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Trade-Union History: The Consolidation of Revisionism

Looking back now, it may be somewhat surprising to realise for how much of the twentieth century British trade unions were either self-restrained or on the defensive. The First World War required a degree of self-sacrifice in the national interest and was followed by high levels of unemployment and organisational weakness for much of the 1920s and 1930s. The next national emergency of the Second World War required if anything even more self-denial, which was then followed by the perception of a pressing need to support Labour in government during the rest of the 1940s. Only with the return of the Conservatives to office in 1951, and their push to replace wartime bargaining over social wages with peacetime bargaining over more narrowly-defined money wages, were the unions finally released from restraint. Continuous organisational growth during a period of full employment underwrote this new sense of autonomy and the Labour ministers who subsequently attempted to reintroduce an element of public interest into industrial relations in the late 1960s and 1970s were seriously misled by their strong memories of the Second World War and its immediate aftermath. The deep shocks which these Labour governments suffered from the unions' refusal to accept their policies destroyed much of the sense of an over-arching 'labour movement', and in 1979 yet another long period began during which British trade unions were once more put onto the defensive. Indeed that brief period of unusual strength and confidence in the 1960s and 1970s had a largely negative legacy, leaving the unions unusually unpopular, not only on the political right but even in the centre and on the moderate left.

These changes in the standing of the trade unions in society have been accompanied by a deep demoralisation within the field of British labour history. For not only have old assumptions about the labour movement proved inadequate in the face of recent industrial and political developments, but the field of study has shifted from a place near the centre out to the margins of the historical profession as a whole. The resulting widespread discussion of a 'crisis in labour history' has however tended to become too pessimistic. It may be that the field no longer has the status it once had, but a great deal of constructive work has been achieved since 1979 and the broad foundations have now been laid for a new paradigm. Frequently labelled 'revisionist', this has moved on from important but isolated case studies and stimulating but largely critical surveys, to the consolidation of an increasingly constructive approach to the whole field of British trade-union history. Perhaps the main area of attention has been the craft bodies in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, but there have been other important clusters of work on the origins of trade unionism, the relationship between the unions and popular radicalism, and the nature of organisation among women workers, as well as contributions from a group of distinguished economic historians to a series of official volumes on the coal industry. Broadly speaking, the overall effect has been to shift away from a focus on the far left and the search for revolutionary opportunities, towards a focus on the

mainstream and the comparative analysis of conditions favouring permanent, effective organisation. This has been accompanied by a general downplaying of the role of class and class consciousness, and a highlighting instead of differences in experiences and attitudes.[1]

Craft Unions to the 1870s

Much of the original framework of the history of trade unionism was established by committed socialists who shared an underlying assumption that it was a mass response to the trauma of industrialisation and would sooner or later give rise to demands for collectivist social reform. However, in such industries as clothing, printing and building, where many components were assembled together and the skilled workers needed considerable understanding of the technical qualities of the final product, organisations were always rather hard to fit into this framework, because they were both more limited in their membership and more liberal in their political outlook. Moreover, they also made frequent references to their continuity with medieval craft guilds, which threatened to undermine the desire of outside observers to assign them an exclusively working-class origin and future trajectory.

More recently the careful researches of Robert Leeson into the specific topic of the 'tramping artisan' have uncovered conclusive evidence for strong continuities from the local craft guilds of the medieval period to the local craft clubs of the eighteenth-century.[2] Apart from anything else, this helps us to understand what would otherwise have remained something of a mystery, how it was that these embryonic unions could have emerged with fully-formed committee structures and procedures: chairmen, secretaries, and treasurers with clear roles in the keeping of order, minutes and accounts. Then, since travelling between clubs remained such an important method of relieving local unemployment, we also gain a new understanding of the origins of national craft unions, which began to take shape out of the need to regulate the tramping system by establishing standard levels of travelling allowances and spreading the costs more evenly between the participating bodies. Of course, this process was also aided by the experience of the travellers from the more active centres who initiated and supported the opening up of new branches in less well-organised areas.

The evidence of marked continuity between guilds and unions does not necessarily imply an ultra-harmonious view of the development of employment relations for the unions were set up precisely because of increasing divergences of interest even in the assembly industries: between journeymen and small masters on the one hand, and merchants and larger masters on

1 See Kenneth D. Brown, *The English Labour Movement, 1700–1951* (Dublin, 1982); and John Benson, *The Working Class in Britain, 1850–1939* (London, 1989) for surveys critical of the old paradigm. See Mike Savage and Andrew Miles, *The Remaking of the British Working Class, 1840–1940* (London, 1994); and Neville Kirk, *Change, Continuity and Class. Labour in British Society, 1850–1920* (Manchester, 1998) for attempts to rescue it.

2 Robert A. Leeson, *Travelling Brothers. The Six Centuries' Road from Craft Fellowship to Trade Unionism* (London, 1979).

the other. These were particularly acute over levels of wages and numbers of apprentices, and were leading to disputes and strikes from at least as early as the late seventeenth century. However, the evidence for continuity does rather soften the sense of an essentially militant response to an unprecedented trauma of industrialisation, only later succumbing to forms of compromise imposed from the outside. There is much parallel evidence in the equally painstaking work of C. R. Dobson to support this.[3] Firstly in terms of the surprisingly wide extent of craft-union organisation as early as the middle of the eighteenth century: with particular centres of activity around the tailors in the capital cities of London, Edinburgh and Dublin; around the more skilled grades in the rural clothing industry of the west country; and around key groups of maritime workers in shipping and shipbuilding. But secondly also in the strong impression of a growing acceptance of workers' associations, if not always among the employers most immediately affected, at least among magistrates hearing court cases arising out of industrial disputes, who frequently approved of organisation for welfare purposes as well as urging masters and men to engage in peaceful collective bargaining.

The more technical legal researches of John Orth have confirmed that trade unionism as such was never completely outside the pale.[4] For his careful investigation has demonstrated that, although thirty-five pieces of anti-union statute law were indeed repealed in 1824, many of these were either already redundant or used only to extend provisions to Scotland and Ireland. Moreover, the remaining nine significant combination acts for specific sectors which had been passed in the course of the eighteenth century were aimed only at restraining strike action, and their enforcement was frequently accompanied by the encouragement of association for the purposes of welfare and petitioning. The rather arbitrary invention of the offence of criminal conspiracy in industrial disputes in 1721 looked potentially more threatening, but even this was directed against specific actions. Moreover, as any court cases still had to be pursued by individual employers and could become protracted and expensive, even this turned out to be a rather less effective tool of repression than might have been expected.

From the outset, then, craft unionism was not the response of a mass of outcasts but of distinctive groups with a strong sense of participation in society, as well as of having access to resources which could assist them in pressing for a fairer share of economic resources and fairer treatment under the law. Of course it is this which accounts for the nature of that 'artisan radicalism' of the early-nineteenth century so ably charted by Iorwerth Prothero.[5] For not only were these skilled men not completely outside the law as trade unionists, many of them also had access to the vote in parliamentary elections as 'freemen' in the manufacturing boroughs, itself another legacy of the medieval guilds. Their concern was therefore to extend their influ-

3 C. R. Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen. A Prehistory of Industrial Relations, 1717–1800* (London, 1980). See also William Hamish Fraser, *Conflict and Class. Scottish Workers, 1700–1838* (Edinburgh, 1988) for parallel developments in Scotland.

4 John V. Orth, *Combination and Conspiracy. A Legal History of Trade Unionism, 1721–1906* (Oxford, 1991).

5 See Iorwerth J. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century London. John Gast and his Times* (London, 1979).

ence and self-respect within a system of which they already felt themselves to be a part.[6] Thus an overlapping between radicalism and patriotism, and a focus on political remedies by workers who were relatively well-organised in the economic and social spheres, is readily understandable even without the enormous impact of the French Wars from 1793–1815. And, despite Prothero's preference for an older emphasis on exploitation and deskilling, it is quite clear from his own evidence that these long years of military crisis saw major increases in the industrial strength, in the bargaining power, and in the political confidence of the skilled assembly workers, especially among the increasingly large numbers employed in war-related industries in London.[7]

However, the strength of trade unionism peaked in the early 1820s and, despite the success of the united campaign to repeal the Combination Acts in 1824–1825, the rest of the decade and most of the 1830s and 1840s was to see a long period of economic depression, high levels of unemployment and defeats for industrial organisation. As unemployment rose the old tramping system began to break down. Though there was by this time more effective coordination of local clubs into a national framework, the increasing efficiency of the country's transport network was too powerful to be resisted. A more integrated economy meant that cyclical unemployment affected almost every part of the country at the same time, so there was no longer any advantage in moving between districts in search of work. Some craft unions responded by encouraging emigration overseas and, true to the long tradition of the tramping artisan, this gave rise to new branches and eventually to independent craft-style bodies throughout the English-speaking world. But, as Leeson also demonstrates systematically, the main solution to the increasingly urgent problem of nationwide unemployment was the introduction of 'static' benefits for the majority who were prepared to stay at home. The resulting stabilisation of local membership allowed the development of a more intense set of activities around club meetings, while the need to keep track of increasingly large sums of money encouraged moves towards the centralisation of administration in the hands of national officials.[8]

Thus the middle of the nineteenth century saw if not the construction of a wholly new type of union, at least the consolidation of new forms of administration and the emergence of a new breed of more literate, more sober, more pragmatic union secretaries. Their ability to control their own members should not be exaggerated, for they were still subject to re-election, they were supervised by lay executive committee members drawn from the branches in the headquarters area, and their power to withhold financial backing from local activities was not the

6 See Anna Clark, *The Struggle for the Breeches. Gender and the Making of the British Working Class* (London, 1995) for the probability of an increasing exclusion of women from trade union circles during the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

7 See Edward P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, 1963) for a major influence on Prothero of which the same can be said.

8 Leeson, *Travelling Brothers.* See also Eric. J. Hobsbawm, 'The tramping artisan', in *Labouring Men. Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964), 34–63 for an earlier indication of this dynamic behind the centralisation of administration among the craft societies.

same as an ability to prohibit strikes altogether. However, they did play a major role in the development of sound administration which gave them considerable influence within their organisations, and they helped to raise the public profile and acceptability of trade unionism. There was some initial resistance on the part of employers to this emergence of more powerful, higher profile craft unions, especially in London which was the centre of major lockouts in engineering in 1851 and building in 1859. However, the tide of economic prosperity was becoming too strong and the indispensable nature of the skills of key assembly workers was too great to be resisted: by the early 1870s something more recognisably like modern trade unions and collective bargaining had come into existence, especially in the metal-working trades.[9] Interestingly enough, a more significant barrier than that of the employers was the resistance of trade unionists in the regions to the process of administrative centralisation. Not that they necessarily wanted different policies on substantive issues of wages and working conditions, just that they wanted to keep more decisions within the procedures of the local branches and sometimes even to maintain the functioning of the tramping system. Thus alongside the emergence of a prominent group of national leaders in London, these years also saw the persistence of rival craft unions based in Manchester and Glasgow, especially among the more traditional and fragmented building trades.[10]

Seniority Unions to the 1870s

The early experiences of the workers in such sectors as coal mining and cotton spinning were quite different. For they not only worked in larger firms, they were also usually gathered together in predominantly single-industry districts or even regions. Thus they had far fewer opportunities either to save enough to become small masters, or even to move around in search of employment elsewhere when made redundant. Moreover, in these sectors a single raw material was gradually transformed through a closely connected series of relatively simple processes, so the fully-skilled adult male workers on the most complex tasks were surrounded by large numbers of semi-skilled youths and women who had seen enough of what they did to be able to take their places, at least for the duration of industrial disputes. Strikes in the process sectors therefore tended to take the form of mass confrontations, with all the skilled workers in a town or district out at once and fighting hard against the introduction of substitute labour. Here then there did seem to be something like the class conflict desired by the early socialist historians of trade unionism, and it is not surprising that they found the events in these sectors much more congenial subjects of study. It is therefore important to bear in mind that these industrial movements had few political and no revolutionary overtones. For the issues at stake were exactly the same as among the apparently more moderate assembly workers:

9 See Keith McClelland and Alastair Reid, 'Wood, iron and steel: technology, labour and trade union organisation in the shipbuilding industry, 1840–1914' and Jonathan Zeitlin, 'Engineers and compositors: a comparison', both in Royden Harrison and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds.), *Divisions of Labour. Skilled Workers and Technological Change in Nineteenth Century England* (Brighton, 1985), 151–184, 185–250.

10 See Harrison and Zeitlin, *Divisions of Labour* for a collection of pioneering papers on this topic.

wage levels, numbers of trainees and work speeds. All this should have been clear enough from Duncan Bythell's earlier work on the handloom weavers, and these insights have now been most usefully extended to include the cotton spinners by Alan Fowler and his colleagues, and the coal hewers by Michael Flinn and David Stoker.[11]

Indeed, the politics of the process workers were, if anything, less radical than those of the craftsmen. Their initial demands for the extension of the vote were similar and the legacy of tense industrial disputes in the northern factory districts contributed to some notoriously repressive reactions on the part of some local authorities. But the skilled process workers were faced with enormous difficulties not only in organising whole industrial districts, but also in moving towards the inclusion of large numbers of semi-skilled workers within unions which could still protect their own position by allocating work tasks according to the length of seniority on the job. Their politics soon came to be characterised by peaceful lobbying for parliamentary protection, first by seeking for more favourable applications of existing legislation inherited from the medieval and early-modern periods, which only succeeded in provoking its repeal. Then led by the cotton spinners, by evolving a new rhetoric of the protection of women and children alongside the prevention of accidents, as a way of reducing working hours and improving working conditions for all. These campaigns were almost immediately willing to accept the parliamentary support of Tory paternalists, and therefore became significantly less focused on the extension of the franchise and less clear-cut in their views on free trade.[12]

If the craft unions fell on relatively hard times after the early 1820s the situation among the harder-pressed seniority unions can be imagined: a long period of demoralising defeats, severe wage cuts and rising unemployment from the late 1820s to the late 1840s. Indeed, if anything the further expansion of their industries made organisation more difficult for, though there were increasing numbers of potential recruits, they were even more divided up into distinct branches. This has been particularly forcefully demonstrated by the work of Roy Church and his colleagues, along with that of Alan Campbell, on the different conditions in coal mines producing for domestic as opposed to overseas markets, but similar issues arose in cotton factories specialising in weaving, and fine and coarse spinning.[13] To build any kind of unity, even at the local level of the pit or the mill, depended on the injection of new cultural

11 See Duncan Bythell, *The Handloom Weavers. A Study in the English Cotton Industry during the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 1969); and Norman Murray, *The Scottish Handloom Weavers, 1790–1850. A Social History* (Edinburgh, 1978) for complementary material. See Alan Fowler and Terry Wyke (eds.), *The Barefoot Aristocrats. A History of the Amalgamated Association of Operative Cotton Spinners* (Littleborough, 1987). See Michael W. Flinn and David Stoker, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Volume 2. 1700–1830. The Industrial Revolution* (Oxford, 1984); and Alan B. Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners. A Social History of their Trade Unions, 1775–1874* (Edinburgh, 1979) for complementary material.

12 Bythell, *Handloom Weavers*; Murray, *Scottish Handloom Weavers*; Fowler and Wyke, *Barefoot Aristocrats*.

13 See Roy Church, Alan Hall and John Kanefsky, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Volume 3. 1830–1913. Victorian Pre-eminence* (Oxford, 1986); and Campbell, *Lanarkshire Miners*.

resources. In coal a highly colourful milieu was created around nonconformist chapels, the symbolism of lodge banners and the excitement of the annual county 'galas', all of which helped to build the miners' legendary solidarity. In cotton the equivalent seems to have been a more prosaic business ethos, around cooperative retailing societies, holiday clubs, even shareholding in the industry, all of which helped to produce hard-headed bargainers.[14] Even so, constructing viable federations between these workplace groups around economic issues continually ran into the ground of industrial diversity, and the most effective focus of wider unity remained the pressure for parliamentary protection. These campaigns not only made national bodies seem worthwhile, when they were eventually successful they created more free time for further organisation and established new foci of activity around check-weighing at the pitheads and factory inspection in the mills.[15]

Before that point was reached, the process workers had made a distinctive contribution to the mass protests around the 'People's Charter' in the late 1830s and 1840s. It is now clear from the work of Malcolm Chase and others that there were many links between trade unionism and Chartism in all its phases and that the seniority unions' traditions of industrial confrontation and Tory protectionism gave that movement much of its particular tone. However, in the end that was also to be a large part of its downfall, for these workers' interest in the vote was more instrumental and, once they had achieved concessions over factory legislation and poor relief in the early 1840s, much of the energy went out of their participation.[16] Similarly, when the radical campaign for franchise extension revived on a mass scale in the later 1860s, it was led by the London-based secretaries of the craft unions and it only spread to the old centres of Chartist agitation in the north when the resistance to reform was intensified by the emergence of new threats to the legal position of trade unions. The recent work of Orth has made it clear just how ingenious the anti-union rulings of the common-law judges were, and how they even continued to behave as if the landmark acts of 1871 had not been passed.[17] However, it was this outrageous stubbornness which finally crystallised a new degree of trade-union political unity, bringing such distinguished leaders of the northern seniority unions as Alexander McDonald of the Scottish miners into close cooperation with such old hands at lobbying among the southern craft unions as George Howell of the bricklayers and the Reform League, and laying the basis for the emergence of the first really united and effective political labour movement.

14 See Huw Beynon and Terry Austrin, *Masters and Servants. Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation. The Durham Miners and the English Political Tradition* (London, 1994). A similar study has yet to be done for cotton, but see John K. Walton, *Lancashire. A Social History, 1558–1939* (Manchester, 1987) for some suggestive insights; and see H. I. Dutton and J. E. King, *'Ten Per Cent and No Surrender'. The Preston Strike, 1853–1854* (Cambridge, 1981) for one particularly important defeat.

15 See Gordon M. Wilson, *Alexander McDonald. Leader of the Miners* (Aberdeen, 1982) for one particularly insightful biography of a leading figure in this process.

16 See Malcolm Chase, *Early Trade Unionism. Fraternity, Skill and the Politics of Labour* (Aldershot, 2000) for a recent survey of trade unions and Chartism. See also Mick Jenkins, *The General Strike of 1842* (London, 1980); David Goodway, *London Chartism, 1838–1848* (Cambridge, 1982); and David J. V. Jones, *The Last Rising. The Newport Insurrection of 1839* (Cardiff, 1985) for important case studies.

17 Orth, *Combination and Conspiracy*.

Equally significant in this development was the fact that it was the Liberal Party which was responsible for what looked like a 'final settlement' of the central issues of trade-union law. For, having passed the acts of 1871, the reassertion of these principles in 1875, while nominally presented in parliament by the Conservative government was, as Jonathan Spain has shown, given all its teeth by union lobbying and Liberal amendments. It was this which played the key role in resolving the longstanding ambiguities at the heart of popular politics between laissez-faire and protectionism, between self-improvement and legislative enactment, in a distinctively Liberal direction.[18] Indeed the fact that the party's charismatic leader William Gladstone had begun his career as a High Tory may even have helped in the fusion of these disparate currents of popular radicalism into an overwhelming mainstream. For many decades to come the miners' leaders who did have a chance of election in constituencies in the coalfields were happy to do so through local Liberal organisations, and in many districts their unions actually became the local Liberal organisations. Meanwhile, the craft leaders could not rely on such industrial concentrations within one constituency and found their attempts to win parliamentary seats frustrated by the greater popularity of middle-class Liberals with strong local connections, many of whom could in any case be relied upon to pursue radical policies on most of the issues of concern to working people. Thus despite the extension of the franchise to include substantial numbers of trade unionists in 1867, there were, as Eugenio Biagini has argued particularly persuasively, few prospects and little need for an independent labour party.[19]

Craft Unions from the 1870s to the 1970s

The next long economic depression from the middle of the 1870s to the middle of the 1890s was accompanied by a process of industrial restructuring and the regional relocation of the assembly sectors towards large-scale, heavy engineering and shipbuilding on the northern rivers. However, as the classic survey by Hugh Clegg, Alan Fox and Pat Thompson should already have made clear, the craft unions managed to re-emerge stronger by the end of the nineteenth century, in terms both of their membership size and their organisational arrangements.[20]

Through a process of jostling for position, more centralised craft bodies reached an unstable equilibrium with regional and national employers' associations in a sort of joint regulation of

18 See Jonathan Spain, 'Trade unionists, Gladstonian Liberals and the labour law reforms of 1875', in Eugenio F. Biagini and Alastair J. Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism. Popular Radicalism, Organised Labour and Party Politics in Britain, 1850–1914* (Cambridge, 1991), 109–133 for the details of the battle over the law, and the other essays in that volume for the integration of labour within the Liberal Party more generally.

19 See Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment and Reform. Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge, 1992).

20 See Hugh A. Clegg, Alan Fox, and Alfred F. Thompson, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889. Volume 1. 1889–1910* (Oxford, 1962), extended chronologically in Hugh A. Clegg, *A History of British Trade Unions since 1889. Volume 2. 1911–1933* (Oxford, 1985).

workplaces and labour markets. As individual employers had resisted local union involvement in bargaining within their firms, the skilled men had come to rely more and more on the national strength of their organisations, and full-time executive committees had been set up to oversee union industrial strategies. This had then provoked counter-organisation into employers' associations and, following initial anti-union skirmishes such as the famous 1897 engineering lock-out, there had been a gradual acceptance that trade unions would need to be dealt with as a permanent feature of business life.[21] As the recent work of Alastair Reid, Jonathan Zeitlin, Howard Gospel and Arthur McIvor has shown in a wide range of industrial contexts, the diverse product markets of these firms, and indeed their direct competition with each other when they were in the same line of business, made it far from automatic that employers would always agree to join in collective actions. Moreover, there were surprisingly few issues of fundamental conflict with the craft unions. The employers did want to overstock labour markets and keep wages low, but their specialised and fluctuating product markets greatly reduced their interest in mass production, mechanisation and deskilling. As a result it was a viable option to remain heavily dependent not only on highly-skilled labour but even on union regulation of labour-market arrangements largely external to the individual firms, especially regarding training and welfare provision.[22]

Thus the traditional craft-union sense of the feasibility of industrial self-government was sustained in a new form, with ideas taking shape on the ways in which national bargaining might even-out the trade cycle by stabilising wages and reducing competition, thus also potentially boosting longer-term effective demand by raising the incomes of the mass of ordinary consumers.[23] This continued preference for collective provision through self-activity rather than reliance on state intervention was somewhat modified by the next experience of a major war between 1914–1918, when government regulation of food prices and rents became essential. But at the same time, fears of industrial conscription and the experience of the shortcomings of bureaucratic administration eventually reinforced the assembly workers' long-term preferences for voluntarism.[24] Thus recent work on industrial relations in the assembly sectors has produced solid confirmation of that school of thought on the emergence of the Labour Party which has emphasised its subordinate role within a 'Progressive Alliance' under the Liberal

21 McClelland and Reid, 'Wood, iron and steel'; Zeitlin, 'Engineers and compositors'. See Roger Davidson, *Whitehall and the Labour Problem in Late-Victorian and Edwardian Britain. A Study in Official Statistics and Social Control* (London, 1985); and Rodney Lowe, *Adjusting to Democracy. The Role of the Ministry of Labour in British Politics, 1916–1939* (Oxford, 1986) for additional government pressure in this direction.

22 See Alastair J. Reid, 'Employers' strategies and craft production: the British shipbuilding industry, 1870–1950' and Jonathan Zeitlin, 'The internal politics of employer organisation: the Engineering Employers' Federation, 1896–1939', both in Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds.), *The Power to Manage? Employers and Industrial Relations in Comparative-Historical Perspective* (London, 1991), 35–51, 52–80; Howard F. Gospel, *Markets, Firms and the Management of Labour in Modern Britain* (Cambridge, 1992); and Arthur J. McIvor, *Organised Capital. Employers' Associations and Industrial Relations in Northern England, 1880–1939* (Cambridge, 1996).

23 See Alastair J. Reid, 'Old Unionism reconsidered: the radicalism of Robert Knight, 1870–1900', in Biagini and Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism*, 214–243.

24 Clegg, *British Trade Unions. Volume 2*.

umbrella until 1918. Even after the definitive establishment of an independent Labour Party in that year, the continuing influence of the craft unions ensured that the electoral competition would be over which party would prove to be the best representative of popular radicalism. Thus from 1900 to 1918 the Labour Party acted as a continuation of the Lib-Lab tradition: only hindsight could produce any vision of the epoch-making 'rise of labour' and only an extremely narrow vision could produce any sense of the prominence of socialism. Then, even after the First World War, Labour's ambition to replace the Liberals was literally that: to become a new, more democratic, popular liberal party.[25]

The most striking feature of the longer-term development of the craft unions after 1918 was the reversal of many of the organisational trends of the previous period, as centralised industry-wide procedures were increasingly replaced by fragmented shop-floor bargaining. By the end of the long post-1945 economic boom many observers on both the left and the right began to see this as to the result of an upsurge of class-based militancy from below, but more careful historical research has begun to uncover the ways in which it was an unintended consequence of the strategies of employers and the state.

The economic background was provided by yet another sectoral shift: away from heavy, capital-goods metalworking in the north towards lighter, consumer-goods metalworking in the midlands and the south, above all the car industry which employed three quarters of a million workers at its peak in the 1970s. As the work of Steven Tolliday in particular has shown, employers in such new sectors continued with long-standing practices of relatively specialised products, relatively short production runs and relatively unsupervised skilled labour. On top of these traditional features they were also able to pass on costs to their customers more easily so, although still keen to maintain high levels of effort from their workforces, they were more willing to pay for this through higher wages. The division which this introduced on the employers' side, between heavy engineering on the one hand and the car industry on the other, was then reinforced by state policy. For, keen to maintain a constant flow of exports of cars after 1945 to help pay off war debts, governments of both parties constantly tried to promote cooperative industrial relations. However, Labour's tendency to press the unions into voluntary or even compulsory wage restraint only widened the gap between their national leaders and their local members. And the Conservatives' contrary tendency to press the employers into conceding favourable wage settlements only inhibited their development of more disciplined collective bargaining.[26]

25 See Martin Pugh, *The Making of Modern British Politics, 1867–1939* (Oxford, 1982) for a lucid survey. See also Duncan Tanner, *Political Change and the Labour Party, 1900–1918* (Cambridge, 1990); the essays in Biagini and Reid (eds.), *Currents of Radicalism*; and Andrew Chadwick, *Augmenting Democracy. Political Movements and Constitutional Reform During the Rise of Labour, 1900–1924* (Aldershot, 1999) for more recent developments of this perspective.

26 Steven Tolliday, 'Government, employers and shop floor organisation in the British motor industry, 1939–1969', in Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds.), *Shop Floor Bargaining and the State. Historical and Comparative Perspectives* (Cambridge, 1985), 108–147; Steven Tolliday, 'Management and labour in Britain, 1896–1939', in Steven Tolliday and Jonathan Zeitlin (eds.), *The Automobile Industry and its Workers. Between Fordism and Flexibility* (Cambridge, 1986), 29–56; Steven Tolliday, 'Ford and

Taken together, all these factors set the stage for chaotic concessions of piecemeal wage settlements to maintain output and the distinct fragmentation of the previously hard-won practices of industry-wide bargaining.[27] Unable to forge effective associations of their own and unwilling to invest in the staff necessary for close workplace supervision, the employers turned increasingly to governments to impose legal restraints on the new forms of local collective action which had been encouraged by their own practices. Rather unexpectedly, largely because of the international financial pressures it was under, the Labour government under Harold Wilson, with Barbara Castle in the role of Employment Secretary, was prepared to move in this direction in 1968.[28] However, this betrayed a remarkable blindness to the lessons of history, for the commitment of the craft unions to the principles of voluntarism had by no means been weakened but rather intensified by the rise of shopfloor bargaining. Hugh Scanlon of the engineers led the way, closely followed at the Trades Union Congress by Jack Jones of the transport workers, and supported in the cabinet by James Callaghan at the Home Office. Recent work has also highlighted the important intellectual reinforcement which came from distinguished groups in the academic and legal professions who had formulated a sophisticated pluralism in response to their earlier experiences of the threat of Nazism.[29] As a result, the Labour government was forced to make a deeply damaging u-turn, and the subsequent Conservative attempt under Edward Heath to impose even tighter statutory restraints through the 1971 Industrial Relations Act was rendered ridiculous by widespread union boycotts. Since this was a campaign of industrial and extra-parliamentary action, it could be portrayed as having extremist overtones, but in reality it showed marked continuities with all the most respectable traditions of craft unionism and parliamentary liberalism, earlier enshrined in the statutory provisions of 1871, 1875 and 1906.[30]

"Fordism" in post-war Britain: enterprise management and the control of labour, 1937–1987', in Tolliday and Zeitlin (eds.), *Power to Manage*, 81–114.

27 See Michael Terry and Paul K. Edwards (eds.), *Shopfloor Politics and Job Controls. The Post-War Engineering Industry* (Oxford, 1988) for case studies of the Coventry area.

28 See Duncan Tanner, Pat Thane and Nick Tiratsoo (eds.), *Labour's First Century* (Cambridge, 2000) for essays surveying all aspects of the party's long-term development. See Jim Tomlinson, 'The Labour government and the trade unions, 1945–1951', in Nick Tiratsoo (ed.), *The Attlee Years* (London, 1991), 90–105; Jim Phillips, *The Great Alliance. Economic Recovery and the Problems of Power, 1945–1951* (London, 1993); and Noel Whiteside, 'The politics of the "social" and the "industrial" wage, 1945–1960', in Harriet Jones and Michael Kandiah (eds.), *The Myth of Consensus. New Views on British History, 1945–1964* (Basingstoke, 1996), 120–138 for the factors influencing the industrial-relations policies of earlier Labour governments.

29 See Roy Lewis, 'Method and ideology in the labour law writings of Otto Kahn-Freund', in Kenneth W. Wedderburn, Roy Lewis and Jon Clark (eds.), *Labour Law and Industrial Relations. Building on Kahn-Freund* (Oxford, 1983), 107–126; and John Kelly, 'Social democracy and anti-communism: Allan Flanders and British industrial relations in the early post-war period', in Alan Campbell, Nina Fishman and John McIlroy (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics. Volume 1. The Post-War Compromise, 1945–1964* (Aldershot, 1999), 192–221.

30 See N. Fishman, *The British Communist Party and the Trade Unions, 1933–1945* (Aldershot, 1995); and John McIlroy, '"Always outnumbered, always outgunned": the Trotskyists and the trade unions', in John McIlroy, Nina Fishman and Alan Campbell (eds.), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics. Volume 2. The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964–1979* (Aldershot, 1999), 259–296 for the historical weakness of genuinely revolutionary movements within British trade unionism.

Seniority Unions from the 1870s to the 1970s

Meanwhile, the long economic depression from the middle of the 1870s to the middle of the 1890s had seen an unprecedented survival of the district organisations of the skilled workers in such process industries as coal and cotton, and their emergence on the railways. As a result the seniority unions, like the craft unions, managed to re-emerge stronger by the end of the nineteenth century, in terms both of their membership size and their national structures. However, they still had more difficulties in organising across massive, diverse sectors as well as facing more stubbornly intransigent employers. As a result their industrial disputes were both more disruptive than those of the craft unions and also much harder for them to push through to successful conclusions.[31]

Moreover, since disputes in such key sectors as basic energy supply and transport had immediate implications for the running of the whole economy, they naturally attracted more government attention than those in such longer-term capital goods production as engineering and shipbuilding. Especially after its landslide election victory in 1906, the Liberal Party showed itself to be particularly friendly to organised labour, passing eight-hours legislation for the mines and imposing union recognition and collective bargaining on the railways. Naturally this tended to confirm the process workers' already greater sense of dependence on the state, and the intensification of government intervention during the First World War eventually brought large numbers of them round to support for the 'nationalisation' of their industries. This apparent convergence with the agenda of socialists and socialist historians created a powerful image of an early-twentieth-century labour movement based on an 'archetypal proletariat' of miners, factory workers and railwaymen. It is therefore important to bear in mind, firstly the distinctive outlook of the craft unions and their equally significant role in shaping the politics of the Labour Party, and secondly that even the seniority unions' interest in 'nationalisation' was not always identical with socialism. Sometimes it only meant public control to guarantee collective bargaining. Even when that did spill over into public ownership, the unions' concerns still focused on formulating demands for higher wages and guaranteeing full employment for their own members. Moreover, the whole attitude involved was one of dependence on the state rather than an advance towards democratic self-government.[32]

The most striking feature of the longer-term development of these unions after 1918 was the impact of a painful process of economic decline in reducing the size of the workforces among which they recruited and in undermining whole communities which had only recently become relatively settled. By the end of the long post-1945 economic boom many observers on both the left and the right began to see the response to this as an upsurge of class-based militancy from below but, as in the case of the craft unions, more serious reflection has begun to reveal the ways in which it was shaped by the strategies of employers and the state.

31 Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *British Trade Unions. Volume 1*; Clegg, *British Trade Unions. Volume 2*.
32 See Church, Hall and Kanefsky, *British Coal Industry. Volume 3*; and Barry Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Volume 4. 1913–1946. The Political Economy of Decline* (Oxford, 1987).

The economic background was provided by a process of industrial contraction which began much earlier that is usually remembered: for the staple export sectors of coal and cotton, and the railways which serviced them, were in almost continuous decline from the end of the brief 1919–1921 reconstruction boom. Cotton and the railways, along with steel, were relatively protected from direct foreign competition and downward pressure on wages in these sectors was consequently less severe. However, industrial relations in mining became set in a pattern of chronic confrontation early in the 1920s as a result of the stubborn and narrow-minded determination of the employers to secure huge wage cuts in the export-oriented coal fields. Threats of national mining strikes supported by more or less widespread solidarity action by other major unions culminated in the brief drama of the 'General Strike' of 1926 and the longer tragedy of the miners' own strike which went on for another six months. But all this determined resistance to wage cuts was futile and only resulted in the utter defeat and fragmentation of miners' trade unionism. Eventually the state was drawn into even further involvement to subsidise and regulate the industry in attempts to reduce unemployment and promote industrial rationalisation. But various forms of 'dual control' brought little real success, and the pressures of production during the Second World War were the last straw. As the work of Barry Supple and Terry Gourvish has made clear, by 1945 public ownership was widely accepted as the only remaining, and now quite uncontroversial, option to prevent the complete collapse not only of coal but of other process industries suffering from chronic under-investment and wartime exhaustion.[33]

Strengthened by wartime demand, the general background of full employment after 1945 and the improved industrial relations of the nationalised coal industry, the miners began to recover their strength and confidence. This was further underwritten by technical innovation around 'long-wall' mining which brought the face-workers and other underground workers into closer cooperation and restored the potential of industrial action.[34] Moreover, they were still plagued with dirty and dangerous working conditions, and their wages tended to lag behind those of workers in the more dynamic metalworking assembly sectors. So although their numbers were in constant decline, it was only a matter of time before they would be prepared to engage once again in serious industrial action. And as all their wages were increasingly settled in national negotiations with a public authority, any such action was bound to have serious political implications. Thus in the 1970s, just as the craft unions effectively blocked all government attempts to abandon the voluntarist tradition of industrial relations, so the miners effectively determined the setting of new levels of high wages and improved conditions in the face of stubborn government attempts to maintain national incomes policies. The miners' eventual destruction, on their own, of a Conservative government in 1974 was a particularly sweet revenge for the bitter memories of the 1920s, and yet another indication of the strength of historical legacies in British industrial relations.

33 See Supple, *British Coal Industry. Volume 4*; and Terence R. Gourvish, *British Railways, 1948–1973. A Business History* (Cambridge, 1986).

34 See William Ashworth and Mark Pegg, *The History of the British Coal Industry. Volume 5. 1946–1982. The Nationalized Industry* (Oxford, 1986).

Federal Unions from the 1870s to the 1970s

The last decades of the nineteenth century had also seen the emergence of new forms of permanent organisation for less-skilled, 'general' workers, above all those employed in the provision of the urban infrastructure of energy supply and transport. But the famous strike wave of 1889–1890 was not a historic turning point, in terms either of the emergence of general unionism or of the connections between trade unionists and socialist activists.

There had after all been significant bursts of activity among these groups of workers before, and the sudden advance of the early 1890s was to be equally quickly rolled back. As the work of John Lovell should already have made clear, it is therefore more appropriate to think in terms of three waves of organisation led by successive generations of young men in periods of relatively full employment: 1870–1874, 1889–1892 and 1911–1914.[35] That the last of these was in the end to be sustained, and to lead to the formation of two giant organisations, the Transport and General Workers Union and the National Union of General and Municipal Workers, was largely a result of the First World War. For the pre-war transport workers' strikes were more often that not defeated, and in 1914 the employers looked set to make another major counter-attack in defence of their long-standing preferences for casual labour. It was the decimation of labour surpluses in the trenches of the western front and the state-sponsored emergence of larger permanent core workforces which had made a significant difference by 1918. Though the ambitious demands of the dockers led by Ernest Bevin were soon sidestepped, trade unionism was from then on a permanent and recognised part of employment relations in these sectors.

While it is true that significant numbers of socialist activists had been involved in the 1889 outburst, this tells us less about the history of trade unionism than about the history of socialism. For what it does show is that the doctrine of socialism had indeed become current among small groups on the left and that its working-class adherents, mainly skilled engineers, were refusing to be constrained by an initial sectarian aloofness from taking part in industrial action. But organisation among the general workers had long been dependent on outside assistance and financial support, most notably among the agricultural labourers in the 1870s, and as many or more radical liberals also played a part in 1889.[36] Moreover, relations between union organisers and their members in these sectors remained volatile: long periods of low participation in periods of unemployment followed by outbursts of unrealistic assertiveness in periods of prosperity were a nightmare for the permanent officials. And all of this was only made worse by the tendency of these organisations to develop into loose federations of wide ranges of semi-skilled workers, with each group tending to feel under-represented at the national level. Finally, as Gordon Phillips and Noel Whiteside have demonstrated, when they

35 See John Lovell, *Stevedores and Dockers. A Study of Trade Unionism in the Port of London, 1870–1914* (London, 1969).

36 See Alun Howkins, *Poor Labouring Men. Rural Radicalism in Norfolk, 1872–1923* (London, 1985) for the agricultural labourers; and Clegg, Fox and Thompson, *British Trade Unions. Volume 1* for the radical-liberal involvement in 1889.

did make an entrance onto the national political stage, this tended to revolve less around public ownership of the industries concerned and more around the regulation of the labour market. This had already been obvious in the early demand for eight-hours legislation, and it became the fatal weakness of the dockers' position in 1920. For their focus on joint regulation of employment contracts left little scope for the promotion of government schemes of the rationalisation of production.[37] Thus the general workers remained highly volatile and relatively poorly-integrated within their own trade unions, let alone into a coherent strategy for national political change, and these were to remain dominant features of their behaviour throughout the rest of the twentieth century.

These years had also seen a significant development of trade unionism among female workers, investigated in the studies of such scholars as Sarah Boston, Joanna Bornat and Eleanor Gordon.[38] Equally volatile and sporadic, equally dependent on outside assistance and support, women's trade unionism saw bursts of activity in the 1870s, the late 1880s and early 1890s, and then more permanent achievements in the 1900s. Here, as with the process workers in coal and on the railways, the support of progressive Liberals after 1906 was crucial. With Lady Dilke in the chair of the Women's Trade Union League from the 1880s, organised female workers were drawn closer to the labour mainstream. With the addition of the dynamic Mary McArthur in the 1900s, they were able to secure important legislative protection under the Trade Boards Act of 1909, which set up state-sponsored collective bargaining for a quarter of a million particularly low-paid, poorly-organised workers, mainly women, in ready-made tailoring, box-making, lace-finishing and chain-making.[39] This newly won position as an independent and effective pressure group was sustained during the First World War, as female workers became central to the mass production of shells, but it was rapidly eroded after 1918. Firstly, because women were driven out of industrial employment during post-war reconstruction as their areas of activity were run down and the regions in which they had been based were soon overwhelmed by mass unemployment. And secondly, because their organisations were absorbed into much larger mainstream, male-dominated ones, the Trades Union Congress and the General and Municipal Workers' Union.[40] In some ways it was a triumph for women's trade unionism to be taken seriously at last, but it also stored up more trouble for the future as female workers were to become increasingly aggrieved at their lack of effective representation within such massive national structures.

37 See Gordon Phillips and Noel Whiteside, *Casual Labour. The Unemployment Question in the Port Transport Industry, 1880–1970* (Oxford, 1985).

38 See Sarah Boston, *Women Workers and the Trade Unions* (2nd edition, London 1987) for a survey. See Joanna Bornat, 'Lost leaders: women, trade unionism and the case of the General Union of Textile Workers, 1875–1914', in Angela V. John (ed.), *Unequal Opportunities. Women's Employment in England, 1800–1918* (Oxford, 1985), 207–233; and Eleanor Gordon, *Women and the Labour Movement in Scotland, 1850–1914* (Oxford, 1991) for cases of unusual assertiveness.

39 See James A. Schmiechen, *Sweated Industries and Sweated Labour. The London Clothing Trades, 1860–1914* (London, 1984).

40 See Angela Woollacott, *On Her Their Lives Depend. Munitions Workers in the Great War* (Berkeley, 1994).

The most striking feature of the longer-term development of the federal unions after 1918 was their growth in membership. Moreover, during the post-1945 economic boom this was matched by a similar development among white-collar and public-sector workers. Thus at their peak the Transport and General Workers' Union with 1,500,000 members was the country's largest trade union, while the National Association of Local Government Officers and the National Union of Public Employees had 700,000 and 600,000 respectively. In the course of the 1970s all of these bodies were to be involved in high-profile industrial disputes, but once again it would be too simplistic to see these in terms only of increasing assertiveness from below: they were just as much, if not more, shaped by employers' attitudes and significant shortcomings in trade union provision.

The employers' attitude which fed most directly into industrial conflict in these sectors was the dogged resistance to union recognition and collective bargaining. Thus as Phillips and Whiteside, as well as Jim Phillips, have shown, the dockers only achieved a relatively favourable position because the pressures of the Second World War were taken advantage of by their leader Ernest Bevin in his role at the head of the Ministry of Labour, to set up new forms of public control, joint regulation and labour discipline, which were not always popular with his own members.[41] But the docks were in long-term decline from the 1920s, like the railways increasingly displaced by road transport, and in this rapidly growing new sector trade unionism was very weak. One interesting exception was among the London busmen, who were protected by the recognition offered by a public authority, in this case the London County Council.[42] But otherwise, the collective-bargaining power of passenger-transport workers was undermined by the other alternatives available during strikes, above all the private motor car. Meanwhile, as Paul Smith has shown, the position of the road-haulage workers was undermined by their isolated working conditions and increasing distances from their home bases. Neither the employers nor the government were fully aware of the changes in attitudes being brought about by the long period of almost full employment up to the 1970s, especially in the case of the truck drivers. And this group's highly effective industrial action, which broke through the Labour government's 5% pay norm in the winter of 1978–1979 and eventually broke the government itself, was in no sense politically-motivated, but was rather the inevitable pay-back for employers who had attempted to maintain the upper hand over workers of traditionally low status and bargaining power.[43]

Meanwhile, there were also significant short-comings in trade-union provision contributing to this type of volatility. For the rapid growth in size of the transport workers, the public employees and the local government officers was based not just on larger workforces to recruit but also on vigorous expansion drives to absorb ever more diverse groups into broad federations. As Robert Taylor pointed out at the time, these rather unwieldy bodies could only sur-

41 See Phillips and Whiteside, *Casual Labour*; and Jim Phillips, 'Decasualisation and disruption: industrial relations in the docks, 1945–1979', in Chris Wrigley (ed.), *A History of British Industrial Relations, 1939–1979. Industrial Relations in a Declining Economy* (Cheltenham, 1996), 165–185.

42 See Fishman, *British Communist Party.*

43 Paul Smith, *Unionization and Union Leadership. The Road Haulage Industry* (London, 2001).

vive on the basis of firm leadership from above and could only really be successful when favourable national agreements could be reached with public authorities. And even then the grievances of particular groups of members could still build up unacknowledged at the national level.[44] Moreover this tendency became even worse during the post-war boom because the rapid increase in black and female employment produced major groups of members who, as Ron Ramdin and Chris Wrigley have emphasised, remained dramatically under-represented within the ranks of full-time union officials.[45] The highly sensitive public-sector strikes in the winter of 1978-9 were, once again then, not the product of politically-motivated wreckers, or even of membership irresponsibility. Rather they were the product of the pent-up material grievances of groups for too long ignored, not only by their employers, but also by their own trade unions and by the national policy-making processes of the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party: quite an old story in the case of the general workers.

Conclusions

Some of the overall features of the consolidation of revisionism in British trade-union history should now be clear. Firstly, it has emphasised the diverse experiences of groups of working people. Initially this was presented as a simple declaration of difference in opposition to previous assumptions of homogeneity, but it is now increasingly possible to identify distinctive types within the broader emphasis on complexity. The organisation of the present article in terms of assembly workers with craft unions and an attachment to voluntarism, process workers with seniority unions and an interest in nationalisation, and general workers with federal unions and a concern for labour-market regulation, seems to capture quite well not only the economic and social influences on their distinctive employment relations, but also their evolving range of attitudes towards industrial and political strategies.

Secondly, the new paradigm has emphasised the importance of long-term continuities. That is not to imply that nothing has changed, for, as has been seen above, there have been recurring long cycles in employment and trade-union strength as well as quite dramatic shifts between sectors and regions. The reproduction of attitudes and values within organisations and their transmission between generations may therefore need more investigation, but ignoring its importance has been a perilous business, not only for the plausibility of historical models but also for the survival of governments.

Thirdly, revisionism has reminded us once again of the nature of the mainstream tradition of British trade unionism: basically moderate but still capable of widespread and stubborn mobilisation in defence of its own immediate interests. Though usually quite reasonable in its

44 See Robert Taylor, *The Fifth Estate. Britain's Unions in the Seventies* (London, 1978), for a perceptive journalist's survey of the position among the federal unions.

45 Ron Ramdin, *The Making of the Black Working Class in Britain* (Aldershot, 1987); and Chris Wrigley, 'Women in the labour market and in the unions', in McIlroy, Fishman and Campbell (eds.), *British Trade Unions. Volume 2*, 43–69.

demands, this long-standing social movement has been excluded from proper consultation both in the industrial sphere by most employers and in the political sphere by most governments. This has resulted in largely unnecessary confrontations and crises, particularly in the late 1960s and 1970s, and little has been gained in the long run by attempts to shift the blame onto media caricatures of political extremism.

It remains to be seen whether the Thatcher regime after 1979 achieved anything in the industrial sphere to stimulate the formation of significant new types of workers or to introduce any fundamental discontinuities into patterns of collective bargaining. It also remains to be seen whether the 'New Labour' ministers will prove more capable than their predecessors in the political sphere at constructing a viable understanding with the unions in a period of relatively full employment. So far the answer to both these questions appears to be in the negative, so there are still many important lessons to be learned from the study of labour history.