated system of industrial relations has greatly increased the work of the Trade Unions in protecting the established rights of their members against violation by the " bad " employer or the " bureaucrat ".

Milne-Bailey concentrates on the representative role of the Unions in modern society. This function includes Trade Union participation in the various bodies, from Joint Production Committees to the National Advisory Councils, which assist in the direction and planning of the nation's economic life. It has gained in importance with the development of what is often called " industrial democracy ". Our economic system is subject to sufficient planning and control to achieve recognized social objectives, but it avoids regimentation by associating those who are affected by policy with its formulation and



execution. Voluntary Trade Unions providing an organized expression of the interests of the workpeople are an indispensable part of that system.

### **Just another "vested interest"?**

These two aspects of present-day Trade Unionism, the protective and the representative, might be thought to cover the whole of its activities, but such an interpretation does not adequately explain the loyalties and sacrifices, the sense of common purpose, to which Roper refers. Trade Unionism has been and still is regarded as a "cause", at least by those who help most actively in its promotion. Devotion to a cause can hardly be the product of vocational interests or the promise of material advantage. There must surely be something broader and deeper in the aims of the British Trade Union that can be inferred from the definitions of the Webbs and Milne-Bailey. In fairness, however, let us quote a contrary view, as expressed recently by *The Economist* (January 3rd, 1948) in one of its editorials:

"... it would be . . . wrong for anybody any longer to entertain any notions about the trade unions being a force for progressive initiative in the nation. They are an incubus, an inertia. So far from representing in some special way the noblest instincts of mankind (as Labour mythology has so often inferred) they are in reality only the most securely entrenched of the vested interests."

Are the Trade Unions "a sword of justice", as Roper suggests, or "the most securely entrenched of the vested interests"?

The truth seems to lie between these two extremes. Undoubtedly the majority of workpeople join their Trade Union for the sake of the material advantages with which it can provide them. A far more lively interest is taken in Union activities when a wage claim is pending. There is nothing surprising or reprehensible about this. The desire for material betterment is common to all members of society and is most justified in the case of those whose share of the social product happens to be least. The question is whether the Trade Unions are not more than "interest" organizations in this narrow sense.

### **A strain of idealism**

It should first be recognized that other than materialistic motives may be responsible for demands for material betterment, when it is a matter of securing conditions of life which make it possible for the individual and his family to live with self-respect. Anyone familiar from practical experience with the reasons why men and women become active Trade Unionists, especially in adverse conditions, will know that considerations other than those of self-advantage play a part. Resentment against arbitrary or contemptuous treatment by the "boss" or his representatives is one of them. Why, it may be asked, do the workers prefer to rely upon their own efforts and their own organization to improve their conditions, why do they cold-

shoulder company unionism and look with dislike upon profit-sharing and management-sponsored welfare schemes? Behind all this there is a conception of what rightly belongs to human dignity. Where self-respect has not been crippled or destroyed by poverty or servitude, the individual will suffer much in the way of personal loss for the sake of asserting his claim to be treated as an equal. This is also an essential part of the spirit of British Trade Unionism. It explains *inter alia* the real strength of the demand for "workers' control". Self-respecting workers do not want to be looked upon as "hands" or as "labour", but as fellow citizens who happen to be doing another kind of job to directors and managers and whose views on the organization of their workshop or industry should be taken seriously into account.

The British Trade Unions, as a movement, embody all the common aspirations of an underprivileged class in society. That is why it is so difficult to define their purpose or fix the frontiers of their action once and for all. Materialistic and idealistic motives are mingled in the spirit which provides the driving force for their development. The former may lead to sectional policies, which give the impression that the Unions represent only one other "vested interest"; but the latter explain, not only the solidarity of the Trade Union Movement itself, but equally its feeling of social responsibility.

### **Need of a change in outlook**

This general analysis of the motive forces of British Trade Unionism may seem rather abstract, but it has a practical significance when we come to consider whether and in what way the Unions can adapt their traditional practices and outlook to suit the economic conditions in which they operate today. Three fundamental and closely related changes have been or are being brought about in the British social structure, namely: the maintenance of full employment; the development of economic planning; and the widening of the public sector of industry. All of these changes have been welcomed by the Trade Union Movement, which has, in fact, by its political action helped to bring them about. Their joint effect, however, demands from the Trade Unions a radically different approach to industry and society.

### **Implications of full employment**

Let us begin with the effect of full employment on the process of collective bargaining. The fact that the employers are seeking workers more than the workers are seeking a job so strengthens the bargaining power of the Trade Unions that they are in a position continually to force up money wages. Instead of having to contend with strong opposition from the employers, they can count to some extent upon their support. This is the case, not only because of the employers' desire to attract labour, but also because increased wages

usually mean that prices are increased in the same proportion and thus profits as well. Although a wage increase always provides a temporary advantage for those who receive it, similar claims on the part of other workers are aroused, and the net result of this competitive process of sectional bargaining is only to decrease the value of money, since there are no additional labour reserves which can be employed to expand the total product. The real value of wages remains substantially the same, but those in receipt of fixed incomes suffer, particularly the poorest of them. The more equal distribution of income is a desirable end, but it cannot be brought about appreciably by means of collective bargaining; it depends far more upon price controls, taxation, socialization and the widening of educational and social opportunities. Thus whilst full employment greatly assists the Trade Unions in exercising their protective functions, if they employ their increased power to press upwards the general wage level beyond the material limits set by actual production, the result is the well-known inflationary spiral, and they defeat their own object.

The other revolutionary consequence which full employment produces on the labour market is an upheaval in the whole structure of wage relationships. The undermanned industries of today are those where, in the past, wages have been most depressed but conditions of work most unpleasant. It was only the fear of unemployment which kept these industries fully manned. Now that there are plenty of attractive alternative jobs, workers are naturally less willing to go down the mines, or into the brickworks or cotton mills. In conditions of full employment and in the absence of compulsory direction of labour, the least attractive work has to receive the greatest remuneration. This is a case where economic necessity and social justice go hand in hand. The necessary process of adjustment is difficult enough, but if it is obstructed by a determination on the part of Trade Unions to cling to previous wage differentials, the only result is to compel the Government to intervene more and more in wage determination and to employ coercive measures to secure the necessary redistribution of labour.

#### **The question of a wages policy**

There is no likelihood of the system of collective bargaining being abandoned in this country; its merits have already been explained and are recognized on all sides. But it is no longer possible to maintain that the outcome of such bargaining only concerns the Trade Unions and the employers who are party to it. Granted that the workers who receive the wages and the employers who pay them have the most immediate interest in the outcome of wage negotiations, nevertheless the public interest, which includes the interests of other sections of the working population, is also deeply involved. Only the Government can state what are the public requirements in regard to the general movement of wages, and it is clearly obliged to do so.

The responsibility of the Government in these matters, which have previously been regarded as the exclusive concern of Trade Unions and employers, is underlined by the nationalization of the basic industries. It is true that the form of organization chosen for these industries is designed to avoid their administration being subject to political interference. The Government does, however, accept a broad responsibility for the way in which they are conducted and has power to issue directives to the administrative boards in matters which appear to affect the national interest. It hardly seems possible that the larger aspects of wage and price policy in these industries can be excluded.

If full employment and public ownership combine in requiring from the Government a statement of its wages policy, the question remains how this policy can secure widespread acceptance in wage settlements without the voluntary system being weakened. A great deal must necessarily depend upon the good sense shown by both sides of industry, and their concern for public interests. A greater willingness to accept arbitration as a means of settling wage conflicts and to provide for such arbitration in collective agreements would seem to be required.

### **Importance of Joint Production Committees**

Full employment, economic planning and public ownership have also enormously widened the range of responsibilities accepted by the Trade Unions in regard to the control and conduct of industrial life. In the publicly-owned industries they are rightly associated at every level with their administration, and even though this may be in a consultative capacity, the influence which they can have on the efficient working of the industries is considerable. Similarly, in the extension of economic planning through such agencies as the Industrial Development Councils, the Trade Unions as the representatives of the workpeople employed have undertaken to make an important contribution to industrial reorganization. One of the effects of full employment is to destroy the previous system of industrial discipline, in which unemployment provided the big stick to maintain the traditional authority of "master over man". It is a kind of authority we should all be glad to see gone. But in its place something else is required to encourage efficient and conscientious work in the factory. Good management, but also responsible Trade Union co-operation, are required for this purpose. This is the reason why so much importance has to be attached to the successful working of the Joint Production Committees.

### **A severe test for British Trade Unionism**

In public and in private industry, from the national down to the factory level, the Trade Unions are involved not only in assisting in the economic recovery of the country, but what will ultimately be of

far greater importance, in making a success of the social experiment in which it is engaged. It is not full employment, economic planning and public ownership alone which characterize this experiment, but full employment in a free society, economic planning through the agency of voluntary institutions, and public ownership combined with industrial efficiency. There are always these two sides of the picture to be borne in mind. In a dual sense the Trade Unions occupy a key position in this social revolution. They are vitally interested in its success on the one hand, because they are both custodians of the basic liberties of the workers and protagonists of a regulated economic system; if they are true to their objectives, they cannot take either the road to serfdom or the way leading back to economic crisis and mass unemployment. On the other hand the power is theirs to determine which course the nation eventually takes.

Never has British Trade Unionism faced so severe a test. All that it has striven to achieve is now in the balance, but so equally is the fate of the British nation and its influence in the world as a practical example that the ideals of Liberty and Equality can be reconciled in human society. Can it rise to the height of its responsibilities? Can it break with those traditional ways of going about its business which are now an obstacle to its progress? Can it undertake the large-scale adjustments in practice and outlook which are required, if it is to equip itself to achieve its purposes in the new social order? These are the questions which it is mainly for Trade Unionists to answer in thought and deed. But it may be helpful to direct attention to the main internal problems which as a result now confront the Trade Union Movement.

#### **Internal problems to be solved**

There is, firstly, the need for an intensification of its own educational work. This need could not be better described than in the words of the report of the T.U.C.'s Trade Union Education Enquiry Committee in 1921:

“The progress of working class organizations and outlook foreshadows the approach of fundamental changes in our social and industrial relations and gives education a new meaning to trade unionism. It is therefore becoming more urgent that, so far as possible, trade unionists, but more especially those holding positions of responsibility in executive, district, and branch organizations, should be men and women having a wide range of knowledge germane to economic and political problems, and such trained capacity as will enable them not only to understand the immediate results of decisions and actions but also to foresee possible ultimate results.”

The truth and relevance of this statement has gained in emphasis with every year which has passed since it was made, but, as we have seen, the educational activities of the British Trade Unions have advanced but slowly and remain wholly inadequate today.

Secondly, there are the organizational aspects of the process of readjustment. Only a central body, and one primarily devoted to

that purpose, can do justice to the common economic interests of the workers in a co-ordinated wages policy, in price regulation and taxation, and in the whole gamut of inter-related industrial and economic questions which affect them in a controlled economy. It alone can develop on an adequate scale the facilities in education, research and publicity which the movement now desperately requires. All these developments are gravely hampered by the inadequate powers of the T.U.C. What is needed is the application of the federal principle to the whole of the Trade Union world.

Thirdly, the part which Trade Unionism plays in present-day society inevitably depends on the leadership which it receives. Unless the spirit of idealism which still resides within it is summoned and strengthened by a bold conception of what is now at stake, it will be swamped by the predominance of sectional, short-sighted attitudes which are rooted in a narrow materialism. British Trade Unionism has only gained its present stature because at every turning-point in its history men and women came forward who were not content to tread the well-worn paths, but, believing in the social mission of their movement, pointed the way to new and greater achievements.

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#### FOR FURTHER READING

Barou, N.	<i>British Trade Unions</i>	Gollancz	1947	7/6
Cole, G. D. H. (ed.)	<i>British Trade Unionism Today</i>	Gollancz	1939	7/6
Hedges and Winterbottom	<i>The Legal History of Trade Unionism</i>	Longmans Green	1930	*
Milne-Bailey, W.	<i>Trade Union Documents</i>	Bell	1929	8/6
.. ..	<i>Trade Unions and the State</i>	Allen and Unwin	1934	12/6
Price, J.	<i>Organised Labour in the War</i>	Penguin	1940	1/-
Webb, S. & B.	<i>History of Trade Unionism</i>	Longmans Green	1920	*
.. ..	<i>Industrial Democracy</i>	.. ..	1920	*
.. ..	<i>Industrial Relations Handbook</i>	H.M.S.O.	1944	3/6

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#### PREVIOUS TITLES IN THIS SERIES.

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## SUGGESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

If it is true that discussion is generally at its liveliest when the participants are in disagreement, most groups will find in British Trade Unionism ample material for a series of interesting sessions. Many highly controversial issues are raised in this Handbook, and it would be impossible in six or even twelve hours of discussion to do justice to them all. The group leader must therefore begin by deciding which aspects of the subject are to be studied and which ignored; in this he will be largely influenced by the composition of his group.

Where all those present are holders of a Union card, much attention is likely to be paid to the internal problems of Trade Union organization which are discussed in the second chapter of this Handbook (pages 18-32). Most of the ground will already be familiar to members of the group, and they will have direct personal interest in such questions as Union democracy (pages 24-27), the relationship between the active membership and permanent officials (pages 25-26), the deficiencies of workshop organization (pages 27-29), the role of the shop stewards (pages 28-29), and the problem of whether or not Union membership should be made compulsory (pages 30-32). Here are a number of issues each meriting a session to itself, and the group leader who is himself a Trade Unionist will find little difficulty in planning a series of discussions round the central theme of Trade Union organization.

On the other hand there will be some groups whose membership is drawn entirely from outside the Trade Union Movement. They will probably be interested less in the internal structure of the Trade Unions than in the attitudes of Trade Unionists towards some of the issues arising out of the economic crisis. To what extent, for instance, are they prepared to abandon the restrictive practices with which they have helped to safeguard their position in the past (pages 44-46)? Why are Trade Unionists so reluctant to accept the principle of a national wages policy involving a radical change in existing wage relationships (pages 58-59)? What is the explanation of the unofficial strikes which have occurred so frequently since the end of the war (pages 41-43)? It is easy enough for those outside the Movement to criticize the Trade Unionist's attitude to problems such as these; it is very much more difficult to understand the reasons for this attitude. No discussion group composed of non-Unionists should therefore attempt to consider the part to be played by the Trade Unionists in the economic crisis without first devoting some time to a study of the history and traditions of the Movement (pages 3-17).

There remains the possibility that the group will be a mixed one, composed in part of Trade Unionists and in part of persons outside the ranks of organized labour, and there can be no doubt that for discussion purposes this is the most satisfactory arrangement. For it is only through the continual exchange of ideas and experiences that each can really learn to appreciate the other's point of view. A good subject for a mixed group of this kind would be the place of Trade Unionism in present-day society (pages 54-61), and the following is suggested as a possible synopsis for a series of six discussions on this theme:

**1. *What is the Purpose of a Trade Union?***

Various definitions that have been suggested (pages 54-55). Why do workers join a Union? (page 56). Protective functions and collective bargaining (pages 33-34). A "sword of justice" or "the most securely entrenched of the vested interests"? (pages 56-57).

**2. *Traditions of the Trade Union Movement***

The long struggle for recognition (pages 5-8 and 16). Independence (pages 16-17): is there any sign of this disappearing today? Unity: a marked contrast to Trade Unionism on the Continent and in the U.S.A. (page 17). Social responsibility, though some critics would deny this (page 17). Can the group offer any other suggestions?

**3. *Trade Unions and the Production Drive***

In what ways has Britain's economic position changed since before the war? (pages 57-59). Many Trade Union practices grew up in conditions of mass unemployment: can they and ought they to be altered to meet the needs of full employment? (pages 44-46 and 57-59). Various kinds of restrictive practices (pages 44-46): is their retention justified? What about Joint Production Committees? Should they be made compulsory? (pages 45-46). Management's responsibility for establishing mutual confidence and goodwill, without which no joint production machinery can function effectively (page 46).

**4. *Trade Unions and a National Wages Policy***

Statement of the problem: the dangers of a steadily rising wage level and the need for a readjustment of traditional wage relationships (pages 58-59). See also the Government's recent "Statement on Personal Incomes, Costs and Prices," Cmd.7321). Should the Trade Unions give up their established methods of collective bargaining? Can they, without abandoning the voluntary system, assist the Government to promote a national wages policy? (pages 58-59).

**5. *The Control of Industry***

The syndicalist approach (pages 10-11): is the idea of "workers' control" a practicable one? Pre-war statements of Trade Union policy: attitude to nationalization (pages 43-47). Support for Development Councils (page 48). Do Trade Unionists give sufficient thought to the interests of the consumer? What part should organized labour play in the running of nationalized industries? (pages 46-47). Dangers of over-centralization.

**6. *Trade Unions and Politics***

What are the political aims of the Trade Union Movement? Relations between the Trade Unions and the Labour Party: how close is the co-operation between them? (pages 48-51). Does the "block vote" enable the Trade Unions to dictate the policy of the Party? (page 49). The political levy and the Trades Disputes Act (pages 50-51): should members have to "contract in" or "contract out"?



## WHAT IS THE BUREAU OF CURRENT AFFAIRS?

The Bureau of Current Affairs is an independent, non-profit-making organization sponsored by the Carnegie U.K. Trust. Its object is to help to create an alert and informed public opinion and to provide for a wider public those aids to group discussion which A.B.C.A. produced during the war for the men and women in the Services — pamphlets on current affairs, visual aids, information services, and short training courses for discussion group leaders. The management of the Bureau's affairs is in the hands of a Council under the Chairmanship of W. O. Lester Smith, C.B.E., Director of Education for the City of Manchester. The Director of the Bureau is W. E. Williams, C.B.E., who created A.B.C.A. in 1941.

### B. C. A. PUBLICATIONS

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Each of these fortnightly pamphlets of 16 to 20 pages is devoted to a popular exposition by an accepted authority of some subject that is "in the air". The pamphlets are illustrated with line-drawings, maps and charts. Recent subjects include The Marshall Plan, Italy, Czechoslovakia, Britain's Steel Industry, Theatre, Adult Education, and Officials and the Public.

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Uniform with this pamphlet (for details of previous titles see page 63). The series is designed to meet the needs of discussion groups who seek background information on current affairs and who wish for a rather more detailed and systematic treatment than is possible in a fortnightly pamphlet.

### PICTORIAL EXHIBITIONS

The Bureau has available for hire or purchase eight Photographic Exhibitions, each consisting of about 20 coloured panels (15" x 12" to 18" x 14") mounted on stiff card ready for wall display. In addition a series of exhibitions is being produced on paper, for sale from 8/6 to 12/6 per set of 5 to 8 sheets.

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