

## SOME RECENT TRENDS IN BRITISH TRADE UNIONISM

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The history of British trade unionism since the passage of the Trade Disputes Act in 1927 has been part of a steady struggle by organized labor to gain control of the government in order to put the principles of trade unionism into effect. The fight has been largely successful. To-day the government is in the hands of the Labor Party, and measures are being enacted for which the unions and their political affiliates have fought during the past quarter century. Although organized labor has had to make compromises with the various other groups forming the present Labor Party, the leadership of that party is held by those whose entire careers have been spent in trade unionism. It is in the ranks of the trade unions that the present government finds its support.

Trade union membership has fluctuated over the past quarter century with the high points recorded in the early twenties, again in 1929, and during the terrible years just passed. Of some 25,000,000 wage earners in 1945, there were approximately 7,780,000 union members. In that year, membership in the Trades Union Congress, which is the general association of trade unions in the United Kingdom, was slightly over 6,500,000.<sup>1</sup> There has been a slight decrease since the end of the war. This was to be expected in view of the large numbers of unskilled and female workers who had joined up during this peak employment period. Many of these people are changing jobs or have retired from the wage earning class. The retention of a large standing army recruited from among the younger men will have a tendency to further retard the growth in union membership for the next few years. If the international picture becomes less alarming, and the number of men in service is reduced, the ranks of organized labor should increase perceptibly in the next five year period, in view of the great demand for manpower in British industry.

In the matter of organization among the trade unions, emphasis must be placed upon the activities of the Trades Union Congress. This body has given increasing power to its General Council, a group that has become much like an interim executive committee with au-

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<sup>1</sup> *Monthly Labor Review*, January 1946, p. 54.

thority to act for the Congress subject to ratification. While such action has not eventuated in the establishment of a central authority over the membership of the TUC, it has been instrumental in the amalgamation of kindred crafts and the integration of several large industrial unions within the framework of the TUC. Mr. Harold Laski has asked for the adoption of union organization similar to that of the CIO but with a hierarchy of control culminating in a central executive committee of all unions responsible to the Union Congress.<sup>2</sup> Sir Walter Citrine, secretary-general of the TUC for the past twenty years, feels the lack of centralized control makes for the "decisions of the Congress (TUC)" having an "influence more effective" than would be the case where strict reliance is placed upon strongly centralized authority.<sup>3</sup> Since 1928 successive moves have been made in the general sessions of the TUC to establish federations among the various unions; the largest of these is the General Federation of Trade Unions (which had its inception in 1897 but which has grown perceptibly in the last fifteen years). The Miners Federation of Great Britain is next with a membership of over 600,000, by far the predominant majority of all workers engaged in the mining industry. Although both these bodies are not completely centralized organizations themselves, they depict the trend toward amalgamation which has been fostered by the majority of TUC leadership. These federations are becoming closely allied both in policy and procedure with the General Council of the TUC. However, at the present writing, several large independent industrial unions and the National Federation of Trade Unions are not affiliated with the TUC. In view of the movement toward nationalization of key industries, it is felt that these groups will effect working agreements with the main body of unions.<sup>4</sup>

Closely related to the maintenance of membership and the integration of union strength is the question of unemployment and its causes. This matter has always been one of paramount importance to trade unionism. Since 1929 the TUC has given its attention to an outstanding problem in British industrial relations—the question of rationalization.<sup>5</sup> This is the British term associated with the economic and social problems arising from the displacement of workers by the introduction of machinery and the institution of labor-saving

<sup>2</sup> *Nation*, July 3, 1937, pp. 16-17.

<sup>3</sup> Sir W. Citrine, *Trade Union Movement in Great Britain* (no date), p. 70.

<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, June 23, 1946, p. 11.

<sup>5</sup> G. D. H. Cole and R. Postgate, *The British Common People* (1938), ch. 50.



technics in industry together with the centralization of large-scale mass production within the capital framework of a limited number of industrial enterprises. Rationalization has tended to create unemployment through displacement of workers with resulting reduction in bargaining power among the laboring masses. To overcome this trend the trade unions have demanded the establishment of a forty-hour week and the institution of the sixty-year pension age. They have also demanded that they be consulted whenever rationalization is contemplated in any industry. Where rationalization does take place, the unions have asked for compensation to all employees displaced.<sup>6</sup>

The closing down of obsolete plants and the introduction of labor-saving technics associated with the centralizing of capital control have created monopolies which give the employer an unique advantage over labor.<sup>7</sup> Organized labor has set itself the task of forwarding the effect of this upon the rank and file of the working class. To fly in the face of technology would be most absurd. The only solution from the standpoint of humanitarian responsibility is to make the financial benefits derived from rationalization meet the costs of human displacement. Once this is done then the savings effected will be distributed in accordance with the claims of the various factors of production. This has been one of the persistent policies of British trade unionism in the past fifteen years. It is now being seriously considered by the Labor Government as an integral part of its economic program. It is socialist in its basic tenets, but the approach has been thoroughly democratic inasmuch as the present control of the Parliament was attained via the ballot box, not the bayonet. This marks a great difference between the totalitarian labor movement and British trade unionism. The gradualness of democratic socialism has come without serious dislocation in the management-labor relationship and without the disruption of social harmony and security as evidenced in those countries which have fostered a socialized program through force.

In addition to the general problem of technological unemployment the trade unions have taken cognizance of the continued severity of working conditions in the depressed industries in Britain. Among these are mining and shipbuilding. These have been the fields of industrial conflict since the close of World War I. It was the situ-

<sup>6</sup> Resolution of TUC Proceedings, vol. 61.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 473-4.

ation in the coal mines that caused the strike of 1926 leading to the abortive general walk-out of that year. Steady depression in both industries since the end of first world conflict had brought the basic issues to the fore by 1938 and was instrumental in the National Government's move of that year toward control of the coal mining industry. The quarrel in the mines has been over hours, wages, and working and living conditions. The pitiable circumstances under which the miners have been forced to work and live have really forced the matter to a climax. Not much improvement was effected in the miner's status even during the hectic period of the Second World War. To-day the miners look with great hope to the nationalization program for a general betterment of their lot. The Government has already accepted the five-day week and is furthering the housing construction in the mine areas. Wages have been raised but not purchasing power. This depends upon increased production, and unless satisfactory methods can be found by the government to further the mines' output, the depressed conditions will continue.

The situation in the shipbuilding trades has shown decided improvement as far as labor conditions are concerned. The intense demand for shipping has carried over from the close of the war so that to-day Tyneside and Clydeside are busy. Housing is a problem, but once the log-jam is broken in the construction trades, the shipyard workers will be at the top of the list for new and better homes. At least this has been the promise of the government. Wages have been maintained even in view of a cut to 44 hours per week. With added leisure and improved living conditions much of the discontent in this industry should vanish.

Labor has determined however that mere chance or economic laws alone will not provide the guaranty for a better and a richer future. Since the terrible times of the late twenties, organized labor has called for nationalization of the key industries. The program announced by the TUC in 1944<sup>8</sup> demanded governmental control of the entire economic system with actual governmental ownership of the essential industries. Although the present ministry came to power pledged to carry out immediate wide-scale nationalization, it has moved cautiously. Banking and mining are the only fields nationalized to date (June 1946). At present the Labor Government seems committed to a policy of slow action giving the newly developed

<sup>8</sup> See *Monthly Labor Review* for digest of TUC resolutions for 1944, January 1945, pp. 112 ff.



industries, such as the automotive, radio, electrical appliances, and cosmetics, opportunity to absorb the displaced workers of the depressed areas, those from closed down war plants, and some of the returning soldiers. The difficulty here may be that too many workers are drained off from the essential industries even though those industries are not presently attractive to labor. If the worker balance can be maintained and if the workers remaining in private employ can be kept contented by adequate living facilities, fair and steady wages, and good working conditions, the impetus toward nationalization will be stayed.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the course the government takes in its economic planning, be it socialized, private-enterprise, or mixed, the important factor remains that of increased output. Without this Britain will slip quickly from the circle of first-class powers. Industrial production rests on more than domestic economic policy. It is dependent upon the maintenance of British markets abroad. Unless these are regained promptly and developed, no amount of internal industrial reform will avail. The Labor Government is well aware of this as evidenced by the recent efforts to establish favorable acceptance of British goods and capital in the dominions and to regain the European and South American markets.<sup>10</sup> British labor's living standards can be raised only by the export of British goods in sufficient value and quantity to insure the importation of food, building materials, and consumer durables, the dearth of which makes for a mere subsistence standard or worse. Nationalization *per se* will be but an idle gesture if British exports are not demanded by those countries which can send to England the basic raw materials so necessary for national health and well-being in this modern age.

As indicated by the present monopolization of foreign trade by the Government,<sup>11</sup> economic planning will have to be extended to cover the distribution and marketing of British products abroad as well as at home. This will necessitate the close integration of British foreign policy and domestic industrial regulation, which might eventuate in full scale economic regimentation—a course feared by vast segments of British labor. The trade unions have opposed regimentation at every turn.<sup>12</sup> They do not accept the extreme leftist doctrine of the

<sup>9</sup> "Britain's One Way Out," by C. H. Grattan in *Harper's*, May 1946, p. 391.

<sup>10</sup> *World Report*, May 23, 1946, p. 4.

<sup>11</sup> *World Report*, May 30, 1946, p. 23.

<sup>12</sup> "Labor in the Saddle," by J. H. Harley in *Contemporary Review*, May 1946, p. 264.

Independent Labor Party, whose tenets include full and immediate control of all production and distribution. The principles of Trade Unionism can be described as socialistic only if the emphasis is upon evolutionary and constitutional procedure. The socialism of trade unions contains little trace of doctrinaire inflexibility. Its measure is determined rather by considerations of practical opportunism within a definite frame of responsibility to constitutional safeguards and respect for individual rights. Whether these can be maintained under the pressure of present world economic conditions is the big question in labor politics not only in Britain but in all the democracies.

It would appear that the broad principles of the trade union movement, with respect to a liberal interpretation of individual rights, may have to be adjusted to the current economic and political pressures of an emerging state socialism. The trade unions have little choice but to move with the Labor Government in its present economic program. They cannot afford to differ radically from the Labor Party. Any defection at this time might restore the government to the Conservatives, who, although not unalterably opposed to some form of governmental control over industry, certainly do not sanction, during peacetime, the rigid regulation of capital now being enforced by the Ministry. The unions realize that unless tight reins are kept on investment, both domestic and foreign, the entire production program under the present postulates will be jeopardized. Any relaxation of controls, particularly over industrial investments, would tend to upset the whole nationalization program with resultant let-down in production levels.<sup>13</sup> It would seem that the trade unions will have to tag along with the Labor Party even though the wind of nationalization takes them and the party to the brink of economic regimentation and over. The unions hope of course that this will not occur, and they are by no means sitting back and letting the government have *carte blanche*. There is strong evidence that they are becoming dissatisfied with some of the industrial technics employed by the Government.<sup>14</sup> They are demanding some participation in the controls set up in the nationalization program. The miners' unions are definitely critical of the procedure employed by the Minister of Fuel and Power in the taking over of the mines. The Government seems to have given in to some of these demands, and relations are now on a better footing.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See article by W. H. Wickwar—"British Plans," *American Political Science Review*, December 1945, pp. 1137 ff.

<sup>14</sup> *New Statesman and Nation*, September 22, 1945, p. 187.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, June 30, 1946, p. 11.



Labor Party's support, however, does not lie completely within the ranks of the unions. Great numbers of agricultural laborers together with millions of white collar workers voted the Labor ticket in July of last year.<sup>16</sup> Whatever pressure the unions can exercise against the government will have to come through the union control over the present leadership in the Labor Party. Most of the members of the government are trade unionists or have been closely affiliated with the organized labor movement. It is hard to see how they would not lend a very sympathetic ear to concerted demands from their life-long associates. Despite this it is not outside the realm of possibility that the logic of the economic situation in Britain to-day may force the Party to extremes not in complete harmony with the basic principles of trade unionism.

Closely allied with the problem of principles is the more pressing one of technics. In the ultimate the motives of the Labor Party and the unions may be quite reconcilable. It is over the means to these ends that the clash may come.<sup>17</sup>

Examples of this divergence are immediately recognizable. In the matter of income adjustment to effect a more equitable distribution of purchasing power there is fundamental agreement. The way it is to be reached presents the problem. The government has moved for a retention of confiscatory levies in the upper brackets with which the unions certainly do not quarrel, but the demand for deficit spending coupled with re-distributive taxation to the extent desired by the TUC has not been accepted wholeheartedly by the present government.<sup>18</sup>

The matters of demobilization and the size of the post-war armed forces are among the ways and means being hotly debated. The trade unions are after security with the same vigor as is the government, but they have demanded a more rapid demobilization<sup>19</sup> than that which the government feels is compatible with national defense and maintenance of British world position. Labor feels that its needs at home in fulfilling the production quotas come before maintenance of a large army.<sup>20</sup> The government has declared for the continuance

<sup>16</sup> See Margaret Cole's analysis of labor vote (July 1945) in *Harper's*, May 1946, pp. 391-2. Also see article by W. J. Newman entitled "Patterns in Growth of British Labor Vote," in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Winter 1945-6, p. 446.

<sup>17</sup> *New Statesman and Nation*, September 22, 1945, p. 187.

<sup>18</sup> See *Monthly Labor Review*, December, 1945, for Resolutions of TUC for 1945, pp. 1179-81.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 1180.

<sup>20</sup> *New Statesman and Nation*, May 25, 1946, p. 371.

of conscription to maintain at least the quota of one million men at arms.

Again, in the matter of retaining war time labor controls as a means to effect prompt reconversion, the trade unions are agreeable to a gradual removal of the restrictions commensurate with reconversion adjustments, but there must be definite signs that the removal *is* occurring even though it is gradual.<sup>21</sup> The government has been adroitly avoiding any statement which might indicate a permanent retention of some war time controls over labor, but it is difficult to see how it can repeal some of the arbitration laws such as the Wages Councils Act <sup>22</sup> without disrupting the present program for increased production. Wages will have to be controlled if British prices are to compete in world markets, and unless world markets are obtained and retained, British labor will be in the throes of a devastating depression. The entire economic policy of the present ministry hinges on adequate markets and a production level to keep those markets satisfied—any failure in this respect spells collapse for Britain. Labor peace is a prime requisite. Controls may not maintain it, but without them it is impossible. British labor has not been averse to arbitration, but whether it will concur in the use of compulsion is questionable.<sup>23</sup> The steady struggle against the Trade Disputes Act of 1927 is a case in point. The government has just repealed this “standing affront” to British unions. It was a fulfillment of a party pledge to remove from the statute book what was considered “more of an insult than an injury” suffered by labor “at the hands of a capitalist Government.” <sup>24</sup> All the controls against general strikes, especially if aimed at the government, have not been removed. The government can still enforce the Emergency Powers Acts of 1920 and 1940, neither of which has even been considered for repeal.

The problem of the strike itself is not controlling inasmuch as the tendency has been away from labor disputes both by labor and management. With the Labor Government now in power this trend should take wider strides, and conciliation rather than compulsion probably will be the rule in settling labor difficulties. The question of the right to strike may arise, however, if the nationalization procedure goes on and workers become employees of the nationalized in-

<sup>21</sup> *Monthly Labor Review*, December 1945, *op. cit.*, p. 1179.

<sup>22</sup> *New York Times*, June 2, 1946, p. 10E.

<sup>23</sup> “Trade Unionism in the Post War World,” by J. H. Harley, in *Contemporary Review* for December 1944, pp. 330-36.

<sup>24</sup> Vol. 59, TUC Proc. (1927), p. 62.



dustries. Can a strike be justified then in any event? It is in this respect that the trade unions are keeping a sharp look-out for all controls that would curtail them once the Government becomes employer as well as arbiter.

These are but some of the outstanding matters in method wherein a basic agreement between Party (as long as it is Government) and organized labor may be impossible. The leaders of the government and the heads of the unions will be called upon for adroit maneuvering to prevent the rise of such conflicts. It will take a lot of patience to get the rank and file of labor to see that in a world moving toward public control and ownership of essential industry, many of the old private prerogatives of workers as well as management have got to be given up. As the public moves in, through government, to the once sacred precincts of private contract, labor and capital will see their demands bent to fit what has come to be called the public welfare.

Trade unionism has come far since the baneful days of 1927. Membership has increased until it is near the 1920 figures, and the prospects are for even greater numbers. The past twenty years have brought a steadier and more amicable approach to the whole problem of labor and industrial relations. The unions realize the uselessness of continued bickering and backbiting, that the only sensible way of dealing with the age old capital-labor question is to put the facts in the open and let reason work its justice through compromise and mediation. The major problem for them now is to adjust themselves to the new role thrust upon them by the Labor Party's recent victories at the polls. The trade unions have represented the moderate, rational planning and organizing group within the British labor movement. They have produced the leaders and set the course. Now that much of what they have stood for is in the process of becoming the law of the land, their task is to see that the same moderation, the same rational planning, and even better administration than they have shown in their own organizations are guaranteed to the British people. This can be done by working in and with the Labor Party and affording that body the benefits of counsel based on eighty years' experience in the field of labor and industrial relations.