

BRITISH TRADE UNIONS

JOHN PRICE



British Life and Thought

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As Mr. Ernest Bevin says in his foreword to this book, "Trade Unions must be concerned firstly with wages, hours and conditions of employment. But also they must be ready at all times to meet new tasks with new vision".

At the present time, these new tasks include the adaption of old ideals to war-time needs, questions of recruitment and training, and the planning of the post-war world, with its fresh economic and social problems.

As a leading member of the Transport & General Workers' Union, and the Secretary of its Political & Research Department, Mr. John Price has first-hand knowledge of his subject. Here, he describes with understanding the development of British Trade Unions; he then discusses their contribution to the disciplined and orderly settlement of industrial relations; and finally he speaks of progress in social conditions.

"Like the old pioneers of trade-unionism, the British trade unionists of today are inspired by the hope of a better world. It is for the new world of tomorrow that they are fighting now, as they fought in the past."

BRITISH TRADE UNIONS

British Life and Thought : No. 12

BRITISH LIFE AND THOUGHT

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Daily Herald

May Day Procession, Thames Embankment, London

BRITISH TRADE UNIONS

BY

JOHN PRICE

SECRETARY POLITICAL & RESEARCH DEPARTMENT
TRANSPORT & GENERAL WORKERS' UNION

With a Foreword by
THE RT. HON. ERNEST BEVIN, M.P.
Minister of Labour & National Service

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FOREWORD

By the RT. HON. ERNEST BEVIN, M.P.

Minister of Labour and National Service

IN Great Britain, as in Germany and Italy before Fascism came into power, Trade Unions have stood for the independent and free organisation of the working people. It is significant that they should have been one of the first institutions to be destroyed by Hitler and by Mussolini. On the other hand, in China where policy is guided by a philosophy of freedom and tolerance, industrial workers are urged to join Trade Unions and Trade Union organisation is otherwise encouraged.

In their origins British Trade Unions were a means of giving expression to the rights of men to an effective voice in deciding the conditions under which they give their labour. As this booklet shows, their progress over a hundred and fifty years has been an upward struggle. But whatever the conditions created by the broad stream of social and economic change, the guiding inspiration and objective throughout has been nothing less than the liberty of the ordinary man and the right relationship between fellow men. Many of the things for which the early Trade Unionists fought have long since been embodied in the vast body of social and industrial legislation in Great Britain. As obstacles are removed or overcome, the horizon becomes wider, and just as Trade Union organisation itself has developed from a local to a national and to an international basis, so the objectives have become more comprehensive or have taken on a deeper significance. Trade Unions must be concerned firstly with matters affecting wages, hours and conditions of employment, provision for industrial risks and generally the regulation of relations between worker and employer. But they could not truly fulfil their real function of representing the organised workers if they were concerned only with narrow sectional interests and ignored the wider interests and inspirations of those they serve. They must be ready at all times to meet new tasks with new vision and to preserve and create as well as making demands.

This readiness to meet new problems has been most fully demonstrated by the actions of British Trade Unions during the war. The present war is essentially a struggle between the philosophy and outlook on which Trade Unionism is based and the negation of all that it stands for.

In Great Britain, as in other democratic countries, whatever regulations may be made by the State, their enforcement must rest in the last resort

British Trade Unions

upon willing acceptance by those whose actions are to be governed by them. The State relies to a large extent on the self-government and self-discipline of workers acting as organised corporate bodies through their unions. Without the good faith, sense of responsibility and discipline of the Trade Unions relations in industry would be chaotic in time of peace and disastrous in time of war. The immediate needs of war production have called for the temporary relinquishment in the national interests of many safeguards and privileges which have been won only by bitter struggle in the past. At the same time new methods have been adopted for avoiding some of the waste of competitive industrialism which could not be tolerated when a country's life is at stake.

Some of these innovations and changes made during the war may prove to be positive gains when the time comes for post-war readjustment. The universal recognition of the need of total effort in total war has caused the problems of the direction of industry to be seen in a new light, and the distinctions between operative and managerial interests are shown to be less fundamental than the community of their interests.

British Trade Unions are already looking ahead to the post-war world. In co-operation with managements they are, for example, studying questions of recruitment and training for industry. They are actively concerned with the steps taken by the International Labour Office to study economic and social problems affecting all countries when peace comes.

Whatever the future may hold, the working people form a vast reservoir of power and ideas, and trade unions provide a channel through which these forces can find expression. The movement produces its own leaders. The great range of Trade Union activities and the great responsibility carried by those men and women who speak on behalf of the workers in the industries they represent show that leadership calls in an exceptional degree not merely for ability to organise and negotiate, but also for high qualities of personal character, courage and vision.

In this booklet John Price has described with admirable understanding the development of British Trade Unions and their contribution towards the disciplined and orderly settlement of industrial relations and to progress in social conditions. He has shown too the capacity of the movement for evolution and adaptation. He writes with knowledge derived from practical experience as well as close study, and I commend his work to all who hope to see the principles of the Atlantic Charter established throughout the world.

ERNEST BEVIN

CONTENTS

FOREWORD	7
1. THE NEED FOR TRADE UNIONS	11
2. THE STORY OF THE TRADE UNIONS	14
3. GETTING TOGETHER	18
4. TRADE UNION FUNCTIONS	22
5. THE TRADE UNIONS IN THE COMMUNITY	27
6. THE TRADE UNIONS AT WORK	31
7. TRADE UNION AIMS	36
8. THE TRADE UNIONS IN THE WAR	41

ILLUSTRATIONS

MAY DAY PROCESSION	<i>Frontispiece</i>
JOSEPH ARCH	12
HENRY BROADHURST	12
ROBERT APPLEGARTH	12
KEIR HARDIE	12
THE RT. HON. C. W. BOWERMAN	13
WILL THORNE, M.P.	13
ROBERT SMILLIE	13
BEN TILLET	13
THE RT. HON. ERNEST BEVIN, M.P.	16
JOSEPH HALLSWORTH	16
GEORGE GIBSON	16
THE RT. HON. SIR WALTER CITRINE	16
T.U.C. SUMMER SCHOOL	17
CONFERENCE OF TRADE UNION EXECUTIVE COMMITTEES	17
TRADES UNION CONGRESS, EDINBURGH	32
TRANSPORT & GENERAL WORKERS' DELEGATION, T.U.C.	32
NATSOPA MEMORIAL HOMES	33
AMALGAMATED WEAVERS' ASSOCIATION CONVALESCENT HOME	33
TRANSPORT & GENERAL WORKERS' CONVALESCENT HOME	33
PRINTING, BOOKBINDING & PAPER WORKERS' CONVALESCENT HOME	33

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