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The Trades Union Congress

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NOTES AND MEMORANDA

THE TRADES UNION CONGRESS.

FROM a chance gathering of a comparatively obscure character, through rough and stormy times, and countless adverse circumstances, the Trades Union Congress has steadily won its way until at the present moment it is scarcely too much to assert that it is the most important of all our annual assemblies. It is, in reality, the parliament of labour, furnishing to the workers fresh hope and inspiration, to the politician a ready indicator of 'paying opinions,' and to the statesman and economist grave problems pressing for solution. This year the Congress was held for the second time in Ireland, at Belfast. Neither the number of delegates present, nor the members represented, were so large as last year. This, though doubtless attributable in some measure to the periodical decline in union memberships on a contracting trade, was chiefly owing to the change in the standing orders governing representation. By resolution of the Glasgow Congress a union is now only allowed to have as many members represented as it pays for at the rate of £1 per thousand. Previously there was no limit. The figures last year were 495 delegates and 1,219,934 members, and this year 380 delegates and 900,000 members.

The report of the Parliamentary Committee was an unusually full and encouraging document. It told of a larger number of beneficial achievements—legislative and other—secured within the limits of the year by Trades Union pressure than on any previous occasion. It reported in detail the Factory Act and other reforms of Mr. Asquith, the extension of the Labour Department by Mr. Mundella, the educational schemes of Mr. Acland, besides several important pieces of industrial legislation of the year. It spoke in optimistic terms of the Employers' Liability Bill, and the adoption by the House of the principle of payment of members. An expression of pleasure at the second reading of the Miners' Eight Hours Bill was only counterbalanced by regret that no opportunity had been given for it to proceed beyond that stage. The appointment of seventy working-class magistrates was approvingly commented on, and Mr. Fowler was accorded thanks

for reducing the property qualification of poor-law guardians. Of the subjects dealt with of a non-Parliamentary character, the one of most far-reaching consequence was a draft scheme, provisionally agreed to, of a federal alliance between the twin movements, Co-operation and Trades Unionism. In this provision is made for a joint committee officially representative of the two great bodies. The committee is to have, among other powers, that of settling all differences between co-operators and their employés. A second proposal recommends the institution of a Trades Union label to be attached to goods sold by co-operators setting forth that they are made under Trades Union conditions, similar to that now in use among the Felt Hatters' Associations of America, and already partially adopted by several of our productive co-operative societies. One cannot now say more of the prospective influence of such an alliance than that it will be stupendous.

The Presidential address did not proceed along the beaten track of helpful allusion to the most pressing current problems. The departure was scarcely a success. It consisted for the most part of a vague, indefinite disquisition on the industrial sphere of Government, and a series of pointless platitudes on the need for religious tolerance, political gratitude, and increased representation of labour in Parliament. It also contained a long and straggling sketch of the factory legislation of the century. But such grave questions as alien pauper immigration, reform of the Poor Law system, old age pensions, were airily dismissed almost in a breath, while others even more momentous were not even alluded to.

The chief event of the Congress, and one for which it will long remain historical, was the passing by an overwhelming majority, and without any perceptible acrimony in debate, of a sweeping Socialistic resolution. It was the culminating point in a four years' strenuous struggle. At Dundee, in 1889, when the London dockers were in the throes of their memorable strike, the first warning note of the coming cleavage was sounded between the collectivist and individualistic schools in Congress. The onset of the newer school was led by Mr. Keir Hardie. The intensity of the attack was only equalled by the crushing character of the defeat. Then followed the Liverpool Congress in the midst of the upward sweep of the new union movement. The Socialists were in force, but they were met with a stern and solid opposition. Their progress had been enormous, but their success was not yet. Newcastle, the following year, witnessed an accession to their strength from conversions in their opponents' ranks. Then came the Glasgow Congress of last year, when a fusion of forces was noticeable. The new men had come to recognise some of the older school's difficulties of organisation, while the general body of the latter showed a more marked inclination to accept the principles of the new men. As this year's Congress approached, though great things were expected, no Socialist was so sanguine as to believe that the delegates

would declare in favour of collectivism. In an amendment on a scheme of independent labour representation, Individualism *v.* Collectivism was raised as a direct issue. This amendment ran :—

‘Candidates receiving financial assistance must pledge themselves to support the principle of collective ownership and control of all means of production and distribution, and the labour programme as agreed upon from time to time by the Congress.’

After a lengthy discussion this was carried by a majority of 40, and on being put as a substantive motion was agreed to by 150 votes to 52. As an emphasis to this declaration Mr. John Burns, M.P., the most prominent of the socialistic labour leaders, was elected at the top of the poll for the Parliamentary Committee.

Of very great political significance was the increase in the majority in favour of the establishment of an independent labour party, from 1 only last year to 98 this. This emphatic declaration may be accepted as clearly indicative of the growing revolt of the workers against being represented in the political sphere, by men who stand for opposing interests in the industrial arena. To summarise the situation the workers assert that political friendship is inconsistent with economic enmity.

The Eight Hours question occupied a minor place, not because of any lack of interest, or decreasing belief in its advantage, but chiefly because its supporters having succeeded in carrying it by large majorities for several years, did not deem a repetition of arguments necessary or advisable. The resolution dealing with the matter demanded a universal measure, with organised trade exemption, as adopted last year.

That fruitful subject of debate for so many years, the law of Employers’ Liability, was quickly disposed of by a resolution approving the measure now before Parliament, and urging the Government to remain firm on the vital clauses.

Proposed amendments of the Factory Acts again occupied considerable time. The dockers and the laundresses both asked for such protection, and a general demand was made for increased inspection in the already protected industries. It is pretty evident that what is wanted is a new, sympathetic, simplified act, instead of the existing measures of exceptions and omissions.

In view of the grave character of the Unemployed Problem a resolution moved by Mr. Keir Hardie, M.P., is of special importance at the present moment. This declared that ‘to provide honourable and profitable employment for the unemployed is a question of the first importance, and should be treated as such by the Government of the day, and any Government failing to recognise this fact is unworthy of the support of the working classes.’ This was carried without a division!

There were several proposals dealing with industrial arbitration and conciliation. The only resolution carried on the subject was of a somewhat negative character. It asserted that no legislation on the

subject would be satisfactory unless compulsory power was given of access to employers' books. A further resolution calling upon Parliament to pass a measure to force the establishment of conciliation boards in connection with every industry was defeated.

Federation and amalgamation again came in for a good share of attention. The first resolution carried affirmed that all kindred societies should amalgamate. A second instructed the Parliamentary Committee 'to draw up a basis of common agreement for the purpose of bringing all organisations into closer relationship on the lines of the American Labour Federation, so that united action may be taken when an industrial crisis arrives.' In adopting this resolution it is doubtful whether the delegates could have been fully aware of what they were doing. To attempt to organise a Labour Federation on the lines of the American Federation of Labour would mean disintegrating some of our national unions. It is a federation for the most part of *localised* unions. It embraces other federations and unions, and parts of unions indiscriminately.

Other resolutions required the insertion of the trades' union conditions in all public contracts, reaffirmed the need for amending the jury and conspiracy laws, asked for a court of criminal appeal, demanded more rigid sanitary inspection of workers' dwellings, insisted upon humanising the Merchant Shipping Laws, and embraced other subjects of varying degrees of importance, which have come before Congress repeatedly in recent years.

In conclusion, it cannot but strike the mind of even the casual observer that in spite of the comparative state of excellence to which the congress procedure has been brought, there yet remains much improvement to be desired. Surely it is unnecessary to reiterate again and again resolutions agreed upon by Congress. It has long been resolved that speeches in support of the *principle* of Trade Unionism are not admissible. This resolution has been arrived at to avoid occupying time in discussing that upon which all delegates are agreed. Why should not exactly the same argument hold of all resolutions upon which Congress has shown itself overwhelmingly and progressively in favour for three successive years? Such resolutions might remain as standing instructions to the incoming committee from year to year until carried into effect.

It is also becoming increasingly apparent that to secure a higher state of efficiency the numerical strength of the congress will have to be reduced. At present it is altogether too large and unwieldy for the effective dispatch of business.

Opinion, too, is rapidly setting in the direction of giving the Parliamentary Committee, a more definite position and relationship to the unions affiliated with congress. At present it is almost an irresponsible body. It is elected for a year from congress to congress. In the interval it is responsible to no one. No organisation, to whatever straits it may be reduced has the right to demand help from the

committee in any other form than that contained in a previous congress resolution. Thus in the case of the difficulties of the dockers at Bristol and Hull the committee did not render any assistance. Again in the present lock-out in which the miners are struggling for the maintenance of a vital principle of Trades Unionism no action was taken by the committee until the struggle had been in progress for fourteen weeks and then only in a casual way by the issue of a circular appealing for help. It is to be hoped that the Parliamentary Committee will be given executive power for parliamentary and certain other defined purposes with a recognised federal relationship to the unions of the country so that upon the fulfilment of certain safe-guarding conditions unions can under the stress of pressing difficulties of a specific character obtain its help.

By this reform the services of the committee to the affiliated unions would be enormously enhanced and it would become in reality the head of the great British Labour Movement.

CLEM EDWARDS

NOTES ON THE GROWTH AND INCIDENCE OF LOCAL TAXATION.

THE 'bitter cry' of the oppressed rate-payer is one with which we have been familiar for many years. At one time we find him clamouring for the transfer of some portion of his ever-increasing burden to the tax-payer or to the owner of personal property; at another he is demanding the taxation of what he calls 'ground values,' or the imposition of a 'betterment' rate. But his voice, in one character or another, has been pretty constantly in our ears during the past thirty years.

What is the justification for this cry? In what sense is Local Taxation a 'burden'? To what extent is it increasing? And is the burden placed upon the right shoulders?

I venture to think that the real weight of the burden is generally exaggerated, and that its true incidence is often misapprehended.

I.

First as to the facts. All that can be known on this branch of the subject seems to be contained in Mr. Goschen's report of 1870 (House of Commons Paper, No. 201 of 1893), and Mr. Fowler's continuation of that report recently presented to Parliament (House of Commons Paper, No. 168 of 1893).

In estimating the real burden of the rates, and its growth from time to time, we shall derive but little assistance from the figures either of the actual expenditure of the several local authorities, or of the amount levied in the shape of rates. The true criterion must be the amount of the rate in the £.