

## The Story of

## Trade Unionism

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### (i) LOOK UNTO THE ROCK

**T**HE early British trade unions were the parents of most of the trade unions of the world. They were the direct forefathers of the unions of to-day in Canada, Australia, South Africa, and also in the United States. The German unions were founded, not indeed in imitation of the British unions, but under the influence of their history. Through the First International, even, the British unions were largely instrumental in spreading trade union principles in Belgium, France, Italy and Spain. But even if we are able to trace the modern trade unions back to the early British "trade club," that does not mean that we have found their ultimate origin. We can look a long way back; but the furthest that we can see is to the middle of the eighteenth century. And the last thing that we can see is—whether you like it or not—the sign of an English public-house.

At one time it used to be thought that the trade unions were descended from the

guilds of the Middle Ages. This is now known not to be true. Possibly there is in one case some connection with the Middle Ages. The Stonemasons throughout their recorded history have been "turbulent men" and in the reign of Edward III. their "alliances and covines"—some form of secret unions—were forbidden. Moreover, the elaborate organisation of the Freemasons is based, as is clear to anyone who has a general knowledge of it, upon the actual processes of stone masonry. It is possible that the old "covines" survived into the eighteenth century as part of the Freemasons. It is possible, too, that in 1717 when "speculative masonry" overbore "operative masonry" among the Freemasons, that some "operative lodges" survived, to turn up again as lodges of the Operative Stonemasons' union. Those who are interested in this speculation may note that in 1834 the Duke of Sussex, as Grand Master Mason, issued an order for a "purge" of the lodges of the Freemasons, which he feared were going to be drawn like union branches into the great strikes of that year. But all this is no more than speculation on what is "possible": the only fact we know is that there is no evidence that enables us to date trade unionism earlier than, at the most, 1700.

There is record of a society of painters in 1749 in London, and in 1764 the Edinburgh masons had an active union. Francis Place, the tailor, about 1795, drafted rules

for small clubs in every sort of trade; and more and more instances are accidentally mentioned, in the newspapers or otherwise, as time goes on. Most of them, it is clear, met at a public house; all of them were confined to members of a particular craft in a particular district. Some early trade unions even took their name from the "pub." For example, we find the "Marquis of Granby Carpenters" in 1816, and the "Running Horse Society of Carpenters" in 1800, and as late as 1867 the two Coachmakers' Unions were known as the "Globe Society" and the "Crown Society." One wonders how the numerous "Bricklayers' Arms," "Blacksmiths' Arms" and "Jolly Painters" up and down the country get their names. Was it not perhaps from the meetings of such early trade unions?

We are very lucky in that there is still in existence—121 years old—an ancient Minute Book and Account Book of one of these early societies, the Preston Joiners. In it we can see slowly unfolded before us the process by which a small trade club began to take on the functions of a union. The first entries are:—

		s.	d.
1807			
Feb. 9	By 1 Quire of paper	1	6
	By Ale 4 glasses	0	8
	By 2 Books	0	8
25	By Expences of Come <sup>e</sup>		
	Meeting	8	8
27	By 8 Glasses of Ale	1	4

Quite probably the Preston joiners had been meeting in the local inn for a fraternal glass of ale for years before they bought "one quire of paper" and set up a committee, with the intent of remonstrating (possibly) against some breach of custom. Almost at once they began to admit new members to the craft (or reject them, presumably) and so claim some control of the conditions of their trade. Before long we find an entry for "writeing" to the employers—an outside hand, perhaps a lawyer's clerk, was employed—and when the "writeing" had no effect, then comes

the entry "to turn-outs." It is easy to guess, even if one has not read accounts of early strikes, what a "turn-out" is. The men who "turned out" were also supported while going to other towns in search of work, and thus we find "tramp money" entered. By this time the process is complete, and, as a naturalist can watch a tadpole turning into a frog, we have watched the festive Preston joiners' club turn into a full-blown trade union.

But the Preston joiners were lucky. Not all unions had so peaceful a life. In 1799 and 1800 two Combination Acts were passed which made trade unions illegal. The police and Government of the reign of George III. were too inefficient for this to mean that trade unions were in fact driven out of existence. They could and did still continue so long as they were circumspect and secret. Some disguised themselves as friendly societies. But if they were active, they, or at least their most prominent members, were at the mercy of any spiteful employer's denunciation. Conviction was almost certain: and, under the conspiracy laws, long terms of imprisonment and even public whippings were distributed.

The men who in face of such oppression kept trade unions alive were driven to strange expedients. The Ironfounders used to meet at night and in secret on the desolate moors of Yorkshire; their records and minute books they kept buried in the earth. The London tailors organised themselves almost militarily, giving strict obedience to a committee of five called "The Town," elected from their chosen public-houses, called "Flint" houses. Those who were spies and blacklegs were apt to meet with very rough treatment: in Dublin, indeed, if the employers' statements are to be trusted, the workers' Board of Green Cloth (as it was called) held the city in a ruthless grip.

Every union had a solemn ceremonial through which every member had to

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## DON'T LEAVE PUSHING THE MOVEMENT

to the other fellow. He's probably counting on you.

pass. The members were dressed up in fantastic garments, with axes, masks or cocked hats, and the applicant had to swear an oath and pray that if he divulged the rules of the union he might die. A sword was pointed at his bared breast, or a skeleton (or its picture) put before his eyes as he did so. The "worthy brothers" concluded their ritual with prayers and recitations which recalled the Church services. Even after the Combination Laws were repealed, in 1824 and 1825, these solemn practices were continued. The "lodge" into which a man was initiated, often the same trade club as had been in existence twenty or more years before, had now very frequently become a branch of a bigger union, such as the Ironfounders (1810) or the Operative Builders (1832). But, though the big union had come into existence, it was still the lodge which was the living unit. The lodge kept its own funds, only remitting to the centre the surplus which the calls of other lodges for sickness or strike benefit required. It decided who should receive sickness pay, how much and how long. It generally also decided what demands should be made on the employers, and whether a strike should be called or not. As may be imagined, trade union history for some forty years (say, 1825-1865) is consequently a fine confusion. But gradually, during these years, the union members were transferring powers to the headquarters from the lodges, until there is to-day no union which still leaves these wide liberties to its branches. Nor is there any which practises initiations or provides beer from the fund, though some require their members to address each other as "worthy brother."

Painters and smiths and others had no doubt for many centuries been meeting together at the local public house for a friendly glass. We may pause at this point to ask why it was at this time that these friendly meetings should have led to the appearance of trade unionism. The reply is that in the Middle Ages there was still probability that in any trade a journeyman would become a master. A journeyman-tailor stood a fair chance if he was a skilled

and fortunate man of ending his life in reasonable comfort and dignity as a master-tailor. He would not for long combine with other journeymen-tailors to oppose the masters; for, with the hopes he held, he would feel he was quite probably only doing what would in the future be an injury to himself. But in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, as the workshops of the masters grew larger and larger, as their capital increased and the old guilds had disappeared, it became clear to the slowest-minded worker that his chance of becoming a master was very small. In an old tailoring shop with three or four journeymen to one master, a journeyman stood some chance of advancement to mastership. What chance did he stand in a textile factory which counted its hands by hundreds? or in a mine or ironworks which counted them by thousands? Luck apart, he stood none. It was quite clear that ninety-nine out of a hundred workers could now never become their own masters. The upward path had been closed, and the masters and employed faced one another as hostile classes, between whom an impassable trench had been dug. Upon this deep division trade unionism was founded, and it depends upon it to-day. Without the consciousness of this class-division a union does not live. Its members may be held together for a while by sickness benefits, or by jealousy of another craft, but sooner or later it will be attacked by the slow decay which is eating away the American Federation of Labour. This does not necessarily mean that a union must be engaged in ceaseless conflicts, night and day, with the employers. With the bitterest enemy one has to sign truces and make temporary agreements. But these temporary agreements must never pass into a permanent policy of peace if the union is to live.

In the early days of trade unionism there was no chance that they would. The employers had (as they still have) a much clearer idea of the true state of affairs. They greeted every effort of their workers to defend themselves as a crime. They resurrected ancient laws to have trade union organisers deported. They locked out

members of the unions systematically, town after town, till the unions' funds were destroyed. They believed it good business to pay as low wages and work as long hours as human nature would permit. There were, indeed, many employers who regretted this policy, as low wages injured the home market; and considered that their rivals ought to pay better wages. But they did not possess the ear of the mass of the manufacturers, who were engaged in producing for export to the colonies or the continent. As the British coalowners and iron masters to-day, the Victorian masters could bear with fortitude the misery of their employees if they were sure of a foreign market.

Before the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, Moses was granted from the mountain-top a sight of the promised land. At the commencement of this difficult and formative period, in 1833 and 1834, the unions, led by the famous Robert Owen, were granted a Pisgah-sight of what will be their ultimate achievement, and an outline of what will be their ultimate organisation. They reached out their hands to grasp what they saw. They failed, and stumbled heavily, because their object was in the far distance. Since then, for many years we have struggled through the valley and the jungle till the promised land which they saw gleaming in the distance is nearer at hand.

Robert Owen was a self-made cotton-spinner who, amid the general complacency, realised that the system of competition and private capitalism was leading to wretchedness and misery. He tried various experiments, such as communist colonies, to introduce universal co-operation, and spent his fortune freely over them. In the year 1832 he thought that the sudden growth of trade unions would provide for him the weapon for which he was looking. He travelled up and down the country earnestly addressing lodge meetings, and receiving in return an equally patient and earnest attention. First of all a great Operative Builders' Union was formed; then in 1833 a great Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, to which the

workers of all trades belonged. Its membership, in the first two or three months of its existence, passed the half-million figure. All trades, divided into their appropriate sections, were for the first time united into one union. The Union adopted in full Owen's plans. He did not believe in political action (he could not, for not a single working man had the vote) and he relied upon two forms of trade union action—the strike and co-operative employment. The strike was to be used to secure shorter hours and better conditions, but the chief strength of the unions, and the bulk of their funds, were to be put into "guilds" which would undertake work directly. Before long, as the sole possessors of labour, the union-guilds would have squeezed out the private capitalist. There would be no more hopeless walking the streets for jobs, no senseless waves of prosperity followed by ruin, no slums and poverty. The accounts between each guild would be simply adjusted at headquarters by calculation of the labour time involved; the democratic management of the unions would, casually and imperceptibly, have extinguished the existing superfluous political framework. "See then," exclaimed one of the union journals, "the King of England becomes only President of the trade unions." Workers' control and a socialised state seemed in the unions' grasp, and the employing class was thoroughly scared. In 1834 a combined and shattering attack was made upon the Grand Trade Union. The employers entered everywhere that they could into conflicts with it. Then they concerted an attack by presenting the "Document," a paper forswearing trade unionism which every worker was compelled to sign. The Government seized upon the union organisers and sentenced six of them to seven years' transportation. They are known to us as the Dorchester Labourers, and they count among the early martyrs of trade unionism. Before long the union was bankrupt, and the strikes were lost. In the autumn of 1834 it broke up. Each section, diminished in numbers, resumed its path as a separate union, until in the 'sixties came a fresh step forward

*(To be concluded next month.)*