Trade Unionism in Britain

HYPOTHESIS: Although trade unions did play some part in the improvement of conditions of the working class, it can be seen that the political reforms of the period had a more substantial role.

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TRADE UNIONISM

The Industrial Revolution hit Britain at an alarming rate and with it came a decrease in the social standards of the working class. Trade unions seemed to be the answer to their problems - however in perspective, it can be seen that although trade unions did play some part in the improvement of conditions of the working class, the political reforms of the period had an even more substantial influence.

The Industrial Revolution brought a shift of population from the countryside to the cities. The cities mushroomed to house the rapidly-growing population and by 1914, over eighty per cent of British people lived in the city. The working class was ultimately crammed into cheap, unsanitary rows of houses and so began an era of appalling conditions and great human distress.

The factories, which boomed during this era, were erected to house machines and made inadequate provision, if any at all, for the "amenities" of employees such as lighting, heating, ventilation and the fencing of dangerous machinery. It was not uncommon for workers to fall prey to disease as a result of their occupations.

Men, women and children were employed in the factories, mills, workhouses and mines and worked a long, laborious day anywhere from twelve to eighteen hours at a stretch. Tiredness and fatigue made them careless and many exhausted factory workers were maimed or killed in the unguarded machinery. In the mines, work was dangerous and hard. Children were employed to sit in the dark and open doors when required; older boys and women were employed to drag along the carts loaded with coal. In return for their labour, employees received low wages and little protection from the illness and injury that so often accompanied their work.

Not only was this employment system unfair and inhumane, it was to breed a growth in trade unionism. A trade union today is an organisation of wage or salary earners; it is formed to protect and advance the interests of its members, principally by means of collective bargaining with employers. Trade unions of the Industrial Revolution were primarily focused on increasing wages, reducing hours of labour, improving working conditions and undertaking the role of a "friendly society" - a fund out of which insurance type benefits could be paid to members in need.

British employers bitterly resisted the formation of trade unions. They especially resisted the union's right to bargain or negotiate collectively for wage increases, as the economic theory of the time held that wages should find a natural level through the operation of supply and demand. The employers declared that union activity was "in restraint of trade" - a harsh blow to Britain's cherished *laissez-faire* principal. In 1799 and 1800, Parliament passed two Combination Acts which clarified the status of the unions by pronouncing them illegal and prescribing summary trial for those found guilty of entering into such combinations. It can be seen (Lindall, 1974, p.75) that "as the working class were just beginning to be drawn into the social upheaval of the Industrial Revolution, they were forbidden to protect their own interests using trade union powers".

Walshe (1971, p.114) has found that, "The outlawing of trade unionism in Britain ... was a great hindrance to the growth of trade unionism but it never completely suppressed the unions". Workers found ways to evade the bans, as they needed the protection of the trade unions now more than in the early period of industrialisation. However, the working class found that they had to direct their energies from the struggle for wages, hours and conditions to a quest for mere recognition of the right of the employee to form a trade union to represent him in negotiations with the employer.

The working class soon realised that in order to improve their social conditions, they had to first clearly establish trade unions as necessary institutions in an industrial society. Improvements, in wages, hours and living and working standards would naturally follow in due course. To do this, they found that they must be the agitators of political reform.

Walshe (171, p.114) understands that, "Just as Britain pioneered the Industrial Revolution, so her workers pioneered some of the most valuable developments towards the legislation of trade unionism". In 1824, Parliament repealed the Combination Acts after a special committee of investigation concluded that, "... the laws have not only not been inefficient to prevent Combinations ... but have, in the opinion of many of both parties, had a tendency to produce mutual irritation and distrust, and to give a violent character to the Combinations, and to render them highly dangerous to the peace of the community".

... and strike actions. The employers became alarmed and prevailed on Parliament to pass an amendment in 1825 which imposed restrictions on union activities and withheld legal recognition; the unions lost their striking power and their funds, property and buildings were unprotected by law.

A further half century of union activity was required in Britain to achieve full legal status. In this period, industry expanded, the number of workers greatly increased, many unions were consolidated and the public overcame its fear of unions as conspiratorial bodies menacing the stability of the economy. This new attitude was reflected in the Second Reform Act of 1867, which gave franchise (the right to vote) to urban working men. Thereafter, legal recognition of trade unions was a foregone conclusion and was officially effected by the Acts of 1871 and 1876.

From this gradual legalisation came the restoration of striking and collective bargaining powers. The first effective unions arose almost exclusively among craftsmen and skilled workers. The Amalgamated Society of Engineers favourably negotiated with employers for wage increases and their gains evoked admiration from other union movements. British craftsmen soon collectively bargained themselves to a higher class, an "aristocracy of labour", and towards the end of the nineteenth century were receiving wages twice as high as those of the unskilled.

What followed was a general resentment of craftsmen and skilled labourers by the working class and a great upsurge in 'New Unionism'. Unskilled workers underwent a process of adjustment to urban-industrial conditions: their sense of their own self worth had risen, they were pressing for the franchise, literacy was extending rapidly,

the quickening and cheapening of transportation made regional and national meetings of union representatives easier and news of trade union achievements abroad served to create dissatisfaction when progress at home was slow.

In particular, the success of three important legal unskilled worker strikes aroused immense enthusiasm for a new growth of unionism. These were the strikes of girls at a London match factory in 1888, of the gasworkers of London in 1889 and of the dockworkers of London, also in 1889. Connolly et. al. (1977, p.136) believes that these strikes "changed the whole face of the trade union world" and that a great spread of unionism then took place among the unskilled.

Thomson (1976, p.355) has found that, "Accordingly, the politics and policies of all European states came, in these years, to be greatly concerned with social problems". Through the agitation of writers such as Engels, Dickens and Mayhew, who heard the cries of the poor working class, and by the pressure given by trade unions, by 1871 Britain had extensive regulations governing the conditions and hours of work in factories, mines and mills. In 1909, a Trade Boards Act attacked 'sweating' in some trades. Conditions of shop assistants were improved by the Shops Act of 1911 and the consolidation of laws applicable to works in the mines also occurred in the same year. Additionally, 1911 saw the introduction of the National Insurance Act which guaranteed a vast contributory scheme to cover all workers against sickness and provided them with free medical assistance.

Clearly, British trade unions could achieve little on their own, without political reform and legalisation of their efforts. While they certainly did play some part in and achieved a great deal in paving the way for the future, it can be seen that the political reforms of the period prompted a more substantial improvement in the conditions of the working class. Trade unions became the pressure groups in their societies, influencing Parliament to enact measures which would not and could not be obtained by union action alone.

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