The Story of Trade Unionism

By R. W. POSTGATE

(ii) THE FAR-FLUNG LINE

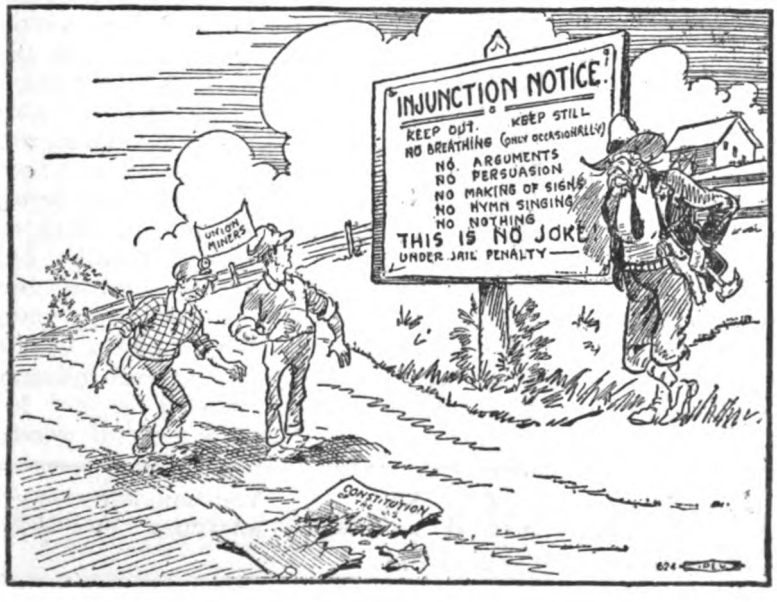
THE second generation of trade unionists was that which founded the trade unionism of to-day. Up till the 'sixties trade unions were things of sudden growth and sudden disappearance: their tactics were primitive, like those of Red Indians or Sudanese tribesmen. They formed in masses to rush the enemy's stockade: their advance was furious and deadly, but if they were checked and defeated, they fled in disorder and their great armies fell to pieces. The new, or reformed old, unions which now sprang up were unadventurous and slow if you like, but they were steady and unshakable. A defeat for these "amalgamated" unions did not mean disaster, for their return in greater strength was certain. Their members were almost irremovably attached to them. They carried their union cards with them to the ends of the earth. Two of the most famous — the Engineers (A.S.E.) and the Carpenters and Joiners (A.S.C.J.)—found, by emigration, that they had branches in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and the United States—some of them counting a very considerable membership. This "far flung battle line," indeed, tempted some of them into the folly of attempting to direct the affairs of their branches in the new countries from a headquarters in another and distant country. Chandler, the A.S.C.J. secretary, attempted to act as general in an engagement with the United States "Brotherhood of Carpenters"; the Operative Plumbers actually amalgamated in this century with the Capetown Plumbers.

The principles on which the new unions were founded were (an unusual thing) based on a carefully-thought-out policy. The group who directed them—known later as the Junta, but at the time called the Clique — observed that the weakness of trade unionism was due to two main causes (1) Maladministration. The absence of any effective central authority, the brief and vague rules, the independence of the branches, the absence of headquarters' staff, and the general habit of carrying on local and central business in a public-house bar, all produced a continuous and irremediable disorder. (2) There was no bond to hold members to their union. They continually lapsed, through carelessness or other reasons; and only returned when a struggle seemed likely. The unions were skeletons in between strikes. They never had a chance of accumulating any funds. The Clique, whose chief members were William Allan (A.S.E., now A.E.U.), Robert Applegarth (A.S.C.J.), Daniel Guile (Ironfounders) and Edwin Coulson (Bricklayers), either reconstructed existing unions or founded new ones based upon principles which cut at the root of all these diseases. Elaborate and complex rule-books were issued which covered every thinkable difficulty and made impossible any free-and-easy gifts to branches which found themselves in difficulties. All funds were transferred to head office, which received authority to conduct all trade movements, and was given a paid secretary with sufficient staff. To "anchor" the members firmly in the union, high subscriptions were fixed, and high benefits attached. Instead of the old small subscription and single "trade" fund, the union had a subscription three times as high and numerous sickness, accident, unemployment, burial, superannuation or emigration funds. A man would think twice before he sacrificed by "lapsing" all that he had paid into these. It was in pursuance of the same object, too, that the new unions were made strictly "craft" unions. A joiner felt a closer bond to a joiner, and a plumber to a plumber, than either did to the building workers as a whole. They both learnt to look down upon the builders' labourer. The Clique,

moreover, lectured their members roundly on their shortcomings. They told them that their only hope was to educate themselves and "give up the taproom for the lecture hall." They urged them to improve themselves both as craftsmen and as men. The old generation of trade unionists indignantly called them prigs and nuisances, and banged their beermugs down on the counter. But the new unions grew steadily and bore down the old; and with them they brought the acceptance of another principle, which did not seem called for so urgently. The Clique, children of the age of Mr. Gladstone and John Bright, were enthusiastic advocates of Liberalism and peace between employers and employed. They believed strikes and lockouts were evils which could and should be avoided; and they strained every effort to secure co-operation between capital and labour.

This seems odd enough to a modern reader, odder still that they were able to "get away with it" and show genuine successes and improvements. But the adoption of this policy is really only another evidence that our political thought is determined by the economic circumstances that surround us. Karl Marx, in his famous *Communist Manifesto*, ended with the words "Workers of the World, unite! You have nothing to lose but your chains." In other words, he based his call to revolutionary Socialism on the fact that the workers had no financial reason to defend the existing system. But now a time was coming when the British workers did not have "nothing to lose but their chains." The British Isles had attained a short period of enormous industrial expansion. The first convulsions were over and the capitalists were reaping the reward of being first in the industrial field. There was scarcely any country that could do without British products, and there was no country which could rival her. A stream of gold was pouring into the islands; and the employers could spare some for their workers. General strikes, Grand National Unions, and "documents" were the last things they wished to hear of. The Clique offered them the hand of friendship, and, tacitly, a bargain was struck. The employers abandoned union-hunting, wages went up and hours went down. The union headquarters tried to, and almost did, make strikes cease altogether.

The Clique, in doing this, was able to point to real victories. There is no doubt that an average British worker was better off, enormously better off, in 1895 than he was in 1855. The employers had been receiving, through certain curious, never-



THE LAW AS A STRIKEBREAKER IN THE UNITED STATES.

(Cartoon from the journal of the United Mine Workers of America.)

to-be-repeated circumstances, a long shower of wealth, and the workers had managed to secure a share of it. This success imprinted every feature of the "amalgamated" trade unionism, good or bad, on the unions of the world. Especially was this so in America, where the later years of the nineteenth century saw the growth of unions which were deeply impressed with the success of the British unions, and whose leaders had sometimes been actual members, sometimes, like Gompers, were wholly under their influence. Consequently, the "A.F. of L." unions exaggerated all the principles of the Clique, until (just as a common weed, grown to an enormous size, is a different plant) they were hardly recognisable as unions. It is as though a man wishing for a broad umbrella were to make one so broad that it covered the sky—or as if knowing that he had to drive far along a certain road on his journey, he were therefore to drive along it without ceasing and without end, forgetting the object of his journey and merely going for ever for the sake of going on. The "amalgamated" unions had high subscriptions: the A.F. of L. unions developed giant entrance fees and subscriptions that barred the ordinary worker. The "amalgamated" unions encouraged the craft spirit: the A.F. of L. unions laid a formal ban on industrial unions and split industries up into a tangle of mutually hostile craft unions, for whom co-operation became impossible, as was shown by the great steel strike. The "amalgamated" unions granted power to the central office: the A.F. of L. unions have let a powerful and often corrupt headquarters domineer over union branches till one finds cases where the union has developed an actual "machine" which stamps out rank and file criticism. The "amalgamated" unions favoured peace with the employers when the latter had good reason to agree, the A.F. of L. unions have continued this policy and exaggerated it in face of an "open shop" drive which has shattered their unresisting forces to pieces.

This extraordinary development was prevented in Britain by two things. One of these was the ending of the period of solitary splendour in which Britain dominated over the markets of the world. Germany, then France, then the U.S.A., and even Japan began to come in as rivals, and to fight for markets and for colonies. The employers were being pressed harder, and they passed on the pressure. Nominally, wages did not go down. All that happened was that prices went up. The period of co-operation came to an enforced end. The second reason was that a new class of worker began to enter the trade union world. The unskilled or semi-skilled worker had never been able to afford high subscriptions, and elaborate craft divisions had no interest for him. The miners began to make their voices heard: in 1872 even the agricultural labourers organised for a short while. In 1889 the world was startled by the uprising of a group of workers whom everybody had declared to be unorganisable. The London dockers came out and remained out for months, aided by generous help from Australia. After paralysing the premier port of the world, they won a victory.

Once these new faces began to appear at trades union congresses, the rule of the old style trade unionists was doomed. Moreover, strange voices were raised within their own ranks. The delegates of the A.S.E. itself became "new unionists," even—terrifying word—Socialists. Under the influence of men like H. M. Hyndman, William Morris, Keir Hardie or Tom Mann, a quite new philosophy was being preached to the trade unionist. In important particulars it varied very greatly, but the new Socialist message was clear on two points—first, that the increasing suffering of the workers could only be ended by the community as a whole taking over industry and distribution and running it, not for private profit, but for the general good:

second, that it was no good the unions pretending that they were there to co-operate with the employers, they must realise that their *raison d'être* was to resist the employers and defend their members. In other words, the unions were led back to the "class struggle" basis of trade unionism described in a previous article.

Reluctantly, therefore, from 1900 onwards, the trade unions entered into politics as the "Labour Party." They gradually accepted for this Party a Socialist programme. They learnt that all workers had a common interest, and "sympathetic" strikes began to appear again. The numbers of trade unionists began to creep up from the hundred thousands to the millions. The trade union army was beginning to reorganise itself as a single unit when the war of 1914 broke out and altered the whole face of the world.

It is too early yet to say exactly what the effect of the war has been. Certainly the unions emerged from it with many more members, and with a greater sense of their own importance. They had also had ample proof that the claims of the ruling class to hold their power were exceedingly ill-founded; and that whatever mistakes a Socialist Government could make, the class that made the war and made the peace would have no right to throw a stone. By the Council of Action in 1920 they forbade the war that Lloyd George had planned on Russia; and, rather to their surprise, saw the Government bow before them. They stood together in defeat as well as victory: the General Strike of 1926, terribly mismanaged though it was, was a grand gesture of solidarity with one oppressed section—the miners. It may at least be said that the trade unionists to-day have realised that they have a struggle to fight, and that they are nearer victory than they were before the war.