

## TRADE UNIONS AND RESPONSIBILITY

TOM O'BRIEN, M.P.

*President of the Trade Union Congress, 1952-53*

POPE Leo XIII, in his letter *Rerum Novarum* of 1891, said the condition of the working classes was the pressing question of the hour; that the hiring of labour and the conduct of trade were concentrated in the hands of comparatively few individuals, so that 'a small number of very rich men have been able to lay upon the teeming masses of the labouring poor a yoke little better than slavery itself.'

In that same year there met in Newcastle-upon-Tyne the twenty-fourth Annual meeting of the Trade Union Congress, over which presided a miner—a Mr T. Burt. That Congress represented a little more than 1,300,000 organized workers. Last year it was my great honour, at the Isle of Man, to preside over the eighty-fifth gathering of the T.U.C. representing over 8,000,000 trade unionists.

The British trade union movement knew only too well the truth of the Pope's words. Had it not waged for many years before an incessant struggle against the evil social conditions produced by the growth of nineteenth-century industrialism?

When the first T.U.C. met in Manchester in 1868, 34 delegates attended, representing 118,000 members. Barely thirty-four years after George Lovelace, a farm labourer of the village of Tolpuddle in Dorset, and five of his colleagues, had been convicted before the High Court for 'treason'—i.e. administering 'an unlawful oath' and endeavouring to form a branch of the farm workers' union—and transported to Botany Bay in the infamous convict ships of the day. The beginnings of our trade unions are rooted in struggle, hatreds, victimization and oppression. They were outlawed as conspirators, deprived of the right to hold property, handicapped by Governments, and ruthlessly opposed by employers.

This story of dogged resistance by the workers to injustice is the same—miners, engineers, railwaymen, building trades, dockers, textiles—all waged war for the right to live, for the right of association. 'The State is bound to protect natural rights, not to destroy them, and if it forbids its citizens to form associations, it

contradicts the very principle of its own existence, for both they and it exist in virtue of the like principle, namely the natural tendency of man to dwell in society.' This great principle of Leo XIII gradually penetrated into the minds of those who had previously opposed it. Great and good men of all creeds and parties—among whom was Cardinal Manning—by their influence and exhortations began to break the intolerable resistance to the rights of the workers to organize and to have their unions recognized. From such sufferings and struggles, no one could complain if the British trade union movement had become one of the world's most violently revolutionary bodies, particularly when Marxist doctrine was capturing unions and political associations throughout Europe.

It is to the everlasting credit of the British trade unions that, despite all influences to the contrary, they have not fallen prey to the 'Class War'. The dignity of the human person is the central principle of the trade union movement. From that principle proceeds the *raison d'être* of its existence in the industrial field.

So much for the fight for rights. Now that that fight is largely won, what of duties and responsibilities? The great Dockers' Strike of 1890 started a series of serious and bitter industrial conflicts, which culminated in the so-called General Strike in 1926. During these thirty-six years employers, Unions and Governments learned much. The strike weapon was not so attractive after all. (Never must it be given up. I have elsewhere stated what in my view are the conditions under which it should be waged.) Victories were gained after heavy losses. Employers realized the damage done to their interests by their own intransigence; Governments, no matter of what party, recognized the need to assist both sides rather than remain aloof, and fully accepted the importance and value of trade unions in the industrial and social system.

The inter-war years saw a striking development of the machinery of conciliation and arbitration as a substitute for strike action. Hundreds of industries, by a process of collective bargaining, accepted into agreements with the appropriate trade unions provisions that, where a dispute could not be settled between the parties, the issue be referred to an agreed form of arbitration, binding upon employers and unions alike. The Ministry of Labour has played, and still plays, a vital part in the industrial life of the nation. Through its conciliation officers it advises and conciliates

in trade disputes large and small. The trade unions fully co-operate with the Ministry, although some unions prefer in the end to go their own way. During the War the trade unions agreed to an Industrial Order that severely restricted the use of the strike weapon, and suspended many practices and customs gained by decades of struggle. The coal industry, railways, docks and transport, building trades and many others, now have their own separate and special machinery for negotiating wages and working conditions.

There has grown up over the years a system of Industrial Relations between employers and unions that is the envy of the world. The discipline of the trade unions during the war and since—spasmodic strikes here and there notwithstanding—has shown beyond doubt that the trade union movement guided by the General Council of the T.U.C. has acquitted itself with a full consciousness of its duty to British industry and to the nation. It has not misused its great power and it is not likely to do so. Governments consult the T.U.C. on a wide range of industrial problems and prospective legislation. Chancellors receive submissions on budgetary policy and unions are represented on Royal Commissions, enquiries, Departmental Committees, public bodies, Statutory Boards, and the like, concerned with the interests of the workers in Great Britain and of the Commonwealth. Credit must go too, to those far-seeing employers for their part in building up our present industrial relations machinery. The spread of trade union organization has—and rightly—spurred employers to form their own protective associations. Almost every industry now has its own Employers' Federation.

Issues and industrial problems of great moment that concern industry and the nation are discussed every month by the National Joint Advisory Council for Industry. This top level council was formed to deliberate on high policy, rather than to settle disputes. It is composed of the National Confederation of Employers, the T.U.C., the Nationalized Boards, with the Minister of Labour as Chairman.

Leo XIII's principle of association, it will be seen, has been amply applied in Great Britain. More than a hundred years ago the struggle for the right of the working man to form and belong to his trade union began. I have sketched in this short article the story that followed. Today, to quote words Sir Winston Churchill

has on many occasions used in conversation with me, 'the T.U.C. is one of the great institutions of the realm'. It is part of our national life. Without it the organization of trade and industry would disintegrate.

Modern trade union leadership has to cope with Communist infiltration. Communists, especially the Communist shop steward, usually make 'good' trade unionists. They rarely break the rules of the Union. They attend all their branch and shop meetings, do most of the hack work, win the confidence of their fellow workers by their example of self-sacrifice and hard work. But all this in the end is for the glory of Soviet Communism. The right way for the wrong reason. They will disrupt when they are told to disrupt. They will obey the 'party line'. These 'active' workers exercise more power than their numbers or their intelligence justify, because the non-Communist is too apathetic to enter the 'active' field. Catholic trade unionists are no exception. The work done by the A.C.T.U., excellent as it is, hardly touches the problem. The Catholic Social Guild and *The Catholic Worker* both perform admirable service to responsible trade unionism, its functions and management, and these Catholic activities deserve bigger and better support from Catholic trade unionists 'on and off the job', as well as from the wider Catholic community. Individual Catholics have played a notable part in trade union development at all levels throughout its history. As a group, however, they exercise little influence on its affairs.

British trade unionism extends its high sense of responsibility in international affairs. It took the leading part in the formation of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions. This organization was established to co-ordinate the activities of national trade union centres throughout the free world and to assist the workers, especially in the under-developed territories. It combats the Communist activities of the Comintern World Federation of Trade Unions.

The great work done throughout the world by the International Labour Organization (the only survivor of the League of Nations) owes much of its success to the constant support given to it by the T.U.C. The T.U.C.s of almost every European country, the U.S.A., Canada and India, regularly send representatives to our Annual Congresses and we to theirs. This exchange of delegates is of the utmost importance. The T.U.C. calls a

Conference of Commonwealth Trade Unions every year, from which the backward and struggling trade unions in our colonies derive immeasurable help and inspiration.

The Trade Union movement plays a very responsible role in industrial education. Most trade unions publish their own magazines or journals. These invariably contain instructive articles on various aspects of industry, with particular emphasis on the industries in which their own members function. Technical training, industrial psychology, management, economics, social science, industrial history, are among the subjects dealt with. These too form the basis of weekend and summer schools, conferences and study groups sponsored by the individual trade unions, and by the T.U.C. Opportunities are given to honorary branch secretaries and other officers of trade unions and shop stewards to learn something fundamental about democratic trade unionism and responsibility to industry as a whole. The T.U.C. is also represented on a number of external educational and social bodies.

Trade unions must be conscious of their responsibility to see that nothing they do injures the markets on which our national trade depends. They are equal partners with employers' organizations on the British Productivity Council, formed for the purpose of focussing attention on, and harnessing a sustained national effort for, improved efficiency and higher productivity in industry and commerce, which is the only means by which present standards of living can be maintained or improved.

The convict ship that took those Tolpuddle Martyrs to Britain's nineteenth-century concentration camp did not make its voyage in vain after all.