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*Trade Union History*¹

By E. J. HOBSBAWM

IN the history of British trade unionism the late 1880's mark the start of a unique and unprecedented transformation which came to a provisional end in the middle 1920's, though the movement as we know it today is still very obviously marked by it. In numerical terms it raised trade unionism to something like its present order of magnitude. The expansion of 1889-91 doubled its numbers from something like three-quarters of a million, the expansion of 1911-14 doubled it again from about 2 to about 4 million, and even during the worst part of the inter-war recession it never again fell below this figure. The expansion at the end of the First World War brought it to about 8 million, half of whom dropped away by the early 'thirties. Nevertheless, in absolute terms this represents not far short of the post-1945 strength of the movement and in relative terms (allowing for the increase in the occupied labour force) something like its modern maximum strength.

Occupationally these expansions greatly increased the weight within the movement of the miners and transport workers, and would have increased that of the machine-building and analogous industries if the unions in these occupations had seized their opportunities better: their relative rise occurred during and after the First World War. Structurally they created, at least in theory, new types of unions (the "general" and "industrial"), though in practice these were less distinct from each other and from the old "craft" and other organizations than they were on paper. More to the point, they widened both the field of union organization and action, of strategy, tactics, and inter-union co-ordination. Before this period, for instance, we encounter nothing that can be realistically called a national strike or lock-out. Ideologically and politically the union expansions after 1889 marked a sharp turn to the left, the creation of a new cadre of leaders and policy-makers—mostly inspired by various versions of socialism—and the association of the movement with an independent working-class political party and, after 1918, a socialist programme.

Much about these transformations is obscure, if only because the period of transition has rarely been seen as a whole: we even lack a single name for it, though individual episodes have traditional labels such as the "new unionism" (1889), "labour unrest" (1911), and the like. Though contemporaries were not in doubt about the novelty of the new unionism, several modern students have taken the difficulty of defining what that novelty consisted in, and the ease with which a few traditionally oversimplified formulae and dates can be attacked, as an excuse for doubting, or at least for qualifying it. The problem is indeed baffling, and the founding fathers of trade union historiography did little to illuminate it. The Webbs wrote their *The History of Trade Unionism and Industrial*

¹ A review of H. A. Clegg, Alan Fox, and A. F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889*. Vol. 1, 1889-1910 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964. Pp. ix + 514. 55s.).

Democracy at a time when the first wave of the “new unionism” was receding rapidly and consequently, if paradoxically, paid relatively scant attention to it.¹ The value of Clegg, Fox, and Thompson’s *History of British Trade Unions since 1889* of which the first volume (1889–1910) has been published, lies in the attempt systematically to bring the Webbs up-to-date, both chronologically and analytically. The authors are lucky to write at a time when the history of British trade unionism flourishes as never before.² The days when the subject was treated in broad general outline narrative or by retired trade union functionaries and sympathetic publicists only, are fortunately gone for good. Nevertheless, the gaps are still so great that no general synthesis can rely for more than a limited part of the field on published research. To an extent which may surprise the non-specialists, Clegg’s team, like the Webbs before them, have been obliged to do the primary work themselves. The scholarly value of their book is enhanced by this, though not its readability. Nevertheless, the first thing that must be said about it is that it makes a major and permanent addition to our knowledge. It is indispensable.

The authors are perhaps less happy in the preconceptions with which they approach the history of the unions than in their scholarship. The Webbs’ own attitude was clear. Their *History* was a manifesto of Fabianism. They wanted the unions to participate in the socialist transformation of the economy, but recognized that this was not their specific purpose. Nevertheless, even the modest object of maintaining and improving the conditions of workers’ employment could not, except occasionally, be achieved by non-political trade unionism, still less by those converted, like the leadership of the TUC in the 1870’s and 1880’s, to “middle class views”. The “new intellectual ferment within the trade union world”, aroused by “an industrial contraction of exceptional character” in the 1880’s and reflected in the spread of socialist ideas, was equally important to socialists and to trade unionists. It led to a temporary “recrudescence of a revolutionary utopianism” followed by a “gradual schooling of the impracticable elements into a sobered and somewhat bureaucratic Collectivism”, which they welcomed.³ This interpretation is open to many objections. It neglects the structural changes within British industry, the novel features of the British economy and the puzzling problem, never yet satisfactorily solved, of why trade union expansions tend to take the form of periodic and sudden “explosions” such as those of 1889 and 1911–13. However, cautious and even supine though the Webbs’ attitude seemed to the left in the 1890’s, it was distinctly more radical than the conventional wisdom of mid-twentieth-century “industrial relations”.

Clegg’s team makes the first and last of these criticisms, though not the second. It belongs to a recently fashionable school which blames the Webbs for the excessive radicalism of their views, or their excessive readiness to concentrate

¹ The first edition of the *History* was in 1894. Later editions were published when the authors had lost that close contact with the movement which they had in the early 1890’s and add nothing of great value to the knowledge of subsequent developments.

² The most convenient bibliography is in H. Pelling, *A History of British Trade Unionism* (Penguin Books, 1963). The *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History* publishes a full current bibliography and nos. 1 and 3 contain a list of publications for 1945–60. No. 8 (Spring 1964) contains a critical survey of the literature by E. J. Hobsbawm.

³ *History* (1894 edition), pp. 360–1.

on the political dimension of unionism rather than on simple collective bargaining; a view which would have surprised the original readers of the *History*.¹ The present authors do not indeed go so far as B. C. Roberts in their defence of the “old” TUC of the 1880’s against its detractors; no doubt because they are both more sophisticated and better historians.² Their argument is rather that effective trade union policy had nothing to do with ideological views or the formal organizational structures purporting to reflect them, but consisted essentially in the realistic calculation of tactical possibilities and bargaining strength (or other forms of pressure) within a fixed framework of industrial relations. The “old” Liberal trade unionists sacrificed nothing of substance as collective bargainers to their Gladstonian ideology and made about as good terms as were practicable in the 1880’s, and certainly no worse ones than the “new” unionists were to make. This argument implies that it was right for the “old” unionists to regard a great many other things not only as equal but as unchangeable; in other words, to accept the limits set upon their activity both by management and the conventional contemporary assumptions of the business economists. The Clegg team have obvious sympathy for the TUC leaders’ opposition to the legal eight-hour day in the 1880’s, which was the most popular slogan of the left. Would work-spreading by such means have avoided heavy unemployment in bad years? Would it not rather have risked high earnings in good ones? Might it not, as the leaders of the North-eastern miners argued, lead to a loss of markets and embitter relations with the owners? Would not statutory regulation undermine craft control of the job situation?³ Clearly such arguments would carry weight among “sensible” officials in the 1880’s. But they have only to be restated in the 1960’s for modern readers to judge how small that weight should actually have been.

It is hard to escape the impression that the pragmatism of Clegg and his colleagues reflects not simply a readiness to “face facts”, but an *a priori* preference for a particular kind of industrial relations. Time and again the authors stress the social consensus which they believe to underlie the trade union movement rather than the conflict which is its professed business, the absence of resistance by employers and State, the error of supposing the movement to have wrested its rights from “a class implacably opposed to trade unionism”.⁴ Time and again they prefer to direct their attention to the “social conscience”—an overworked and under-analysed concept—to public sympathy or political goodwill.⁵ Such bias is not without its value. It sharpens the scholar’s eye for facts readily neglected by the historical class-warriors; for instance, for the fact that the Taff Vale judgment

¹ “They help to prepare the reader for the great political developments of the next twenty years . . . But they entirely fail to prepare the reader for the equally important developments in collective bargaining.” H. Clegg, ‘The Webbs as Historians of Trade Unionism’, *Bull. Soc. Stud. Lab. Hist.* 4 (1962), p. 9.

² “The very things which made the TUC a success were what they despised most: its loose method of organization; its lack of central control, and its adoption of *ad hoc* policies to meet situations as they arose, instead of a clear-cut plan of campaign to achieve the kind of society they held to be desirable.” B. C. Roberts, *The Trades Union Congress, 1868–1921* (1958), p. 360.

³ Clegg, Fox, and Thompson, *op. cit.* pp. 53–4.

⁴ Cf. pp. 46–7. The view of trade union development in the first half of the nineteenth century which this produces is rather odd, though casuistry might argue that it is not quite what the text suggests at a first cursory reading.

⁵ Cf. pp. 90, 175, 247.

(which was not, to begin with, wholeheartedly opposed by all unions) did not lead to a systematic attack on trade unionism and did not apparently deter strikes much; that the employers' counter-attack of the 1890's was by no means universal, and indeed more generally, that at no time between 1889 and 1910 was there a serious attempt to eliminate trade unionism as such. Some of the best pages of Clegg's team are those devoted to these demonstrations.¹ Yet the incidental advantages cannot offset a general failure to appreciate the historically decisive characteristics of the period. By all means, let historians of the movement do justice to the merits of men like Richard Bell and David Shackleton as labour statesmen. Yet, once again, the mere mention of these names illustrates the limits of the outlook which singles them out. For the movement as we know it today, and whose foundations were laid in the period after 1889, owes nothing of significance to them. Tom Mann (whose index entry is distinctly shorter than either of theirs) was with all his weaknesses a much more significant figure for the future.

On the whole, therefore, the authors' bias does not make it easy for them to study a period of trade union history in which a new (socialist) ideology was so evidently relevant to union practice that it attracted a quite extraordinary number and proportion of union activists, as can readily be judged by comparing the number of socialists among leading union functionaries by 1900 with the derisory numbers of organized socialists: say 3,000 in 1889, 10,000 in 1894, 11,000 in 1899.² They founded, inspired, or rapidly took over all but perhaps one of the "general" unions of 1889.³ They became powerful in several important older unions, and even penetrated into coal and cotton; and, but for the slow rate of turnover among the old Lib-Lab functionaries, would have progressed even more rapidly.⁴ The authors do not actually deny this; but they are evidently reluctant to allow the socialists the traditional credit for their part in the union transformation, except for the invention and propagation of a "mythical" antithesis between the "new" and the "old", and an equally mythical "ideal type" of the "new" unionism.⁵

Hence they are incompletely aware of the problems raised by these remarkable socialist successes. For the attraction of the union activists to socialism is a little surprising, given the striking lack of enthusiasm about unions, and the absence of interest in their organizational, strategic, and tactical problems of all socialist groups until the rise of the industrial syndicalists and the small De Leonite Socialist Labour Party in the Edwardian era.⁶ What did they find in socialism that helped them in their union activity?⁷ No doubt sociologically the early

¹ Cf. Chapter 8 on Taff Vale and its consequences.

² For estimates of membership, H. Pelling, *The Origins of the Labour Party* (1965 edn.), Appendix A.

³ Clegg, Fox, and Thompson, op. cit. pp. 90-1 and 95, suggests a more modest picture, but among the unions mentioned as not founded by the left, or receiving "little or no initial help" from it, the N.U. of Dock Labourers, was founded by two Henry Georgeites and soon taken over by an ILPman (p. 56), the (Tyneside) Nations Labour Federation "owed something to socialist inspiration"—the Fabian Edward Pease was its general secretary (p. 65), the National Amalgamated Union of Labour was taken over by "the union's foremost exponent of socialism" in 1892 and became a reliable support of the political left.

⁴ Ibid. pp. 294-304. ⁵ Ibid. pp. 90-1, 96.

⁶ This may help to account for the instability of the political allegiances of Tom Mann, perhaps of all "new" unionists the one who thought most instinctively in industrial terms.

⁷ The authors' only observation on the subject is not illuminating: "The type of man who was likely to come forward in 1889 was likely, particularly in London, to have come under socialist influence" (p. 91).

socialist groups functioned as schools of leadership, and as foci of potential cadres of the labour movement. But other bodies expressing the self-assertion of the workers might also have done so, and religious (Liberal-Radical) sects had done so among miners and farm-labourers.

The point, it may be suggested, was that socialism rejected the current economic orthodoxy flatly, and in doing so provided an analysis which was more realistic, and more adequate to the new tendencies in industrial structure, than the commonplaces of economic liberalism. Two examples may be quoted. The Marxian argument that increasing mechanization reduced the skilled to the ranks of the unskilled quite evidently struck a spark of recognition in the minds of young engineers in a period such as the 1880's and 1890's. As John Burns argued: "The difference between [old and new unionists]. . . is entirely due to the fact that the 'new' see that labour-saving machinery is reducing the previously skilled to the level of unskilled labour, and they must in their own interests, be less exclusive than hitherto."¹ Again, the theory of capitalist concentration (a world "as yet unexplored" by the economists, as the Webbs observed)² taught unionists to seek for concentration and integration in their turn: "Advocates of industrial unionism always point out that against the mass formation of Capitalism, a mass formation of Labour is needed, that Craft unionism has not the strength to combat the vast aggregations of Capital."³ "Thus will the Labour and Socialist movement. . . keep pace with the constant efforts of the capitalists to get a wider and deeper grip of everything," as Tom Mann put it, with his habitual capacity for translating theory into workshop language.⁴ Such theories made sense at a time when the scale of collective bargaining was evidently increasing, and when employers' organizations were launching national offensives. Even an "old" unionist like Chandler of the Carpenters hoped that the movement "shall then be prepared to meet [the attack] in one solid phalanx, instead of our strength being frittered away in sectional attempts to deal with an organized body of capitalists".⁵

In rejecting the current economic orthodoxy and the union tactics based on it, in combating sectionalism and concentrating on the largest geographical national and social units of action—class and nation, or even world—socialism became, without particularly trying to, a potential programme of modernization for trade unions. The value of this programme cannot be judged by the specific innovations actually proposed by the socialists in union organization—the "general" and later the "industrial" union, for as Clegg's team are not the first to show, these were either impracticable or rapidly modified in practice. It must be judged by the general stimulus which it gave to all union activities and reforms, and which in 1920 turned the TUC into the body we know today and built or transformed its major unions.⁶ The intellectual hegemony which the left estab-

¹ *A Speech by John Burns on the Liverpool Congress* (London, 1890), p. 6.

² *Industrial Democracy* (1902 edn.), p. 688.

³ G. D. H. Cole quoted in W. Milne-Bailey, *Trade Union Documents* (1929), p. 124.

⁴ *The International Labour Movement* (London-Manchester-Glasgow, 1897), p. 13.

⁵ Quoted in S. Higenbottom, *Our Society's History* (1939), p. 117.

⁶ Of the "Big Six" who have included over half of total TUC membership since the last war, the two great "general unions" (Transport and General, General and Municipal) descend from the main socialist initiatives of 1889, the N.U. Railwaymen is the creation of the left-wing reformers of 1911-14, the Engineers were given their modern form and scope by the left in 1921, and the Shop, Distributive and

lished was the consequence of its usefulness. It is perhaps worth observing that, with all the defects and loose ends of its analysis, the socialists were at this period more in tune with what we know to be the main tendencies of twentieth-century industrial development than the economic theories of either employers or state, and the labour movement remained in advance of both until the late 1920's, when official conventional wisdom began to catch up, and the trade unions' modernizing drive was exhausted with the defeat of the great post-war radical surge.¹

Yet the paradox—perhaps the tragedy—of the trade union movement was that the systematic adaptation of the movement to twentieth-century technology, business structure, and industrial organization which the “new unionism” recommended, did not achieve its object. What it did achieve was often only the effective organization of workers in established occupations and regions of nineteenth-century British industry who had hitherto been weakly organized, or not easily or at all organizable. In doing so it made the trade union movement rather more representative of nineteenth-century industrial Britain—e.g. by extending it to hitherto weakly held or inactive regions like Scotland and Wales, or to hitherto grossly under-organized industries like transport²—but it failed, in spite of the efforts of bodies like the 1889 general unions and Tom Mann's *Workers' Union*, to make it notably more representative of twentieth-century industrial structure. Indeed, it reinforced the traditional character of the movement by partially reforming it, and to this extent its potential weakness, not to mention its resistance to further rationalization.³ Nevertheless, in so far as it was capable of adjusting itself to the twentieth-century economy, the British trade union movement owed its adaptability to the innovating impetus which began in the late 1880's.

Clegg, Fox, and Thompson provide a great deal of material for the study of these problems, though they are notably weak on what one might call the mental world of the trade unionists and “the labour movement” (a term on which, characteristically, they throw some lukewarm water). On the other hand, valuable though their contribution is, it remains limited. They neither answer nor even ask many of the questions which will have to occupy historians of the British labour movement, or for that matter of contemporary Britain. Admittedly it is too early to judge their work as a whole. The period they have chosen for their first volume is such as to make generalizations about the trade union transformation impossible, for the “labour unrest” of 1911–13, not to mention the war and post-

Allied Workers resulted from the merger of two unions of 1891 vintage, of which one at least had received most of its initial impetus from the left. Only the Miners, though founded in 1888 as part of the general transformation, owed little to the left until very much later. For comparative ranking of unions 1938–58, see PEP, *Trade Union Membership (Planning, xxviii, 463, 1962, p. 159)*.

¹ The TUC of 1927 buried the proposals for major reform (cf. Milne-Bailey, *op. cit.* pp. 129 ff., 135 ff.), but not until much more far-reaching changes had been achieved in the rationalization of union structure than were to be achieved by the more half-hearted reform movement of the Second World War, and the still-born aspirations of the early 1960's.

² Transport comprised 8 per cent of organized unionists in 1888, 17 per cent in 1913. Cf. Clegg, Fox, and Thompson, p. 1; G. D. H. Cole, *Organised Labour (1924)*, p. 156.

³ In 1939 the only industries, apart from some forms of public employment and public utilities, with more than 50 per cent of their workers organized in unions were: mining, cotton, boot and shoe making, Railways, and probably waterside transport. N. Barou, *British Trade Unions (1947)*, App. VIII.

war waves of militancy, fall outside its chronological boundaries. However, even allowing for this, the authors' vision of the trees is much better than their vision of the wood. One is sometimes inclined to feel that, given their approach to trade unionism, they are not as unhappy about this as some of their readers. Still, henceforth no student will be able to do without their work.

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