HISTORY OF THE GENERAL FEDERATION OF TRADE UNIONS, 1899–1980

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New Preface to the 2023 Reissue of *History of the General Federation of Trade Unions, 1899–1980*.

The publisher's decision to reissue this important book about the little known, but highly influential work of the General Federation of Trade Unions (GFTU) is a welcome one and very timely. Trade unions are on the rise again and the GFTU is playing a central role in this rebirth. Understanding its origin and history is therefore very useful and Alice Prochaska's work is the only published source for this. Based on the GFTU's own archives and numerous interviews with officials of the affiliates in the 1970s, she portrays the origins and continuing ethos of the Federation in the early drive for an inclusive solidarity among unions, and not just solidarity within large unions with financial power.

So much of our history can be hidden. The GFTU itself has always been very modest and just got on with the job of practical assistance to unions and their members, transforming lives for the better but unacknowledged by the mainstream media. By the time I was elected as General Secretary of the Community and Youth Workers' Union (CYWU) in 1987, I had not heard of the GFTU.

A friend pointed out the GFTU to me and it seemed ideal even in those days when you couldn't do a google search. So the CYWU applied for affiliation in 1991. Our first application was rejected. It was not clear why, but there were still in the GFTU then only manual industrial unions in membership and there was a sense that recruiting a non-industrial union might not be appropriate. The distinction, which I always thought was unhelpful, between blue and white-collar workers, was still alive at the GFTU. The GFTU rightly highly prized the social value of manual labour.

However, none of the unions around the GFTU Executive Committee table in 1991 exist today as independent unions. Several of those around the table today have been formed in the last 10 years.

Things change. Two years after CYWU's unsuccessful application to join, its affiliation was accepted, and this was indicative of

an inevitable new chapter in the GFTU's development. The wilful destruction of British manufacturing saw the demise of many of the crafts and skills which had generated the unions that led the GFTU for decades and the organisation would have disappeared if it had retained only industrial affiliates.

When I was elected to the GFTU Executive in 1995 I could instantly feel the deep tradition of many of the unions present. Some in their style, manner, concerns and lineage went right back to before the full Industrial Revolution. Some had highly technically specific names relating to the jobs their members did and on international delegations these tested the abilities of our translators. Most knew everything about their industry and controlled the skills required to run that industry and produce what it made. There was a huge pride in contributing to the making of the nation.

It was the long legacy of such unions that had among many other things, through the GFTU, formed an internal welfare state for members helping them and their families in times of need. The GFTU was the first international arm of British trade unionism. It built a huge building to be a centre of campaigning activity, Central House, opposite Euston station in London; it helped form the Labour Party; fought for returning soldiers' rights and payments after both World Wars; campaigned successfully for the formation of the national Welfare State and National Health Service; helped extend collective bargaining by the end of the 1970s to over 80% of workplaces and continually lobbied for progressive changes in Labour law and the introduction of the Employment Tribunals system and the need for a National Minimum Wage, and many things besides.

Of course manual workers and skilled engineers and others across industry campaigned tirelessly for health and safety improvements and I am always struck by the fact that when the Health and Safety At Work Act was eventually introduced in 1974, industrial accidents and fatalities were reduced by a staggering 80% over the following year. This reminds us just how dangerous factories and work sites really were.

Learning from the unions at the GFTU with their solid and steady way of doing things, their careful and considered approach to big questions was a real honour. I have always found that workers engaged in making things and solving practical problems in productive processes have a strong way of building their organisations and the prospering and the survival of the GFTU itself is a testament to this. It is a bit like the hand-made street furniture, engines, ships, even hand tools and machines of the Victorian and later industrial periods, they just keep going and were made to last.

Naturally some industrial unions had a playful spirit. One GFTU President who I respected greatly was a man of few words, but those he uttered fell as certainly as molten metal into a perfect mould. He set himself the challenge of conducting the shortest Executive Committee meeting ever and was proud as punch when he clocked it in at 17 seconds. This didn't mean anything was neglected. One entertaining approach he made to a potential funding crisis was to suggest, successfully, that as well as investing GFTU funds in the fickle roll of the dice of the money markets, the Executive members should take joint shares in a racing greyhound. Thorgill Twizzelena the Second's results unfortunately turned out to be no more successful than the financiers who have brought the world to crisis after crisis, but she provided much more light relief.

Reprinting the history of the GFTU at this point reminds us of something very significant about the British trade union movement. Setting aside the underestimated impact of its uniquely long roots way before the Industrial Revolution in the organisation of skilled workers, and setting aside the essential role it played in pushing for the universal franchise in a 134 year long struggle, and setting aside its role in creating alternative models of workers' democracy and the rule of the majority, the 5,400 or so trade unions that have been recorded in British history have been specific organisations built around particular trades and usually relatively small in size. General trade unionism, though in recent years attracting relatively high numbers of workers, is the exception rather than the rule. There have only been about 7 of them.

Most unions build vertically from the common identity of a particular occupation. Amalgamations have taken place as a result usually of changes and reductions to an occupation which have affected union finances or ability to succession plan. The idea that big is beautiful or that small is beautiful is not quite right. What is important is that a union genuinely represents its members and enables them to have more collective power in the workplace. The largest union in the country is ultimately only as good as its worst Branch.

Regardless of size, each GFTU affiliate has one vote on the Executive Committee.

A key virtue of British trade unionism, that is organising together whatever your beliefs or personal characteristics, to stop exploitation and oppression where you work and improve the terms and conditions of others like you, is precisely that you do not organise around your religious, political or racial aspects. How divided workers' movements are in countries where trade union centres are based on such things!

The early settlement on this issue in Britain was an important one. The TUC, which first established the GFTU, would be the main centre, and the GFTU would continually and consistently assist new unions to come into being, support well established ones and constantly innovate new services and ideas to take the whole Movement forward, and ensure internationalism and contacts were widely spread.

Alice Prochaska's wonderful first study of this great organisation will be full of surprises for the contemporary reader and stimulate further enquiry.

Doug Nicholls, General Secretary of the
General Federation of Trade Unions
June 2022

History of the General Federation of Trade Unions, 1899–1980

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Preface

The General Federation of Trade Unions came into being in 1899 incorporating the highest and most visionary hopes of many leading trade unionists in Great Britain. They wanted to forge an instrument of unity among all trade unions in the country, through which common action might be attained towards the betterment of all working people's lives. It was hoped that a nationwide federation of trade unions might transcend the sectional interests which necessarily made up the daily business of the multitude of separate unions in the country. Some hoped that with a solid enough financial basis for federation this new organisation could overcome the mixture of feuding and inertia so often displayed at the Trades Union Congress in the 1890s. It might become the industrial arm of the labour movement whose separate political identity was affirmed in the foundation of the Labour Representation Committee (later the Labour Party) in the following year.

After more than eighty years of sometimes turbulent history, the General Federation of Trade Unions in the 1980s is a modest but prosperous organisation catering for some forty unions (almost all also affiliated to the TUC) whose membership ranges in size from less than 100 to over 100,000. The great majority of its gross aggregate membership of over 490,000 do skilled manual work, with a high concentration in the textile and garment industries and a significant proportion also in specialised engineering, furniture making and the ceramic industry. Its small headquarters staff of four full-time officials including the general secretary provides a range of services which most affiliated unions could not provide for themselves: research, educational courses, publications on general industrial problems, and legal advice. It does not compete with but complements the services offered by the TUC, gearing its own services to the needs of its own small and medium-sized affiliated unions and providing an atmosphere at its courses and meetings where the members and officials of these unions can feel especially at home.

If we were to judge from published writings on labour history, the history of the General Federation of Trade Unions would seem a study in obscurity, buried with few traces in the corporate past of trade unions and the broader labour movement. The General Federation appears from time to time in a few pages of works on the labour movement in the early years of this century, but hardly ever gets a mention in any work dealing with a period later than 1920. Its early history is seen as something of a blind alley, or at best a path that

trade unions as a whole decided not to follow, and therefore of little interest. After the decline of the General Federation as a force in national trade unionism, round about 1920–3, its very existence is seldom acknowledged. Its continuation and gradual renaissance in the 1960s and 1970s are facts of which many active participants in and students of the labour movement are ignorant. But the GFTU, far from dwindling into insignificance, has turned itself into a highly useful representative of small and medium-sized trade unions. Many of these enjoy a record of success in industrial relations which might be the envy of more prominent organisations and provide services for their members which in some instances are superior to those offered by the giant unions to workers in the same or closely related industries. The GFTU in the late twentieth century is a very different organisation from what its founders in 1899 hoped it might become, and more modest by far than the vocal national representative of labour that its early management committee wanted it to be. In both its early and its present form, however, it holds a significant place in the history of British trade unionism, and the vicissitudes it has suffered in all its eighty years and more shed much light on the history of labour relations and working-class organisation in this country as a whole.

It is my aim in this book to draw attention to the unduly neglected past and present of the GFTU and to provide a framework within which its contribution to the history of British labour in the twentieth century may be understood. Several hundred separate trade unions have belonged to the General Federation at different times, and its activities have impinged on many different aspects of national industrial life, from the nuts and bolts of wage bargaining in particular industries to the principles of social insurance, international labour relations and the higher philosophy of syndicalism and the class struggle. It has not been possible in a limited time and space to provide anything like a comprehensive history. Much still remains to be discovered about the General Federation and its past, and I have left many sources untapped. I hope that other students of British labour may be stimulated by this book to probe further, and that in the meantime members of the GFTU, other trade unionists and more general readers may find matter here to interest and perhaps surprise them.

I owe a debt of gratitude to various organisations and to individuals, above all to the General Federation of Trade Unions itself for commissioning me to do this work and giving me the freedom to produce an honest portrait. The general secretary when I was commissioned at the end of 1976 was the late Leslie Hodgson, whose personal kindness was a great encouragement. The chairman

of the Management Committee in 1976–7 was Mrs Margaret Fenwick, who recently retired as general secretary of the Union of Jute, Flax and Kindred Textile Operatives (now the Jute, Flax Branch of the National Union of Dyers, Bleachers and Textile Workers). She and her successors as chairmen each year have been unstintingly generous with time, information and hospitality. My visits to them and my contacts with many others as the guest of the General Federation at the annual general council meetings in Edinburgh in 1977 and Torquay in 1978 formed the basis for this book and gave purpose and meaning to the documentary research. Without these personal contacts and all the reminiscences and verbal guidance that I received, it would have been very difficult to approach an understanding of the GFTU. I only wish time had permitted me to visit all of the unions now affiliated. The list of individuals who have helped me in this way would be very extensive, so I hope they will not feel slighted by this general note of thanks. The names of some of them will be found in the text and notes and in the notes on sources and bibliography. I must, however, thank by name the present general secretary of the GFTU, Peter Potts; the two research officers, Rod Smith and Roger Sutton, and the education officer, Nigel Knowles. I am indebted also to the several secretaries at General Federation headquarters, who have joined in helping me and making me feel welcome.

Others whose connection with this history is more detached have given very valuable help. Roger Rideout, Professor of Law at University College, London, who has long been associated with the GFTU as informal legal adviser and as a lecturer at the federation's courses, has read this book in typescript and made many invaluable comments. Parts of it also have been read by Logie Barrow of Bremen University, Arthur Marsh of St Edmund Hall, Oxford University, and Noelle Whiteside of Bristol University. For general discussion and advice I am indebted to Sir Harold Emmerson, formerly Permanent Secretary at the Ministry of Labour, to John Edwards, Certification Officer for Trade Unions and Employers' Associations, John Halmos of the TUC, John Hughes, Principal of Ruskin College, Oxford, Rodney Lowe of Bristol University and to several friends and colleagues at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, and at the Public Record Office. I am particularly grateful to the Keeper of Public Records for granting me six months' leave of absence in order to work on the book, to the Social Science Research Council for supporting me financially, and to the Director and Secretary of the Institute of Historical Research, University of London, for advice and many kindnesses while I was attached to the Institute during that time. The Twenty-Seven Foundation gener-

ously made a grant towards the cost of typing and photocopying the manuscript. I would also like to thank the many individuals in libraries who have lightened my task, especially in the British Library, the British Library of Political and Economic Science, Darlington Public Library and the Public Record Office. Thanks, finally, to Frank Prochaska, whose advice, criticism and moral support have been indispensable. For the imperfections that remain after all these kindnesses I am myself alone responsible.

ALICE PROCHASKA

List of abbreviations used in text and notes

agcm	annual general council meeting
AEU	Amalgamated Engineering Union
AFofL	American Federation of Labor
ASE	Amalgamated Society of Engineers
ASRS	Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants
ASTMS	Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs
ATWU	Amalgamated Textile Workers' Union
AUEW	Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers
BL	British Library
BLPES	British Library of Political and Economic Science
CATU	Ceramic and Allied Trades Union
CGT	Confédération Générale de Travail
CUB	Central (Unemployed) Body for London
ETU	Electrical Trades Union
FTAT	Furniture, Timber and Allied Trades Union
GFTU	General Federation of Trade Unions
GMWU	General and Municipal Workers' Union
IFTU	International Federation of Trade Unions
ILP	Independent Labour Party
JIC	Joint Industrial Council
LRC	Labour Representation Committee
LTC	London Trades Council
NAUL	National Amalgamated Union of Labour
NSMM	National Society of Metal Mechanics
NUFSO	National Union of Funeral Service Operatives
NULMW	National Union of Lock and Metal Workers
NUT&GW	National Union of Tailors and Garment Workers
PRO	Public Record Office
SDF	Social Democratic Federation
SLADE	Society of Lithographic Artists, Designers, Engravers and Process Workers
TGWU	Transport and General Workers' Union
TUC	Trades Union Congress
TURU	Trade Union Research Unit
USE	United Society of Engravers
UTWFA	United Textile Workers' Factory Association

VAF	Variety Artistes' Federation
WEA	Workers' Educational Association
WEWNC	War Emergency: Workers' National Committee

1

The Beginnings of the General Federation of Trade Unions, 1890-1900

Industrial Relations in Britain in the 1890s

Industrial relations in Great Britain today inherit a tradition that stretches back unbroken to the 1820s. In 1824, with the repeal of the Combination Acts of 1799 and 1800 which had forbidden the existence of 'combinations of workmen', some unions which already existed in defiance of the law became free to organise openly and others soon developed. As continuous associations of working people, they sought to maintain and improve the conditions of their working lives.[1] But the law scarcely bestowed freedom on their organisations. In 1825, barely a year after legalising the existence of trade unions, Parliament passed some much more restrictive legislation. The celebrated case of the 'Tolpuddle Martyrs' in 1834 showed just how oppressively the law could work, when six farm labourers from Dorset were sentenced to transportation for the crime of swearing an illegal oath for a seditious purpose, because they had sworn to work together to obtain higher wages.[2]

The Tolpuddle case coincided with the end of the first well-documented upsurge of trade union activity. The next great landmark in working people's industrial organisation came after the failure of Chartism, the movement for working-class political rights, in the 1840s: this was the formation of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers in 1851, the first of what the Webbs, pioneering historians of trade unionism, called the 'new model' unions of highly organised skilled workers in major industries. In 1868, with the foundation of the Trades Union Congress, trade unionism in Great Britain reached another watershed, the beginnings of a permanent working-class organisation on a national scale. By the 1890s the picture of British trade unionism was highly complicated. Some industries, like coal-mining and cotton textile manufacturing, were relatively well

organised into amalgamations or federations of unions with tens of thousands of members and boasting considerable strength *vis-à-vis* the employers. Other important industries like engineering (despite the dominant ASE) and woollen textiles were much more divided. In some, the division fell between unorganised labourers and multiple organisations of skilled craftsmen, while in other industries rival unions competed for the membership of very much the same sorts of workers, and divided along regional lines. Relative newcomers on the scene were the general unions, which catered for a shifting population of unskilled or casual labour. In spite of the great diversity and the large number of unions, however, not more than about a quarter of Britain's working population belonged to any trade union. Although the strength of trade unionism as a whole had grown enormously since about 1850, the scene in the 1890s was still volatile and swiftly changing, and the membership both of individual unions and of the movement as a whole fluctuated widely. Many unions, moreover, owed their existence mainly to the driving force of a particular leader, like W. J. Davies of the brassworkers, John Ward, the founder of the navvies' union, or Ben Tillett, the leader of the London dockers. Throughout the trade union world and in the TUC itself the personalities of the leading officials were profoundly influential.

The great dockers' strike of 1889 was widely thought to signal an era of 'new unionism'. Workers who previously had been little organised were joining unions which, unlike the older-established organisations in such industries as textiles and mining, required few or no qualifications for membership and offered the simple benefits of strike pay and solidarity in return for low contributions. They were led by some of the most daring and eye-catching of trade union leaders, men like Ben Tillett of the dockers, Will Thorne of the gasworkers and John Burns, the engineers' leader who had helped Tillett and Tom Mann to lead the dockers to victory. These men's militant rhetoric and qualities of leadership brought a new flavour to the Trades Union Congress. On the other hand, older societies too were organising in new ways to deal with the problems of the 1890s. In the Lancashire textile industry, seat of pioneering trade unionism and of some of the most fiercely guarded traditional crafts, the weavers' amalgamation was displaying a new militancy on behalf of both skilled and unskilled labour. Unions founded to protect the skilled crafts of heavy engineering, like the United Society of Boilermakers and Iron and Steel Shipbuilders, or the Friendly Society of Ironfounders, were devising schemes for greater unity within their trades. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain, formed in 1888, drew together the miners of several districts to fight for a legally compulsory 8-hour day rather than the sliding scale of payments on

which the more conservative miners' organisations still centred their negotiations. The Miners' Federation was rapidly to become one of the strongest and most distinctive trade union groups (it was still by no means a single union) in the history of British industrial relations. Membership of the TUC rose dramatically with the influx of new unionists in 1890, and although it dwindled during the trade recession of the early 1890s, by 1896 a steady rise was again in progress.[3]

Increased numbers of organisations with a greater numerical strength and new methods were far from being the preserve of the unions alone. As early as 1873, five years after the first meeting of the TUC, the National Federated Association of Employers of Labour came into being to combat the 'extraordinary development – oppressive action – far-reaching, but openly-avowed designs – and elaborate organisation of the Trade Unions'.[4] In the 1890s more federations of employers were founded in particular industries and the National Free Labour Association, formed in 1893 to provide a pool of blackleg labour for employers whose workers were on strike, presented the unions with another unwelcome example of the power of 'scientific organisation'.[5] Workers in many industries felt the impact of their employers' renewed organisation. In the gas industry this took a relatively benign form when the South Metropolitan Gas Company in London attempted to wean its employees away from the union with schemes of profit-sharing and co-partnership. But in the docks the Shipping Federation established 'free labour registries' in 1893 and provoked a major strike in Hull. Other examples of the employers' anti-union organisation were to be found in mining, where the coal owners locked out the miners and tried to impose wage cuts of 25 per cent in 1893; and among cotton manufacturers and railway companies.

It was the engineers who engaged in the most fiercely fought of all the industrial battles of the 1890s.[6] The Amalgamated Society of Engineers in that decade was gathering new strength and beginning to change direction. In 1892 supporters of Tom Mann, who had stood unsuccessfully for the post of general secretary in the previous year, succeeded in replacing the old local executive councils of the ASE with one central council. The new system put seventeen full-time central officials in the place of the previous four, and at the same time the society broadened its base to give full membership for the first time to workers in some of the newer processes, like electrical engineering. In 1896 George Barnes, who had stood for Rochdale as an Independent Labour Party parliamentary candidate in 1895, became general secretary. Barnes wanted direct political representation in Parliament for the ASE (which in fact was already paying £100 a year to John Burns, the former engineer who was Liberal MP for Battersea). He also

wanted a more militant industrial policy which would include a federation of all the unions in engineering and kindred trades; and he sought greater authority for the general secretary within the ASE. The engineering employers regarded the ASE under its new management as a threat. But at the same time they were looking for an opportunity to impose a national system of bargaining on an industry which, however centralised its main union might become, would always retain strong local diversity and independence.

Early in 1897 the London committees of the main engineering unions together with a number of smaller ones formed an Eight Hours Committee to campaign for an 8-hour day throughout the industry, the same cause that the Miners' Federation had already made the kingpin of its policy. As far as the ASE was concerned, there were other things to fight for, too. In parts of Scotland and the north of England, for example, the 'machine question' was the burning issue: employers who had introduced new machinery were using 'handymen' instead of 'labourers' to operate it, an intermediate grade not recognised by the ASE, which threatened the jobs of skilled labourers whose skills in any case were becoming obsolete. The London Eight Hours Committee had some success in negotiations with employers in London, but meanwhile the Employers' Federation of Engineering Associations, under the new leadership of Colonel Dyer of Armstrong-Whitworth, was preparing to resist the engineers' demands nationally. In March 1897 the ASE called for a levy of 9*d* per member and prepared for battle. In June a London branch of the employers' federation was formed, and the Eight Hours Committee refused to recognise it, threatening at the same time to call a strike against any employer who did not grant the 8-hour day. The employers' federation retaliated with a progressive lockout of engineers throughout the country (25 per cent of employees in each federated firm were locked out each week). In the minds of some of its members at least, the federation's resolve was to 'get rid of trade unionism altogether'.[7]

The national lockout of engineers lasted for nearly seven months. During the course of it the ASE found itself bearing some other unions' expenses as well as its own, and some of the other large unions involved, like the boilermakers and the patternmakers in areas outside London, caused permanent bitterness by negotiating separately with the employers. Energetic campaigns in the labour press, notably the *Clarion*, brought in thousands of pounds for the engineers' funds, as did special football matches and concerts and a huge demonstration in Hyde Park. Through the agency of Eleanor Marx, who did so much to help British trade unions during her short life, foreign trade unionists, especially in Germany, contributed generously. The TUC,

however, had done pathetically little to muster support. In January 1898, with its own funds close to exhaustion and with waning support from other unions, the ASE finally negotiated terms with the employers. Although the agreement that ended the lockout did set up machinery for the settlement of future disputes, it really represented humiliating defeat for the ASE: no 8-hour day, no agreement on the machinery question and no right to negotiate for non-unionists; let alone any approach to the closed shop, which the ASE in some areas had virtually achieved before the lockout. This complex and embittered struggle was the epic of the 1890s as far as most British trade unionists were concerned. It helped to convince many of them that there was an urgent need for some form of systematic joint action in the trade union movement.

Against this industrial background, trade unionists were increasingly uneasy about the attitudes of the legal and parliamentary establishment in general. Now that most working men had the vote under the Parliamentary Reform Acts of 1867 and 1884, growing numbers of them wanted to use their political power independently. Within trade union ranks there was a groundswell of dissatisfaction with the Liberal policies of Henry Broadhurst (secretary to the TUC Parliamentary Committee, 1875–90) and the other long-established leaders. Many working men were attracted to the socialist ideas put forward by H. M. Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation and, more important, to those of Keir Hardie, the Ayrshire miner and founder of the Scottish Labour Party. Hardie became effectively the leader of the Independent Labour Party after its formation on a national basis at the Bradford conference of 1893. The Liberal Party under Gladstone and then under the patrician Lord Rosebery, held little hope for a sustained representation of working men's interest in Parliament. Moreover, a series of important judgements in the courts in this last decade of the century was undermining the legal protection for trade unions' activities embodied in the Trade Union Act 1871, and union leaders rightly judged that nothing short of major legislation would be needed to reverse this trend. Three decisions in 1893, 1895 and 1896 severely restricted the freedom of unions to carry out peaceable industrial action including picketing. Then the decision of Mr Justice Farwell and subsequently of the House of Lords in the Taff Vale case (1900–2) laid open union funds to common law actions for restraint of trade, a crippling disability from which the Trade Union Act 1871 was supposed to have freed them.*

* Liability for restraint of trade before 1871 was a criminal and not a civil one, which made it all the more oppressive. The Taff Vale case itself did not involve a common law action for restraint of trade, but the decision paved the way for such actions. See R. Y. Hedges and A. Winterbottom, *The Legal History of Trade Unionism* (London: Longman, 1930).

During these years of ferment and realignment in the world of British labour, leaders of the working-class movement were looking for a formula that would bring them greater unity and strength. The idea of a federation that would unite trade unions and so create an irresistible weapon in the workers' struggle against capital had been in the air since the creation of the Trades Union Congress in 1868 and even before that. The notion finally bore fruit just one year before the birth of the Labour Representation Committee, or Labour Party, as it was to become. Like the Labour Party, the General Federation of Trade Unions was the outcome of several different schemes and of some heated disagreements. Although its subsequent history was to be very different indeed from that of the Labour Party, its origins in the British working-class movement in the 1890s shed much light on the possibilities that existed then.

The Campaigns for Trade Union Federation

Federation was a 'hardy annual' at the TUC in the early 1890s.[8] The Parliamentary Committee had drawn up a constitution for federation in 1890, the Congresses of 1893 and 1894 had both considered the question, and in September 1895 yet another scheme, devised by a committee appointed at the Norwich Congress the previous year, was placed before the Congress at Cardiff. The stumbling block of previous plans had been their failure to secure any agreement on a financial underpinning for the proposed federation, and the 1895 plan avoided this problem by simply omitting financial arrangements altogether. Financial benefits, claimed the framers of the scheme, would come from saving expenditure on disputes that the federation would settle at an early stage through mediation. Any financial assistance required by a union that did get to the stage of a strike or lockout would be easier to obtain through the auspices of the new federation than it had been previously. This was spineless stuff. But there were two more constructive features of the scheme: its reliance on mediation and its proposal that overall federation should be preceded by the federation of unions in kindred trades into groups which would then be represented in a general council and as equally as possible on the central executive committee which the general council would set up. The constitution was to be as democratic as possible, leaving full autonomy to the affiliated unions, and a subsidiary constitution was suggested for the industrial groups, which provided for the approval of any dispute by all unions in the group before sympathetic action could be taken, and for courts of conciliation and arbitration which would be set up by the group in case of

disputes between its members. The preamble to the scheme contained this singularly tame sentence:

> The aim of the Federation is the avoidance of all unnecessary friction between employers and operatives, by affording ample facilities for the adjustment of industrial difficulties through the agency of *mediation* or some such means.[9]

A heated scene followed the presentation of the report. Alexander Wilkie of the Associated Shipwrights, chairman of the committee responsible for the scheme, was supported by most of the speakers who followed him, and a show of hands gave a majority of 108 delegates to 68 in favour of forming the federation. Squabbling and booing accompanied the vote and after two card votes and much wrangling a majority of 133,000 against federation was recorded.[10] This was the Congress where the Parliamentary Committee had obtained a change in standing orders giving full weight to the numerical strength of the big unions and so diminishing the influence of the smaller (and often older) unions. A card vote took precedence over a show of hands in the new system and it was this issue that mainly accounted for the anger over the vote on federation. The episode was not auspicious for the future unity of the trade union movement, all the less so for having become entangled with the opportunist manœuvres of the Parliamentary Committee over the TUC's own rules.[11]

Congress was not to be allowed to forget the idea of federation, however unprepared it had shown itself for putting together a workable or acceptable scheme. In 1896 an obscure trade union organiser named P. J. King approached Robert Blatchford, editor of the *Clarion* newspaper, with a comprehensive scheme for a national and international federation of trade unions.[12] For more than two years Blatchford gave much space and full editorial support to King's articles on the subject. The *Clarion* was a lively and highly influential socialist newspaper. For a penny a week it offered its huge readership a mixture of practical politics and readable journalism on all sorts of subjects. The *Clarion* Cycling Clubs were among its most successful offshoots, combining healthy and sociable weekends with the inculcation of good socialist ideas for thousands of readers all over the country. Blatchford's views were influenced to some extent by those of the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) but still more by his own hatred of industrial competitiveness and his non-political vision of the right of all people to lead a decent, healthy life. He intensely disliked anything he saw as political intrigue and was a fervent campaigner for socialist unity. His most famous writing, *Merrie*

England, was first serialised in the *Clarion*. From 1894 it then sold more than 2 million copies in book form and is said to have converted more people to socialism in Britain than any other written work.[13] Although Blatchford said that he espoused King's scheme of federation not because it was socialist (he did not think it was) but because it offered some practical benefit to working people,[14] there was much more of socialism and the class war in this scheme than in any that the TUC had considered to date. By comparison with the proposals put forward in Cardiff in 1895, it was revolutionary.

King's plan for a federation of trade unions was ambitious and comprehensive. He based it upon equal payments, equal benefits and equal representation: each affiliated union would make a fixed contribution per week per head of its membership and it would then be entitled to exactly as much dispute benefit from each of the other affiliated unions (or in practice, from the federation funds) as it had paid in contributions; its voting strength in the federation would be proportioned exactly to the size of its contribution. The executive committee would consist of representatives of every affiliated union and would be required to vote its approval of any dispute before benefit could be paid. In the case of small disputes, affiliated unions would be free to conduct their own affairs without applying to the federation for benefit, and King made much of the fact that their autonomy would be unimpaired. A guarantee fund was to be formed consisting of the first year's contributions from each union, and no union could draw benefit until a year after entering the federation. Should any union wish to leave the federation, it would be entitled to withdraw with interest any money that it had paid in for a period of one year or more during which it had not received any benefits. The proposed level of contributions was 6*d* per week per union member. Benefits would be paid out at the same rate, but only in cases where a whole union or separately affiliated branch was involved in the dispute. No benefit at all was payable for disputes affecting only part of an affiliated union or branch. Estimating a potential aggregate membership of up to 2 million workers, King worked out that each one would receive about £4 per week in benefits while on strike or locked out. This figure, he conceded, was probably unnecessarily high and he proposed therefore that a maximum of 30 shillings per week might be given to each member, the remainder to be placed to the union's account in the federation funds.[15]

The *Clarion* scheme gathered formidable support from various sources. The Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants framed a resolution for the 1897 Congress (one of several resolutions on federation that year) which adopted King's proposals in outline.[16] The Scottish TUC, having put forward their own proposal at first,

dropped it in favour of the *Clarion*'s.[17] The Wharton Hall branch of the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners' Federation proposed at the federation's meeting in Wigan in August 1897 that 'the time has arrived when all trades should amalgamate in one federation' and that 12,000 copies of the Clarion Pamphlet on the subject should be bought for distribution among the miners. This was in direct opposition to the views of Thomas Ashton, general secretary of the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners' Federation, and tended to support the *Clarion*'s claim that federation had the backing of rank-and-file trade unionists even if it went against the vested institutional interests of their paid officials.[18] Further demonstrations of support from trade unionists at meetings throughout the country, and most notably from the railway workers,[19] were reported in the pages of the *Clarion* for 1897 and 1898 and, equally telling, support flowed in from some of the most respected leaders of the labour movement. John Burns wrote, 'Your scheme of Federation is theoretically comprehensive, financially practicable and tactically adaptable.' But he added, 'you have not allowed sufficient for the personal and official elements that in labour movements are sometimes inimical to progress as the bureaucracy often have been to the growth of Democracy within the State, whose paid servants they are'.[20] Blatchford subsequently pressed John Burns to head the new federation, but Burns's enthusiasm stopped short of that.[21] Henry Broadhurst, whom the TUC's new rules had excluded because he was no longer either a full-time official or an active worker in industry, also lent his support in the *Clarion*'s pages. 'The present union of unions requires a thorough overhauling and modernising' he wrote.[22] Further testimonials came in the pages of other labour journals. Keir Hardie backed the *Clarion* scheme in the *Labour Leader*,[23] an article in the SDF organ *Justice* approved,[24] and Bruce Glasier commended the scheme to the ILP as a model for its own constitution.[25]

As the *Clarion*'s campaign for federation progressed, its arguments gained force from the plight of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. In 1896 employers in the engineering industry had formed a federation to combat the growing militancy of the ASE. The following year, the employers' federation intervened when engineers in the London area struck for an 8-hour day and forced a national lockout. It was the first national strike or lockout on such a scale in British history. After six months' struggle the engineers had to return to work without having gained the 8-hour day and under humiliating terms which included giving the employers the right to determine whether skilled or unskilled men worked on new machinery. The lockout aroused prolonged discussion in the national press and helped to convince many trade unionists of the need both for a federation of

trade unions and for concerted political action. The engineers' leader was George Barnes, a member of the ILP and politically sympathetic to the advanced ideas of Tom Mann. From mid-1897, when the disputes began, his letters appeared in most issues of the *Clarion*, together with progress reports on the lockout and lists of subscribers to the engineers' cause.

On 1 January 1898, with the engineers still locked out, the London Trades Council held a conference to consider the best means of helping them. Robert Blatchford reported the proceedings with approval. Although the London Trades Council had produced a rival and slightly different scheme of federation, there was a great deal of common ground between its politics and Blatchford's.[26] The conference began by recommending a universal levy among trade unionists of 3*d* per head to form a fighting fund for the engineers. It then proceeded to condemn the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC. James Sexton of the Liverpool dockers moved, and Pete Curran of the gasworkers seconded, a motion deploring the apathy of the Parliamentary Committee. 'Most people were beginning to think', said Pete Curran, 'that the only function of a Parliamentary Committee was to buttonhole capitalist members of Parliament in the House of Commons with a request for support for labour measures.'[27] Robert Blatchford added his own gloss:

> [The Parliamentary Committee] should be at once abolished . . . . I do hope that this clique of belated and enervated amateur statesmen will soon be put upon the retired list . . . .If only the rank and file of the unions will learn to distrust paid leaders, to watch permanent officials, and to attend zealously and systematically to their own affairs, the tactics of Colonel Dyer [of the Employers' Federation of Engineering Associations] and his staff will prove entirely futile.[28]

By this time a committee set up by the 1897 Congress in Birmingham was at work on an official scheme of federation to be considered at the next Congress in Bristol. Blatchford and King, however, decided to pre-empt these deliberations, which they expected to be valueless. They called a 'Federal Labour Parliament' to meet at Co-operative Hall, Manchester, on 18–20 July 1898,[29] and here they achieved a large attendance. One interesting feature of the meeting was the support that it gained from unions which refused to join the General Federation of Trade Unions in the following year. The president of the parliament was Robert Smillie, the Scottish miners' leader, and vice-president J. Toyn came from the Cleveland miners. Ben Turner of the Yorkshire textile workers, later a supporter of the GFTU, acted as treasurer and T. Wilson of the Scottish bakers (who did join the

General Federation in 1900) acted as secretary. Among the 136 delegates was one from the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, which along with the Miners' Federation was later one of the most important unions to cold-shoulder the TUC's official scheme. The size and nature of the unions represented, with an aggregate membership of some 750,000, ranged from the ASE to the Amalgamated Society of Billposters, the Jewish Tailors and the Bolton Spindle and Fly Makers. The meeting agreed to an initial levy of 10 shillings per 1,000 members from each union represented there, and adopted the *Clarion* scheme of federation. P. J. King became secretary of the 'National and International General Federation of Trade and Labour Unions', which was to be governed by annual parliaments elected by the membership of the affiliated trade unions.

This, as it turned out, was the peak of King's success. Some of the unions in his federation, including the very important ASE, became founder members of the General Federation in 1899. Little was heard of the National and International General Federation after its first parliament. In 1902 King resigned from the secretaryship, and by about 1906 it had fizzled out.[30] Although a Clarion Pamphlet published by King in 1899 lambasted the TUC's official scheme of federation, Blatchford's columns in the *Clarion* newspaper itself were not so hostile to the TUC after the beginning of 1899. He appeared to be prepared to accept any workable scheme for the closer unity of the trade union movement, even though he wished to see King's efforts rewarded.[31] Why, when this scheme had made all the going for two years, when it had pushed the TUC into taking seriously the question of federation, when apparently it had gathered such strong support among both rank-and-file trade unionists and their leaders, why did it fail so quickly?

The reasons lie partly, no doubt, in the fact that the *Clarion* scheme opposed the TUC. Quite explicitly King's federation was designed to replace the Parliamentary Committee for which he and Blatchford avowed the deepest contempt.[32] Whatever traces of justice there may have been in the *Clarion*'s charges of apathy, aloofness and personal vanity, the fact remained that the TUC and its officials embodied such unity as the working classes then possessed. Few trade unionists would be prepared in practice to do away with the body that had represented their interests nationally since 1868, however superior the new institution might promise to be in theory. There was, further, a strong sectionalism among trade unions in Britain. Despite King's claim that federations of unions in kindred trades were simply accumulations of weakness, liable all to be involved in a dispute at one time and therefore powerless to help each other,[33] this was not always the experience of those trades that were federating in the