

The British Labour Movement and the Industrial Depression

by

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The effects of the present economic depression on British trade unionism, its membership, funds, and organisation, and its political and other external relations are described.

Successive wage reductions during 1921 and 1922 are held to have been effected to some extent independently of other economic phenomena, such as reduction in volume of production and profits, and to have been more severe than the fall in prices warranted. On the other hand, there has been but slight retrogression in hours of labour, while the spread of the custom of granting an annual holiday on pay has been a distinct development. The causes of the decline in trade union membership during these two years from nearly 8½ million to probably 6 million persons are analysed. The depletion of trade union funds over the same period is attributed to the enormous demands paid in unemployment benefit. On the other hand, the greater strength of the organisation of the trade union movement, especially by means of the amalgamation of small unions, is stressed, and details are given.

The final pages of the article deal with the representation of labour in parliament and with forms of labour organisation other than the regular trade union movement, and the author comes to the conclusion that the effects of the economic depression, great as they have been, have not, as in 1879, led to any collapse of trade union organisation. This he attributes to the tardy results of an improved educational standard during the past half-century and other similar causes.

IN the latter part of the year 1920 the trade union movement in Great Britain reached an unprecedentedly high point. Trade was brisk, continuous employment was general, and wage rates in currency were at their highest, while even "real wages" (the amount of commodities and services obtained for each week's work) were relatively good. It is always in such circumstances that trade union membership (as in 1892, 1901, 1907, 1913) attains its successive high water marks. Then there sets in an ebb, which reaches its lowest point two or three years later (as in 1879, 1886, 1895, 1904, 1909).

THE ECONOMIC DEPRESSION

The position of trade unionism at the close of 1922 cannot be understood without due appreciation of the economic depression

of 1921-1922. Whatever may have been its determining factors, the fall in prices throughout the world, which became conspicuous in retail transactions in Great Britain from November 1920 — accompanied as it was by a rapid decline in the volume and the profitableness of production and trade, and in the numbers of workers employed — was quickly followed by a general fall in trade union membership, which has continued in practically all industries for nearly two years. This has been coincident with a universal campaign among employers for a drastic cut in wages. Each month of the years 1921 and 1922 has seen the insistence by employers, in one trade after another, upon successive reductions in wages rates. It has been officially computed that these reductions have amounted during 1921 to about £6 millions per week, and during 1922 to a further £4 millions per week, making a total reduction in the wage earners' aggregate income of more than £500 millions per annum. This is the central fact of the situation (1).

Broadly speaking, it may be said that the years 1921 and 1922 have seen, in Great Britain, more or less concurrence of the following economic phenomena, namely: a universal reduction of prices; a decrease in the total volume of production and trade; a diminution in the rate and also in the aggregate amount of the profits of employers; the discharge from employment of a great number of wage earners; a universal fall in the money rate of wages; only a slight reduction in the rate of interest from durable investments coupled with an actual increase in the aggregate amount paid to the owners thereof; no reduction (and probably in the aggregate some slight increase) in the amount taken as rent of land and buildings; and, as the wage earning class universally believes, a fixed determination on the part of the employers, with the support of the whole community of property owners, to cut down what were more than once alluded to in the newspaper press as the "swollen wages of war time".

(1) From the following table it will be seen that the heaviest wage losses have been sustained by the iron and steel trades, the engineering and shipbuilding and the building workers.

Industry groups	Workers affected	Net decrease per week, 1922	
		£	s. d.
Iron and steel	240,000	243,000	20 3
Engineering and shipbuilding	1,305,000	1,178,200	18 0½
Building	509,000	394,800	15 5
Other metals	374,000	209,100	11 2
Furniture and woodworking	92,000	48,100	10 6
Public utility services	364,000	188,900	10 4
Mining and quarrying	4,037,000	536,700	10 4
Transport	993,000	490,200	9 10
Chemicals, glass, brick, pottery, etc.	276,000	134,700	9 9
Textiles	1,001,000	404,600	8 1
Paper, printing, etc.	190,000	59,400	6 3
Other industries	167,000	49,600	5 11
Food, drink, and tobacco	283,000	74,200	5 3
Clothing	715,000	161,600	4 6
Total	7,546,000	4,170,100	10 5

This is not the place in which to attempt any estimate of the correlation of these phenomena or even to determine their exact sequence. But, as bearing on the result for trade unionism, it is to be noted that the movements in the rates and aggregate amounts of wages have been markedly different from those in the rates and aggregate amounts of interest and dividend received by the capitalists, and also from those in the aggregate amounts exacted as rent of land and buildings. Thus the aggregate amounts of some of the shares of the common product have moved in different directions. Moreover, the coincidence between the movements in the rates and in the aggregate amounts of wages, on the one hand, and the movements of such other factors as the volume of production and trade, or the rate and amount of employers' profits, or the cost of living, on the other, has been very far from exact or universal. The reductions in wages have been enforced, not only in the mass of industries in which the volume of trade and the amount of profit have fallen away, but also in those industries (such as brewing, on the one hand, and banking and insurance, the Stock Exchange, and finance generally, on the other) in which, by exception, profits have admittedly remained high or even increased, and likewise in national and municipal services not conducted for profit and not appreciably varying in volume. Nor have the reductions in the rates of money wages usually been coincident with the fall in the cost of living. They have frequently, and perhaps normally, preceded the successive reductions in the retail prices of the articles of working-class consumption; and in nearly all industries they have gone beyond (and in some cases far beyond) the decline in the cost of living. By November 1922 the somewhat optimistic government statistics had to admit that even such of the wage-earning class in Great Britain as were fortunate enough to be employed at all had, on the whole, lost all the advances that they had gained since July 1914. Whereas the average advance in the rates of money wages in Great Britain, taking all trades together, in the last quarter of 1922 as compared with July 1914, has been estimated at between 75 and 80 per cent., the average increase in the prices of the commodities and services consumed or used by a working-class family in November and December 1922 over those of July 1914 was authoritatively computed to be approximately 80 per cent. In many cases the wage reductions have been carried much further. Thus throughout the great industries of coal and iron mining, engineering and shipbuilding, and pottery — to name only the most conspicuous cases — it seems clear that such of the three millions of workers as were so fortunate as to be employed full time at the close of 1922 were obtaining from 10 to 50 per cent. lower real earnings (i. e. commodities and services) in return for their labour than the corresponding workers obtained in 1914. The cotton operatives, who suffer through short time more than by complete unemployment, are, as regards actual earnings, in like case.

It seems, indeed, as if the wage reductions have been enforced

without any reference to the amount taken out of the product by the recipients of rent and interests ; not, as a rule, concurrently with any fall in the cost of living ; nor yet with any reduction either in the rate or in the aggregate amount of any particular employer's profits. Moreover, these wage reductions do not even show any exact correspondence with the falling off in volume of production or trade. On the contrary, the reductions have seemingly been effected in fairly close correspondence with unemployment in the industry concerned, if not, indeed, with the aggregate numbers of the unemployed in Great Britain as a whole. Now wage rates do not fall automatically, any more than they rise automatically. The universal and repeated reductions in wage rates have been brought about by decision of the employers, who are now more effectively combined by industries and in national federations than ever before. It is therefore easy to understand why trade unionists, in common with the wage-earning class as a whole, attribute no small share of the slump to the determination of the employers, some of whom during 1918, 1919, and 1920, are popularly believed by them to have openly expressed their intention to seize the first opportunity of reducing wages fixed during the war period.

On the other hand, it is to be recorded that, despite many protestations by employers and some threats, there has been only the very slightest retrogression during either 1922 or 1921 with regard to the hours of labour. Though no general 8-hour Act has been passed, 48 hours have become almost everywhere the customary working week. The building trades retain almost unimpaired their complicated working week, differing slightly from town to town, but on the whole varying from about 46 hours in summer to about 42 in winter and averaging about 44 hours throughout the year. The railway workers, on the one hand, and the tramway and omnibus workers, on the other, have suffered a slight loss in the way in which their overtime rates are computed, and also in some cases in the hardship of the "spreadover" times of their "split" periods of duty. The system of multiple shifts has been slightly extended among the coal miners, the soap makers, and some others. But there has been no systematic extension of the working day.

Even more significant has been the continued spread of the concession of an annual holiday on full pay, varying from three to 14 or even 21 days, over and above the six separate days in the course of the year almost invariably observed (though often without pay for the manual workers) as public holidays. Such holidays on full pay, though long usual for clerical and the managerial staff, were almost unknown before the war for manual workers. From 1919 onward they become frequent, and in over a hundred cases they have been safeguarded by joint agreements covering all the workers concerned. Among the principal industries in which such holidays on full pay now form part of the regular conditions of employment, as arranged for by national agreements, may be

mentioned boot and shoe making ; printing ; bookbinding, etc. ; heavy chemical manufacture ; flour milling ; cocoa and sugar-confectionery trades ; cement manufacture ; match making ; printing-ink making ; paper bag and paper box making ; envelope and stationery making ; paint and varnish manufacture ; process engraving ; gas and tramway undertakings ; non-trading services of local authorities ; and mental asylums (indoor staffs). But similar terms are arranged for by district agreements for many other industries, including brewing, baking, butchering ; water-works and electricity undertakings ; co-operative society employees ; cemetery and funeral workers ; dressmaking ; type-founding ; road transport workers ; cinema operators ; and various kinds of shop assistants. This extension of holidays on full pay has been one of the most remarkable unnoticed developments of the year. Even female domestic servants in upper and middle-class households now expect and receive (besides their annual money wage) "board wages", that is an allowance for maintenance, for their fortnight's holiday each year.

The past year, even more so than 1921, has been a period of relatively few strikes, the aggregate time lost during the whole twelve months through disputes of all kinds not amounting to 20 million days, or less than is lost by the universal two days' public holiday at Christmas. Taking together the two years in each case the number of separate disputes and the total number of persons directly affected by them has been considerably lower in the period 1921-1922 than in 1919-1920. During 1922, as the *Ministry of Labour Gazette* for January records, "these totals are much smaller than those recorded for any year since 1918". But just as the year 1921 was marked by a universal stoppage of the entire mining industry for three months, so the year 1922 witnessed a nearly universal stoppage for three months of the great engineering industry, coupled, for part of the time, by equally enforced idleness in the shipbuilding yards. In both cases the stoppage was caused by the insistence of the employers not only on drastic reductions of wages, but on a practically complete exclusion of trade unionism from any participation in industrial administration. After prolonged suffering by the wage earners and their families, with no little sympathy from the public, the employers won complete victories. The other principal dispute of the year was in the printing trades, where the compositors (outside the metropolis) held up the entire provincial newspaper press for some days in resistance to a cut in wages, the struggle ending in a compromise. In all industries, indeed, the employers' insistence on reductions of wages has had to be accepted, not necessarily because their economic inevitableness had been demonstrated, but because of the presence on the labour market of large masses of unemployed who could not have been prevented from accepting the employers' terms. In some conspicuous cases, for instance in the brewing industry at Burton and elsewhere, the wage reductions have been enforced while high profits have admittedly continued to be earned. The trade

unions have everywhere objected ; their officers have stubbornly combated, often with great skill and knowledge, the employers' contentions ; the negotiations have been prolonged to the utmost ; in ten or a dozen cases on an average each week the men have even stopped work, if only for a few days, in resistance to some aggression on their accustomed conditions of employment ; but in almost every instance the most that could be obtained, so far as wages were concerned, was some postponement of the drastic "cut at wages" ; sometimes its division into two cuts, spread over an interval, and occasionally some mitigation of its severity.

TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP

The effect of the economic depression on trade unionism in Great Britain has been serious. The aggregate membership of all trade unions, which is officially computed to have risen from 4,192,000 at the end of 1913 to 8,493,000 at the end of 1920 — a doubling in seven years — sank by the end of 1921 to 6,793,000. It is probable that the figure for the end of 1922 will be somewhere in the neighbourhood of 6,000,000 ⁽²⁾. Allowing, on the one hand, for the continuous increase of population — the five years' cessation of emigration counterbalancing the naval and military mortality — and, on the other, for the reversion to domestic employment of many war-time workers, we must conclude that at least 25 per cent. of the trade unionists of 1920, representing half the increase since 1913, have fallen away within the past two years. The following table gives statistics of aggregate membership from 1902 to 1921.

TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP IN GREAT BRITAIN 1902 TO 1921

Year	Aggregate membership at end of year computed by the Ministry of Labour	Membership (midyear) affiliated to the Trades Union Congress	Year	Aggregate membership at end of year computed by the Ministry of Labour	Membership (midyear) affiliated to the Trades Union Congress
1902	1,966,150	1,400,000	1912	3,287,884	2,001,633
1903	1,942,030	1,500,000	1913	4,192,000	2,332,446
1904	1,911,099	1,422,000	1914	4,199,000	2,682,357
1905	1,934,211	1,541,000	1915	4,388,000	2,850,547
1906	2,128,635	1,555,000	1916	4,669,000	3,082,352
1907	2,425,153	1,700,000	1917	5,540,000	4,532,085
1908	2,388,727	1,777,000	1918	6,645,000	5,283,676
1909	2,369,067	1,705,000	1919	8,024,000	6,505,482
1910	2,446,342	1,647,715	1920	8,493,000	6,417,910
1911	3,018,903	1,662,133	1921	6,793,000	5,128,648

⁽²⁾ These totals are, it is believed, exaggerated to the extent of about 100,000 in each case by the inclusion (a) of about 70,000 members, chiefly engineers, resident overseas ; and (b) of about 30,000 cases of duplicate membership, mostly among teachers. Moreover, as the teachers' organisations are not usually regarded as trade unions and do not belong either to the Trades Union Congress or the Labour Party, a further 200,000 should perhaps be deducted from the totals.

It is interesting to give more detailed statistics for the close of 1913, and for the last two years (those for 31 December 1922 being not yet available), as to the distribution of trade unionists between the sexes and among the various groups of industries.

TRADE UNION MEMBERSHIP IN GREAT BRITAIN BY SEX AND INDUSTRY GROUPS IN 1913, 1920, 1921

Groups of unions	Men			Women			Total		
	1913	1920	1921	1913	1920	1921	1913	1920	1921
	<i>(thousands)</i>								
Agriculture	24	208	147	1	3	2	22	241	149
Mining and quarrying	920	1,148	937	—	7	5	920	1,155	942
Metal, engineering, and shipbuilding	546	1,131	1,003	1	17	11	547	1,148	1,014
Textiles									
Cotton	158	165	158	244	292	276	372	457	434
Other textiles	50	84	74	36	171	129	86	252	200
Bleaching, dyeing, finishing	55	83	74	11	30	23	66	113	94
Clothing	82	110	97	25	128	84	107	238	181
Woodworking and furnishing	60	116	96	1	6	4	64	122	100
Paper, printing, etc.	79	149	138	6	72	57	85	221	195
Building, decorating, construction, etc.	250	572	470	—	—	—	250	572	470
Transport									
Railways	327	606	504	—	12	6	327	618	507
Other	369	633	513	—	12	10	369	645	523
Commerce and finance	144	334	227	22	138	74	136	472	301
Public utility services	215	361	322	24	96	78	239	457	400
Teaching	52	67	64	70	141	146	122	208	210
Miscellaneous	98	188	162	7	63	48	105	254	210
General labour	351	1,179	783	24	174	80	373	1,353	863
Total	3,747	7,131	5,760	442	1,362	1,033	4,189	8,493	6,793

The causes of the decline in membership from the peak of 1920 are manifold and obvious. Millions of men and women have now left the war-time trades to which they had flocked and in respect of which they had joined trade unions. The steady restriction in volume of the industries swollen in 1915-1918 by war needs: the continuous ebb of trade and of wage earners from the temporarily congested munition areas: the continued cutting down of the staffs of the government departments: the reductions in the railway service consequent both on decline of traffic and on amalgamations — all these factors have deprived literally millions of men and women of the new occupations to which they had turned between 1914 and 1919, and in which they had (mostly for the first time) become trade unionists. Apart from those fortunate enough to be able to revert to their former occupations, the mere transition from war to peace industry must in itself necessarily have involved a great fall in trade union membership. In some cases the men or the families have emigrated. Others have started small agricultural holdings or become petty employers. Hundreds of thousands of wives and daughters have simply reverted to domestic duties. Old men and women and others infirm or partially disabled, who worked in wartime, now subsist wholly on their pensions; and their numbers are swollen by the partially disabled ex-Service men whose trade union membership has

lapsed. Still more remain outside trade unionism merely because they have never yet regained more than very casual or nondescript employment.

The second cause for the decline is the unprecedented extent and duration of unemployment, which has been specially severe and continuous from the latter part of 1920 onward in such highly organised industries as engineering and shipbuilding. When men are continuously unemployed for months and in some cases actually for years, a certain proportion even in the relatively well-paid trades exhaust their savings, lose their homes, drift

NUMBER AND PERCENTAGE OF UNEMPLOYED AMONG TRADE UNION MEMBERS AND INSURED WORKERS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM BY QUARTERS 1913 AND 1920 AND BY MONTHS 1921 AND 1922

Date	Number of trade union members			Workers insured		
	covered by returns	unemployed	percent. unemployed	number	unemployed registered	percent. unemployed
1913						
Jan.	884,444	19,498	2.2	(¹)	(¹)	(¹)
Apr.	912,063	15,719	1.7	(¹)	15,260	2.8
July	926,787	17,935	1.9	(¹)	(¹)	3.1
Oct.	948,601	20,857	2.2	(¹)	22,200	3.6
1920						
Jan.	1,564,066	44,735	2.9	3,827,571	233,583	6.10
Apr.	1,560,904	14,729	0.9	4,160,828	116,312	2.80
July	1,498,473	21,144	1.4	4,197,028	114,774	2.73
Oct.	1,400,890	73,612	5.3 (²)	(¹)	(¹)	(¹)
1921						
Jan.	1,586,507	109,970	6.9	12,000,000	977,276	8.2
Feb.	1,533,973	130,815	8.5	12,000,000	1,145,710	9.5
Mar.	1,528,001	152,118	10.0	12,000,000	1,355,206	11.3
Apr.	1,338,731	235,737	17.6 (²)	12,000,000	1,799,242	15.0
May	1,342,725	298,144	22.2	12,000,000	2,109,654	17.6
June	1,278,739	295,238	23.1	12,000,000	2,171,288	17.8
July	1,384,935	231,562	16.7	12,200,000	1,803,696	14.8
Aug.	1,419,530	234,864	16.5	12,200,000	1,603,369	13.2
Sept.	1,433,249	211,953	14.8	12,200,000	1,484,829	12.2
Oct.	1,442,352	224,614	15.6	12,200,000	1,554,973	12.8
Nov.	1,432,659	228,484	15.9	11,902,000	1,865,170	15.7
Dec.	1,431,820	235,872	16.5	11,902,000	1,934,030	16.2
1922						
Jan.	1,406,309	236,161	16.8	11,902,000	1,925,450	16.2
Feb.	1,389,969	226,698	16.3	11,902,000	1,838,223	15.7
Mar.	1,353,013	220,847	16.3	12,120,000	1,765,329	14.6
Apr.	1,387,333	230,308	17.0	11,881,000	1,714,968	14.4
May	1,393,452	227,838	16.4	11,881,000	1,598,888	13.5
June	1,393,615	218,626	15.7	11,881,000	1,502,955	12.7
July	1,334,339	195,447	14.6	11,881,000	1,458,264	12.3
Aug.	1,300,414	187,083	14.4	11,881,000	1,427,311	12.0
Sept.	1,299,798	190,048	14.6	11,831,000	1,414,378	11.9
Oct.	1,278,964	180,589	14.1	11,750,000	1,412,527	12.0
Nov.	1,305,750	185,044	14.2	11,750,000	1,454,336	12.4
Dec.	1,256,128	174,102	14.0	11,750,000	1,431,929	12.2

(¹) Not reported.

(²) Not including those thrown idle in direct connection with the coal mining stoppages in these months.

away alike from their craft and from the trade union branch to which they belong, and sink to lower levels, from which it is often impossible for them to rise, even to the extent of resuming payment of a weekly contribution. In the occupations suffering conspicuously from restriction of employment there is naturally only the smallest influx of young recruits, while trade union membership continues to be depleted by death and superannuation. The influence of a mere shrinkage of the industry is illustrated by the fact that the decline in trade union membership is trivial among cotton operatives, among bricklayers, masons and carpenters, among workers in food, drink, and tobacco, and among banking and insurance employees, these being all occupations in which there has been little or no shrinkage.

How extensive and continuous has been the aggregate unemployment can be shown only by the statistics (see page 216). It must be noted that even these colossal figures do not completely register the extent of the tragedy. Those registered as unemployed are exclusive of all agricultural workers and domestic servants (who are outside the scope of the state insurance scheme and seldom resort to the employment exchange). They also exclude the not inconsiderable number of those within the scheme who have "run out of benefit" through long-continued unemployment, or who are debarred from benefit by some technicality. The statistics omit also not only all workers on strike, but also all workers idle in consequence of industrial disputes in the establishments at which they work, even if they are not parties to the dispute or are merely victims of a lock-out by the employer. Moreover, the statistics take no account of those officially recorded as working only short time, whose number in April and May 1921 was officially recorded to exceed one million.

Lastly, we have to enquire to what extent the falling off in trade union membership is to be attributed to desertion from trade unionism, deliberate or apathetic. It is admitted by the organisations concerned that an appreciable proportion of the four millions of new members enrolled between 1913 and 1920 have during 1921 and 1922 simply let their membership lapse through the combination of poverty with discouragement at the failure of trade unionism to avert the catastrophic reductions of their wage rates or adequately to provide for them in unemployment. The number of those who have deserted trade unionism for the above named causes is large among the women workers, the shop assistants and warehousemen, and the general workers (as the unskilled labourers are now styled), and calamitously great among the agricultural labourers. This phenomenon has always been seen in previous years of ebb in trade unionism; and it is apparently not greater in proportion to the unprecedented growth of 1913 to 1920 than it was at former periods.

It is only in the last named feature that any decline in the trade union spirit has to be recorded. Among the old stalwarts of trade unionism, whether cotton operatives or coal miners, engineers or shipbuilders, the printing trades or the building

industry, faith in and devotion to trade unionism have remained unshaken. Moreover, even among the women, the general workers, the shop assistants and warehousemen, and the agricultural labourers, there is this time no collapse of the organisations and nothing worse than a numerical decline. Compared with the slump of 1879, which is the nearest approach within the past half-century to that of 1921-1922, there is an enormous advance in trade union solidity. Trade union structure remains unimpaired, and, as will be presently described, actually to some extent improved. Even with all the losses of the past two years, British trade union membership stands in the aggregate 50 per cent. higher than it did at the beginning of the war, and is double what it was at the end of 1911. The collapse has been most severe among the agricultural labourers. In 1920 there may have been 300,000 of these in trade unions, while at the end of 1922 there cannot have been 100,000.

It must be said that there are signs, in the latter months of 1922, of an arrest in the decline of trade union membership. It looks as if the movement had in this respect touched bottom. Thus the National Union of Railwaymen, which fell away during 1921, has actually increased its membership during 1922, standing now at about 350,000, while its competitor, the Associated Society of Locomotive Enginemmen and Firemen, has declined during the year merely from 64,000 to 60,000, being only about half of the actual reduction in the aggregate staff of drivers, motormen, firemen, and engine cleaners, for which this society claims specially to cater. The United Society of Boilermakers (96,000 members) has, in spite of unparalleled unemployment, declined during the year only by about 10 per cent. The Amalgamated Woodworkers' Union, which fell away by 10 per cent. in previous years, has during 1922 seen its rate of decline first diminish and then stop until the total membership (120,000) is now, in spite of the continued unemployment, pretty nearly stationary. This is the case also with the newly amalgamated Transport and General Workers' Union (300,000 members).

TRADE UNION FUNDS

There has naturally been a heavy depletion of trade union funds. At the end of 1919 the assets of all the trade unions reporting either to the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies or to the Ministry of Labour stood at the unprecedented total of £15,989,025; by the end of 1920, notwithstanding the beginning of the slump, this had increased to £16,045,241. This great accumulation, probably three times as much as was possessed by the whole trade union movement in Great Britain before the war, and much more per member than had ever previously been recorded, proved quite insufficient to meet the catastrophic slump. When unions find as many as 30 per cent. of their membership simultaneously out of work, and that for many months on end, the necessary unemployment benefit, inadequate as it is in amount,

flows out like water. During 1921 and 1922, it is estimated, the British unions disbursed £20 millions to their unemployed members, only a small proportion of which was contemporaneously provided by the extra levies, heavy as these usually were, collected from those members who were in employment. And there is in this respect no improvement to report at the end of 1922. If the decrease in the funds has stopped it is only because there is no more to spend. The figures for the end of 1922 are not yet available, but it is a matter of common knowledge that practically none of the principal unions have at present any considerable free assets. Some are in debt. Many are living from hand to mouth, dispensing only what they are receiving and glad to be able to abstain from mortgaging the property that they use for offices. Others still possess investments of some magnitude, but find these definitely allocated for the maintenance of the superannuation benefits to their retired members, whose numbers have grown extensively. The gross receipts of British trade unions which were officially computed to amount in 1920 to no less than £11,411,474 (or an average of 26s. 9d. per member) are still large; in 1922 possibly between £7 and £8 millions sterling. The current expenditure, however, (mostly in sick, superannuation, and unemployment benefits, with dispute pay and the necessarily heavy working expenses) must at least equal the aggregate income. The time for a reconstitution of reserves has apparently not yet come.

TRADE UNION STRUCTURE

In spite of the calamitous decline in membership and funds, the organisation of the trade union world has, if anything, slightly improved during the past two years. The proportion of the total membership belonging to the fifty principal unions has steadily increased. The movement towards the amalgamation of rival or competing unions has continued quietly, with some satisfactory results⁽³⁾. The number of separate trade unions has fallen since 1920 by about 15 per cent. The 1,425 distinct societies that were officially recorded at the end of 1920 were probably represented at the end of 1922 by no more than 1,200. The merely local society, small in numbers and isolated from the movement as a whole, tends to disappear. That many new and small attempts at independent organisation, which were encouraged by the boom of 1919-1920, have succumbed in the slump of 1921-1922 is no loss to the movement as a whole. Where absorption into larger societies has occurred, it is an actual gain; even partial unification is an advance. The building trades, which have suffered for a generation from extreme disunion and a multiplicity of small organisations, have strengthened themselves during 1922 not, indeed, by complete union throughout the industry, but by the increasing solidity of their half-dozen

⁽³⁾ Cf. Sidney WEBB. *The Process of Amalgamation in British Trade Unionism*, in the *International Labour Review*, Vol. I, No. 1, Jan. 1921, pp. 45-60.

principal societies. The Amalgamated Society of Woodworkers, with its 120,000 members, now covers practically all sections of carpenters and joiners outside the shipyards throughout the whole of Great Britain, with a substantial membership in Ireland. The Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers, with some 70,000 members, unites not, indeed, the whole building industry, but nearly all the bricklayers, masons, plasterers, tilers, and slaters, though the slaters in Scotland remain largely in the Amalgamated Slaters' Society of Scotland (1,300 members). The National Amalgamated Society of Operative House and Ship Painters and Decorators, with some 60,000 members, which has swept in nearly all the innumerable little local societies of the past generation, has maintained its hold on the trade unionist painters from one end of England to the other; while the Scottish Painters' Society, with 7,500 members, equally dominates the trade in Scotland. The old-established United Operative Plumbers' and Domestic Engineers' Association of Great Britain and Ireland, with 25,000 members, remains without a competitor in its craft. The National Amalgamated Furnishing Trades Association, with some 20,000 members, has maintained its union of many small societies of cabinet makers, polishers, etc., though the Upholsterers' Amalgamated Union, with over 2,000 male and 2,000 female members, still keeps its separate existence. The Amalgamated Society of Woodcutting Machinists (19,000 members) is without a rival in its specialised craft. The small National Union of Packing Case Makers (Wood and Tin), Box Makers, Sawyers, etc., with 1,700 members, represents another specialisation. The Builders' Labourers — once dispersed among numerous small societies — are now mostly gathered into two relatively strong organisations, the "Altogether" Builders' Labourers' and Constructional Workers' Society, with 60,000 members, and the National Builders' Labourers' and Constructional Workers' Society, with 25,000 members. The lines of demarcation between these two societies, on the one hand, and, on the other, the Public Works and Constructional Operatives' Union (2,000 members) and the National Amalgamated Operative Sheet Masons, Paviers, and Road Makers (3,000 members) are not clearly marked. The work of amalgamation among the whole class of building and constructional operatives has still far to go, but there can be little doubt that the four to five hundred thousand workers in this group are at the end of 1922 more strongly organised than they were ten years ago.

On the other hand, little progress towards unity has been made in the great body of the metal workers. In the lock-out in the entire industries of engineering and shipbuilding from April to June 1922 the negotiations had to be conducted, so far as engineering was concerned, by no fewer than 48 separate unions. The Amalgamated Engineering Union, with 335,000 members at the end of 1922, continues to regard all the other societies as interlopers. Some of these claim priority in age over their greater rival, others dominance in particular sections of the industry, such

as iron-founding, brassworking, the electrical trades, and pattern-making, while others, again, monopolise such special branches as spindle-making and tinplate working; nearly all of them steadfastly refuse to be absorbed. Nevertheless, the situation among these million workers is no worse than it has always been, and the feeling among the members generally for greater unity seems steadily growing.

Among the textile workers, while the cotton operatives retain their complicated but relatively efficient hierarchy of industrial federations, the woollen workers have gone on with their amalgamations, the strong General Union of Textile Workers absorbing during 1922 the National Union of Dyers and Finishers and the Yeadon Factory Workers' Union. In another industry the Marine Workers' Union has been formed by the amalgamation of the National Union of Ships Stewards, Cooks, etc., with the British Seafarers' Union; and this energetic body continues in sharp rivalry with the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union.

The disasters suffered by the coal miners in 1921 have weakened their organisations, both regional and national. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain, which at one time seemed approaching a million members, had in November 1922 only 773,752 members. This represents to some extent a falling away from trade unionism in certain of the coalfields, notably in South Wales, the West of Scotland, and the English Midlands, together with Bristol and Somerset, partly through the disaffection of extremists, but principally through the poverty and indifference of "the apathetic mass". But it represents also a suspension in the movement towards inclusion in the National Federation of those mine workers other than the hewers and those immediately associated with them. The number of unions of undermanagers, overmen, or deputies, of enginemen, boilermen, and firemen, of cokemen and bye-product workers, and of mining mechanics which are not affiliated either to the county association of miners or with the Miners' Federation itself is now larger than it was five years ago.

On the other hand, the great army of general workers (formerly called unskilled labourers), while losing several hundred thousand of its unstable members, has considerably advanced in the process of amalgamation. Notwithstanding all losses and in striking contrast with the position in the previous great slump of 1879, there seem to be at the end of 1922 not far short of one million of these general workers in unions, five-sixths of them in three great national organisations of experience and solidity. The National Union of General Workers (originally the Gasworkers' Union of 1889) has absorbed within the last two years half a dozen more societies, the principal being the National Federation of Women Workers (the last, as it was the chief, of the exclusively feminine trade unions). Including some 80,000 members thus gained, the National Union of General Workers stood at the end of September last, with sadly depleted funds, at a total membership of 278,523. Four of its officers have been

elected as Members of Parliament. The Workers' Union, of less than half the age of the National Union of General Workers, counts a somewhat unstable membership of many kinds of men and women wage earners, which may have numbered at the end of 1922 at about a couple of hundred thousand. Two of its officers have been elected Members of Parliament. The third of these organisations is the new amalgamation, completed at the beginning of 1922, of the Transport and General Workers' Union, having a membership at the end of September 1922 of 300,426, with three of its officers elected as Members of Parliament. This represents an amalgamation of the old Dock, Wharf, Riverside, and General Workers' Union (the original London Dockers' Union of 1888), with no fewer than fifteen other societies, all much smaller in membership, but some of them of equal antiquity.

The continual progress of amalgamation among these general workers, including, as they do, men and women employed in the most diverse occupations, in all parts of the country, in all sorts of industries, in factories and workshops, wharves and shipyards, side by side with skilled craftsmen of the most different trades, is one of the most significant twentieth century developments of British trade unionism. We note first the final abandonment, after half a century of devoted endeavour, of the attempt to organise women workers in trade unions apart from men. But even more important is the development as bearing on the aspirations of those who look to "organisation by industry" or to "guild socialism". There has been in 1922, in the preceding decade, very little tendency for the various craftsmen in each industry (however we may define an industry) to unite among themselves into one industrial union. The establishment of the Miners' Federation, on the one hand, and of the National Union of Railwaymen on the other, it may now be seen, cannot be interpreted as instances of conversion to industrial unionism. Moreover, of any tendency to union between the skilled craftsmen in an industry with the unskilled men and women in the same industry which industrial unionism postulates and on which the newer idea of "insurance by industry" would seem to depend, there is the very smallest indication, if any. On the contrary, the assumption by the unskilled labourers of the designation of general workers and their steadily increasing union in great national organisations, each comprising workers in the most diverse industries, with the deliberate intention of facilitating the ebb and flow of their members among such industries according as these severally wax and wane, are indications of a different character, more in consonance with the ideas underlying the establishment of the national system of employment exchange and state insurance against unemployment.

Improvement has continued during 1922 in the internal administrative machinery of the trade unions. The larger unions, having each from fifty thousand to four hundred thousand members, have necessarily had to cope with a continually increas-

ing volume of central office work. The administration of the state health and unemployment insurance schemes, in which the unions rightly claimed to participate, had itself already involved a relatively large body of clerks and the regular handling of considerable sums. The increase in the number of members on benefit, from three or four per cent. in previous years, to fifteen, twenty, or even thirty per cent. in 1921-1922, with the extraordinary amount of book-keeping and financial remittances that this involves, has seriously burdened not only the funds but also the official staffs. And there has come much other work. More and more of the unions make a practice of undertaking to present their members' claims to compensation for industrial accidents, whereby large sums are recovered from the employers at the cost of continuous work by a centralised legal department. Already one big union has a qualified solicitor as a full-time salaried member of its staff. The necessity of defending the members' interests in the numerous trade boards, which in the less well-paid industries fix a legal minimum of wages, has involved in many unions (especially those of the general workers) the engagement of considerable staffs of officers competent either to sit as members of these boards or to conduct proceedings before them. All this has meant the growth, which has been exceptionally marked throughout 1922, of an extensive and relatively highly qualified trade union civil service, of a kind scarcely thought of in the nineteenth century. The very considerable office staffs of the larger unions have necessitated equally extensive office accommodation, which is being increasingly provided, not in the centre of London or Manchester, where office rents are exorbitantly high, but by the acquisition of more spacious premises in the outer suburbs — a new development in trade unionism of which its founders never dreamt.

The improvement during the year in the machinery of the principal organisations has not been equally marked throughout the trade union movement as a whole. The local trades councils, of which there are about 550, have practically stood still in the amount and range of their activities, while naturally falling off in affiliated membership with the general shrinkage in numbers. The Trades Union Congress, which is the only federal organisation on the industrial side that covers the whole movement, has undergone little change during the past twenty years. Its only organ, the so-called Parliamentary Committee, of over fifty years' standing, was in the autumn of 1921 enlarged into a General Council of 32 members, elected by the whole Congress in eighteen industrial sections instead of by a single list. The General Council cannot be said, however, to have made much progress during 1922 in its projected task of giving an efficient organisation to each group of industries, still less to that of supplying an adequate "General Staff" for the industrial functions of the trade union movement as a whole. Only slight additions have been made to the central office staff; and, while some steps have been taken to foster the amalgamation of competing unions, practically

no advance has been made in the direction of co-ordinating forces in industrial disputes or of bringing the power of the movement as a whole to the assistance of its weaker sections. This may be accounted for, however, less by the inactivity of the General Council than by the still prevalent desire for autonomy among the larger and better organised unions.

EXTERNAL RELATIONS OF THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

Joint Industrial Organisations

Between the trade unions and the employers' associations organisation has, on the whole, increased and developed during 1922, so far as willingness to meet in joint committee is concerned. But the much-vaunted standing joint councils in the several industries — now universally known as "Whitley councils", because initiated by the Government at the instance of the committee presided over by Mr. Whitley (now Speaker of the House of Commons) — have fallen during 1922 increasingly into abeyance. Rejected by most of the larger and more active trade unions, these councils were formed in nearly a hundred trades, mostly those in which trade union organisation was not strong. The trade unions objected, even though represented on the Whitley councils, to cede to these mixed bodies the negotiations of the conditions of the wage contract. The Whitley councils in some industries have accordingly ceased to meet; in others the meetings have become few and perfunctory; only in very few industries are they functioning with any sense of reality. In the Civil Service, indeed, the Whitley councils seem to have been of real use in bringing to the notice of the responsible administrators the grievances and aspirations of the lower grades.

In the great railway service with its 600,000 wage earners, until lately in the employment of over two hundred separate companies which are now in process of amalgamation into four great railway systems, the Whitley councils have taken statutory form under the Railways Act of 1891 in a hierarchy of joint committees. At every centre where more than 75 employees are to be found there is a Local Departmental Committee of four elected representatives of the wage earners and four nominees of the employing company. Each company has, in addition, its five Sectional Railway Councils, acting for each of the five sections of the staff throughout its whole system, and composed of 12 elected representatives of the particular section and 12 nominees of the company. Finally, each company is to have a Railway Council, dealing with the staff as a whole, composed of two representatives of each of the five sections, nominated in each case by the Sectional Railway Council, together with ten nominees of the Company. In addition, there is for the entire railway system of the Kingdom a National Wages Council, to act as final arbiter with regard to wages and hours, consisting of four representatives of the railwaymen's three trade unions, four

nominees of the companies, and four representatives of the consumers or citizens. Two of these representatives of the consumers and citizens are nominated by the Federation of British Industries and the Association of Chambers of Commerce and two by the Trades Union Congress and the Co-operative Union. For the present railwaymen's wages are raised or lowered only in accordance with movements in the officially declared cost of living of working-class households — an agreement come to as part of the solemn bargain which ended the great national strike of 1919. Nevertheless, the companies during 1922 have sought to "nibble" at the railwaymen's earnings by changes in the regulations and allowances, notably as regards overtime, and by altering the amount of reduction for each recorded fall in the cost of living, and the men's condition has been, to some extent, adversely affected.

The alternative to the Whitley councils for the unorganised industries or those in which trade unionism had failed to secure a "living wage" was intended to be the trade boards, formed under the Trade Boards Act of 1908 and having power, with many safeguards, to fix a legally enforceable minimum wage throughout the trade concerned. Although after a whole decade of experience the Trade Boards Act was renewed and greatly extended by a statute of 1919, which was passed almost without dissent, many of the employers in 1921-1922 attacked the whole system so vigorously that the Government was induced to appoint a committee of enquiry. This committee recommended in 1922 an amendment to the law in the direction of curtailing the scope and range of the trade boards. The Government, acting in advance of legislation on the recommendations of this report, stopped the establishment of additional boards that were contemplated, restricted the activity of existing boards, and curtailed the official inspection by means of which the determinations of the boards are enforced, thus limiting the scope and effectiveness of the whole system. A Bill to give statutory sanction to this administrative policy has been for some time in preparation, but it has not yet been submitted to parliamentary criticism.

Political Activities

An even more significant step was attempted during 1922 in the Trade Union Acts Amendment Bill, which was introduced by Members of Parliament belonging to the Government Party, but not members of the Government, and passed through all except the last stage towards enactment. This Bill was devised and intended, as its authors do not conceal, to hamper the trade unions in their political activity. By the Act of 1913, adopted as a compromise, trade unions were expressly allowed to engage in other activities than collective bargaining and similar proceedings in settling their conditions of employment — notably in educational and political activities, including the support and maintenance of educational classes and of political newspapers,

on the one hand, and of Members of Parliament, on the other, provided that the union members had by special referendum decided on this course, and that any dissentient member should be entitled to demand to be exempted from his share of the cost thereof. It was proposed by the new Bill to enact that, after the trade union had voted by a majority or even unanimously to embark on any such course, it should be undertaken only at the cost of such members as might, year by year, individually express and renew consent thereto in writing. The calculation was that, even if the membership has manifested its overwhelming or unanimous desire that the union in its corporate capacity should take action, the necessity of obtaining every twelve months specific written authority from each of the tens or hundreds of thousands of members — many of them working away from home and often overseas — whose addresses can never be accurately recorded and are sometimes not recorded at all, would interpose an insuperable obstacle to the creation and maintenance of the Labour Party in Parliament. It remains to be seen whether the project of 1922 will be brought forward again.

The political side of the trade union movement, taking form in the federation of all the principal national unions and the trades councils of the various towns (together with the local Labour parties, the much smaller Socialist organisations, and a few of the co-operative societies) in the Labour Party, with an aggregate membership of four millions, has, indeed, during 1922 gone from strength to strength. The formal opening of its ranks in 1919 to "workers by brain as well as workers by hand" has brought it a large accession of influence. The 61 members whom it succeeded in sending to the House of Commons at the General Election of 1918, with a total Labour vote of 2¼ millions, grew during the ensuing four years, by successive victories at bye-elections, to no fewer than 76; and the General Election of November 1922 saw this number increased to 142 (including four members of the practically allied Co-operative Party), with a total Labour vote of 4¼ millions, being only one million short of the Government vote. The following figures illustrate the progress of the Labour Party in returning Labour Members of Parliament.

LABOUR REPRESENTATION IN THE HOUSE OF COMMONS 1901 TO 1922

Year	Seats contested	Seats won	Votes cast for Labour candidates	Affiliated membership
1901-1902	15	2	62,698	375,921
1906	50	29	323,195	921,280
1910 (Jan.)	78	40	505,690	1,430,539
1910 (Dec.)	56	42	370,802	—
1918	361	57	2,244,945	3,013,129
1922	414	142	4,200,000	4,079,000

Of the 142 Labour Members in 1922 about two-thirds are trade unionists and one-third members of the brainworking professions. There are 45 coal miners, 6 engineers, 5 textile operatives, 4 trans-

port workers, 3 railwaymen, and no fewer than 10 general workers, with 22 men of other industries. Among the others are practising lawyers (including three of the higher grade called King's Counsel), university professors, authors and journalists, a few manufacturers, other employers, and men of independent means. This success, which puts the Parliamentary Labour Party in the position of "His Majesty's Opposition", was the outcome of a carefully planned and energetically worked organisation of the whole of Great Britain, based principally on the affiliated membership in each of the 600 parliamentary constituencies, of which, however, from insufficiency of funds no more than 414 were actually contested. But above and behind the propagandist and electioneering organisation in each local constituency, the Labour Party has developed during the last two or three years a not inconsiderable central organisation for economic and political information, education, and research, assisted by a dozen "advisory committees", each composed of members of the Party having special experience or competence in the several subjects, covering international relations, the various aspects of commerce and industry, social services, local government, national taxation and finance, and other problems of British political life. During the past year, in view of the expected general election, the activities and publications of this department (together with its incessant stream of informative memoranda to Labour members and candidates) greatly exceeded anything ever before attempted by the organised Labour movement.

The development of the central organisation of the movement during 1921-1922 has not been confined to the political side. After the Trades Union Congress of 1920, with a view to avoiding duplication and to extending to the industrial side all the advantages that were being provided for the political side, arrangements (rendered possible by the offices of both bodies being placed side by side in Eccleston Square) were made, by the machinery of a National Joint Council with four sub-committees, for the common management by the Trades Union Congress and the Labour Party of the four departments of Press and Publicity, International Relations, Information and Research, and Legal Information and Proceedings. During 1922 considerable progress has been made in this co-ordination, so far as regards the first three departments, although the fourth, or legal, department has not yet been established. The experience of the year, while it has demonstrated how much there is to be gained by co-ordination, still leaves it uncertain to what extent it will be possible to develop joint action. But taking it all in all, there can be no hesitation in concluding that the central organisation of the Labour movement, with all its shortcomings, has never before been so well equipped or so efficient as it was at the end of 1922.

Even with regard to the "winds of doctrine" by which the more active spirits among the British working class are periodic-

ally swept, there is marked improvement. The so-called Syndicalist movement of 1906 to 1911, succeeded by the rebellious and sometimes turbulent tendency to "direct action" of 1911 to 1914, with which the small organisation called the Socialist Labour Party (which was at no time connected either with the trade union movement or the Labour Party, or, indeed, with the better known Socialist societies) was associated, now finds exponents chiefly among the British Communists, proclaiming their adherence to the theses of the Third International. These, although filling an altogether disproportionate space in the public eye, have a very slight influence on the trade union movement, and they stand outside not only the trade union movement, but also the Labour Party, which has steadfastly refused to admit to affiliation those who avowedly seek reform by other than constitutional and parliamentary action. The Guild Socialist movement — originally projected as the outcome of national "blackleg proof" trade unions "controlling the instruments of production" in each industry over the whole country, and therefore aspiring to rivalry with the characteristically British politics of the Labour Party with its adherence to parliamentary government — has made since its promulgation in 1913 only slight progress. Its effect has lain in influencing in the direction of mitigating the logical rigour of the general trend towards Collectivism. It seems now to be developing into isolated small-scale experiments in "co-operative production" by groups of building, printing, clothing, and engineering operatives, not necessarily at variance with the Labour Party and not essentially differing from the successive crops of "self-governing workshops" which have sprung up about every twenty years since 1833. It may, indeed, be said that at no time within the past half-century has there been so near an approach as at the close of 1922 to general acquiescence and agreement among such of the British working class as are in any way active-minded in favour of the political action advocated and pursued by the Labour Party.

What, finally, can be reported of the spirit and temper of the six million men and women, who, organised in the way described in the preceding pages, and generally supported by the other half of the wage-earning population not formally enrolled, make up the labour, or trade union, movement of Great Britain? We find them at the close of 1922 in the depths of economic depression, suffering more severely than has ever before been recorded from the extreme penury produced by successive reductions of wages to the extent of £500,000,000 a year, and from the privation, amounting often to semi-starvation, resulting from involuntary unemployment on a gigantic scale. This unparalleled depression has resulted in the disbursement of practically all the accumulated funds of the unions and in a severe decline in membership. But it is not marked in 1922, as it was in 1879, by any collapse of trade union organisation or disappearance of trade union structure. On the contrary, the internal organisation of the principal societies has continued to improve; the process

of amalgamation of overlapping or competing unions or of isolated local societies has gone on steadily if only slowly ; the smoothing out of inter-union differences by federations and joint committees has become general ; the central machinery of the Trades Union Congress has at least started on the path of regeneration ; while the political organisation of the movement, both local and national, has grown from strength to strength and proceeded from triumph to triumph. This relatively satisfactory position in organisation is the outcome of the intellectual development of the wage-earning class. We are experiencing in Great Britain the tardy results of the slow but continuous amelioration of elementary, secondary, and technical education during the past half-century, of the continuous training afforded in the present century by the Workers' Educational Association, Ruskin College, and the other Labour Colleges, and of the patient helpful co-operation with the workers of men and women of higher education and wider social experience. At no previous period has the general level of political intelligence among the British workmen been so high or economic knowledge so widely diffused.



