WILEY

The Future of Trade Unionism

Author(s): H. Allsopp

Source: *The Economic Journal*, Vol. 22, No. 85 (Mar., 1912), pp. 130-134

Published by: [Wiley](#) on behalf of the [Royal Economic Society](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2221653>

Accessed: 18/12/2014 05:53

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Wiley and Royal Economic Society are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Economic Journal*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

THE FUTURE OF TRADE UNIONISM.

IN every trade union there are, roughly, four classes of men. There is, of course, no broad line of division between these classes, and the proportion of members in each class varies considerably in different unions. But looking at the world of trade unionism as a whole, one can say that on the average—

(1) About 20 per cent. of the members of trade unions are “dead-heads,” more or less passive members, some of whom look upon the union as little more than a sick benefit society. These men very rarely attend a meeting of the society; a small number of them are members only because they have been to some degree coerced to join.

(2) About 50 per cent. of the members are genuine trade unionists, men who thoroughly believe in the virtues of collective bargaining and in the principles of combination.

(3) About 20 per cent. to 25 per cent. of the members are men who, in addition to being good convinced trade unionists, have also a keen mental vigour and an inclination towards politics. These men, who have been the salt of the trade union movement, tend to become Socialists; they are often members of the local I.L.P. They are often the delegates from their unions to the local trades councils. Most of the representatives of Labour on local governing bodies are men of this class.

(1) 5 to 10 per cent. of the members are “irreconcilables,” men who have faith in nothing save their own energies; they usually call themselves revolutionary Socialists; they claim to be Marxists (ignoring the fact that Marx repudiated and detested the idea of revolution); they take up each of the new revolutionary doctrines as it arises and propagate it vehemently. At present they are calling themselves Industrial Unionists and Syndicalists.

It is now to be noted that each of these sections in the trade union movement has been sharply goaded by the events of the last three or four years.

The “dead-heads” have been aroused by the steady rise in prices. Their souls are in their pockets, and, if not in so many words, they have realised that the man who is now earning 20s. per week could have bought with it goods to the value of 21s. fifteen years ago.

The “unionists” have by the same fact had, not only their wages reduced, but also their faith in collective bargaining and in combination rudely shaken. “Trade unions exist to improve

wages and conditions of labour," they say. "But our real wages are *less* and our conditions are not much better." Clearly there is something wrong with unionism.

The "politicians" who have more or less unanimously practised the precepts of John Stuart Mill's followers, and have urged their unions to take political action, to gain an influence in legislation, to prefer working through Parliament to using the strike—these men are stung to anger, not only by high prices, but by the Osborne judgment. Their activities, their most cherished ideals, are suddenly declared illegal, and the fabric which has been built up by two generations of earnest, patient, long-suffering politicians is seriously endangered.

The "irreconcilables" have been further infuriated by what appears to them to be the futility of the Labour party in Parliament. "The Labour party is a mere wing of the Liberal party. It has been captured by the capitalists. We always said that nothing but strikes, and strikes, and more strikes, would be of any use to the workers. We always knew that nothing but a fierce acceptance of the class war would be any good. We have always preached red revolution, and now we are proved to be right." Such is the cry of that small minority, whose vehemence often leads thoughtless people into believing that they really do represent trade unionism.

Certainly there has been some excuse for that belief during the past year, for such cries have been very prevalent. But in view of the events indicated above, would it not have been remarkable if there had not been serious discontent and unrest? And would it not have been even more remarkable if that unrest had not been generally expressed in the terms of "the irreconcilables"? It was not so much that men suddenly came to believe in Syndicalism, in revolution, in violence. It was simply that their discontent found expression in the terms of revolution; just as in any State where there is political and economic unrest the form of expression is usually, and probably will continue to be, Republicanism.

Indeed, the majority of trade unionists are far from being revolutionaries; they belong to all political parties, and it is very unlikely that the trade union movement will become preponderantly even Socialist. What is much more likely is that the activities of most of the keener minds in the movement will be devoted to reaffirming and extending the true principles of trade unionism.

A stimulus of exceptional value has, in fact, almost suddenly

been applied to trade unionists. Economists have for some years been studying what is called "the Trust movement," and have long been familiar with the fact that most of the largest English industries are under the more or less complete control of combinations of employers. But the English trade unionist has only just begun to realise that opposing his 1,300 unions there are now 1,200 combinations of employers. In other words, while the trade union movement has been concentrating the greater part of its energies on political action, the employers have been stealing trade union thunder and practising very effectively the principles of combination and collective bargaining.

The revelation of these developments is already having a remarkable effect. All sections of unionists, save possibly the "dead-heads," receive from it a powerful motive to advocate federation or amalgamation. All sections are quite prepared to believe that what the employers have adopted must be advantageous. The true unionist has his faith in his principles strangely confirmed. The "political" member has always desired increased membership and federation. The "irreconcilables" have longed for the sympathetic strike and the general strike.

Thus there is beginning a great agitation for federation and amalgamation. The "irreconcilables" themselves have actually begun to realise that the general strike is impossible until the unions in allied industries are linked up into one organisation. Formerly, as industrial unionists advocating a combination of wage-earners irrespective of trades, they tended to look upon existing unions as obstructive vested interests. But now it becomes clear that the necessary policy is that, for example, all the unions of men working in the iron and steel industries shall either *federate* and form a joint committee for strike purposes, while still retaining their identity and autonomy for all other objects, or shall actually amalgamate, join the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, and form one great union for all purposes.

This is the real significance of the seamen's, dockers', and carters' strike, which has been a wonderful object-lesson in the principles of federation of all the chief sections of those workers engaged in transport. This, again, is the value to trade unionists of the strike of railway workers, in which the four chief unions acted together. And although both these strikes contained elements that can hardly be attributed to trade unionism, there can be no doubt that their effect on the resurgent policy of trade unionists will be immense.

It must not be imagined that this policy of federation and

amalgamation is new. The idea was mooted by Robert Owen, and in 1850 had already made possible the Amalgamated Society of Engineers. The principle also lies behind the formation of the Trades Union Congress and the General Federation of Trade Unions. But hitherto its advocacy has been little more than half-hearted. It was scotched partly by the growing political activities of the unions in the attempt to form a Parliamentary Labour party. Thus the few amalgamations that have taken place have been spasmodic and only very moderately successful, even with the engineers.

But present conditions in the industrial world are very different. Everything, and in particular the similar policy of the employers, seems to point the unions to the plan of forming ultimately some seven or eight immense groups of unions, each group representing one great industry—the iron and steel trades, the building trades, the mining industries, the textile workers, and so on. Already there seems to be an approach to completion of the negotiations for the amalgamation of the Trades Union Congress and the General Federation of Trade Unions. Already the four independent unions of railway workers are on the brink of coalescence, and there can be no doubt that in the near future much oratory, much vehemence, and much money, will be expended by trade unionists in pushing what is, after all, the genuine basis of trade unionism. The Secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions (Mr. W. A. Appleton) has already set the tune in a pamphlet entitled *The Trade Union Movement*, and the wisdom with which federation is advocated may be gauged by the fact that Mr. Appleton foresees the difficulties of converting the paid officials of smaller societies which may be absorbed: he wisely advocates that all such displaced faithful servants must either be found posts of equal security or be compensated, possibly by a pension.

A further fillip to the movement is provided by the Chancellor's concessions to small societies under his Insurance Bill. Even the State is going to give them every inducement to link themselves up with other allied societies.

What the results will be it would, of course, be foolish to predict. But speculation is not out of place here; and it is suggestive to ask whether the trade union movement will be able to maintain two strenuous lines of propaganda: (1) its political work, (2) its severe new union activity. The federated societies will, of course, save expense by their coalescence, but it is very doubtful whether they can find money enough, and, what is

much more important, leaders enough to run the two campaigns. It must always be remembered, too, that the bulk of the members are not actively enthusiastic about the utilisation of their societies by the Labour party. The question is further complicated by the fact of payment of members of Parliament, and it really seems as if, even though the Osborne judgment be completely reversed, the unions as such may be driven to take less and less part in politics, and that the Labour party will become more and more definitely a Socialist party, depending for its support mainly on local branches of the I.L.P., on Clarion Fellowships and the other Socialist organisations.

What, however, does seem quite clear is that trade unionism is going to gain an enormous access of strength if it really takes up once more its old policy of amalgamation and makes it effective. It is quite possible, indeed, that for a few years the political activity of the unions may be partly diverted to this kind of propaganda; but the ultimate gain of strength and wealth will almost certainly enable them to devote in the long run far more effort and money to the support of their own candidates.

In any case, it is certain that no legislation against the right to strike can hinder very effectively the growth of power of trade unions. Such legislation *may* make union leaders a little less ready to advocate a strike; but no law can compel men to work if they do not wish, no law can effectively punish all the members of a large union. In fact, any attempts to get such legislation partake very much of the nature of religious persecution; the more men are oppressed by such laws the more determined will be their resistance.

Thus, on all counts it seems better to be prepared for a great revival of trade unionism, and to look rather for more labour disputes than for less, unless, indeed, the employers make genuine attempts to remove the grievances under which the great majority of workers believe themselves to be labouring.

H. ALLSOPP

Ruskin College, Oxford.

THE COST OF FOOD TO THE CONSUMER.

THE following particulars regarding the retail prices charged in an inland residential town for certain articles of food are based upon dealings with a firm of grocers and a butcher. Both shops do a good, and in the case of the grocers a very large, family trade. The period covered by the accounts for groceries