History Of Trade Unions Essay, Research Paper

In 1867, the Trade Union movement in Britain was limited to a mere 5% of the working class. They were uncoordinated and unsupported by the law. In fact, had the government, or even employers, cracked down on them they could easily have been crushed. Yet by 1900, they have millions of members, legal protection and strong political influence.

The early trade unions consisted mainly of artisans, skilled workers who could afford to pay the comparatively high subscription charges. Strangely, it is this exclusivity in their early stages which allowed the trade unions to grow into massive and widespread organisations. These early trade unionists did not see themselves as socialist revolutionaries destined to overturn the social ladder; instead they had no political agenda. They wanted only to be constitutional and respectable, they saw striking as a last resort. Although this early strategy was not successful, it allowed the trade unions to develop, if they were militant whilst they were weak they would have been crushed quickly.

They were saved from insignificance by some truly brilliant leaders, union leaders such as Guile (engineers), Coulson (bricklayers), Potter (carpenters) and particularly Applegarth, realised that the only way the trade unions would be strong was by consolidation. Thus in 1860 they formed the London Trades Council, they were moving towards a national platform but they still needed legal backing, not in the least to avoid the legal theft of trade union funds, a practice pioneered by Close in 1867.

The necessary legal support came from the unlikeliest of origins. A particularly avid trade unionist in Sheffield took it on himself to show non-trade unionists the error of their ways, by assault, intimidation and arson. Employers seized the opportunity to over react and demanded for a Royal Commission to investigate the conduct of trade unions, the government eagerly agreed, and both were prepared to hammer the trade unions when the damning verdict was returned. Had the Royal Commission gone against the trade unions there would have been little they could do to save themselves. However, the trade union movement was saved by the oratorical skills of Robert Applegarth, allowed on to the commission to represent the trade unions, he incredibly managed to persuade the commission that trade unions were necessary to lift the unbearable oppression from the working class, and that the outrages were not support by the amalgamated societies. The Royal Commission s verdict, surprisingly, in favour of trade union legislation and the unions held their strongest position ever. The result of this enquiry, combined with the increase of the working class vote resulted in a rush of trade union legislation from both Liberal and conservative governments, Gladstone’s Trade Union Act (1871) and Disraeli s Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act (1875). The unions now had legal recognition, giving them credibility and a strong base from which to grow.

The strong leadership again helped the consolidation of the trade unions, at a time when militancy and extremist action would have brought short-term aim; the leaders aimed for long-term strength. Realising the importance of public opinion, the unions remained peaceful even when it was not the best option for short-term gain. For example, the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants didn t sponsor a single strike for 17 years. This approach led to a reserved acceptance from employers and the necessary public support when the strikes did eventually come.

The trade union movement now had respectability and strength, yet it only represented the most aristocratic of the working class, for the movement to truly develop the unions would have to lose their benausic approach. This would not be easy, the unions were strong because their members were skilled and difficult to replace, and the unskilled workers were easily replaceable. Their only hope was solidity. The highly populated industrial regions provided the basis for this, cramped factories were the perfect places for large numbers of the unskilled to join together and begin their New Unionism. New Unionism was unionism for the masses, with recruitment without distinction and low subscription their memberships mushroomed.

The New Unions also benefited from excellent leadership, although of a different nature. The leaders, such as Ramsey Macdonald and Kier Hardie, were more dynamic and more politically orientated. They knew that the mass unions would have to become militant and strike to succeed. The new unions began to take action, following the advice of the new breed of intellectual socialists. The aristocratic youth, with little else to do, began to adopt Marxist ideology and spread it through the trade unions. One particular anti-capitalist was Thomas Mann, who produced What a Compulsory Eight-Hour Working Day Means to the Worker ; the pamphlet was cheap and soon became a best seller. It was this kind of mass coverage and ideology that lead to a string of successful strikes in the late 1880s. Will Thorne s organisation of London gas workers won an eight-hour day without being contested in 1880, the success inspired others. Soon the Bryant & May match workers and their phossy jaws were compensated after a display of overwhelming public support. The most notable of all triumphs was that of the dockers in 1889, after five weeks of strike action the dockers eventually received their two and a half pence per hour, their strike was sustained entirely from public donations, including 30,000 from the Australian trade unions. The dockers union membership rocketed by 40,000 members in one year. However these victories turned employers firmly against the trade unions and the most vital stage of the trade union movement was to begin.

Pushed by a slump in world trade and increased mechanisation leading to a requirement for less unskilled workers, the employers decided to unite and take on the unions. They founded the Federation of Employers Associations, giving them political and financial clout, and the National Free Labour association gave them a limitless supply of blackleg workers for use in strikes. When one unionist tried to organise himself a pay increase his employer fired him. The union jumped to his defence and picket to stop the blackleg workers, the owners sued, and the union had to pay them 30,000. This set a very worrying precedent for the trade unions. The unions were saved by their growing political strength and the fact that even the most unskilled workers were more efficient than the rotation of blackleg workers.

As the trade union movement reached the 1900s, it had transformed from a small group of uncoordinated artisan groups, to an framework of massive unions with huge funding, legal backing and a growing political interest and influence, which would eventually result in the Labour Party. This remarkable transformation was, ironically, marshalled by men such as Ramsey Macdonald, who were snubbed by the established political parties, despite their devastating political ability. The unwillingness of the successive governments to make genuine widespread working class reform forced the workers to unite together, behind leaders who were able to develop the trade unions carefully and skilfully.

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