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TRADE COUNCILS
DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR *

The first World War was an important period in the history of the British trade union and labour movement. It is well known that at a national level the leaders of the trade unions were consulted by the government to a greater extent than ever before, and that the signing of the Treasury Agreements represented a recognition of their importance, and made them partners in the prosecution of the war. Labour Party leaders also became members of the administration, thus confirming once and for all that they were "fit to govern". These were significant developments for the working class movement, but they did not take place without sharpened disagreements within the movement and the growth of increasingly radical political and social attitudes. The purpose of this article is to show that at a local level there were almost precisely parallel developments for the working class movement during the war years. There was a similar accession to power, if more limited, and to prestige in the local community, if often more grudgingly conceded. At the same time there was a growth of general disillusionment with the work which was undertaken, and by the end of the war, an increasingly militant attitude on trade union and general political questions.

I

Since their exclusion from the Trades Union Congress in 1895, the trades councils had changed considerably.¹ Speaking for wider sections of workers, they had increased their interest not only in electoral

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¹ Trades councils are, and were, local organisations to which are affiliated branches of trade unions, and occasionally other working class bodies. In 1914 there were nearly 400 such in the British Isles, and until the 1918 Labour Party Constitution, they were nearly always of greater importance locally than similar organisations devoted to purely electoral matters.

politics, but also in a wide variety of local administrative work, where they could perform a representative role. As recruiters to the trade unions, as bodies which were active on behalf of the poor, as defenders of trade union and general working class rights, the trades councils continued in 1914 to perform important functions for the movement of which they were part. They came to represent groups of workers beyond the few crafts who had constituted their membership in the nineteenth century, and took on broader interests and activities. As well as dealing with education in all its aspects, the trades councils agitated on behalf of the unemployed and the homeless, and interested themselves in such questions as hospital administration and the welfare services. Along with the increasingly successful electoral activities of local trade union organisations in the early years of the century, there was a growing variety of representative and quasi-representative functions to perform, including work on judicial benches, education committees, and in various aspects of the administration of both public and private welfare services. By the time of the outbreak of the war, many trades council leaders who were involved in such work, had achieved a position of some power in their local communities. This applied to the well-established men who led such bodies as the trades councils of Sheffield and Birmingham, or those in the Lancashire cotton towns. In Coventry and Leeds, trades council leaders were known as spokesmen of locally powerful movements, on wages and social conditions as well as on a wide variety of other matters. It was during the war that this position came to be accepted more fully and more widely than ever before. Local leaders of the trade union movement as well as national ones, were now acknowledged as people whose views had to be taken into account, and accepted increasingly as partners in administration. With electoral activity suspended, and local *ad hoc* machinery a common governmental device in the war years, the recognition of the local trade union movement was indicated by the increasing representation that it secured on bodies which administered such matters as pensions, exemptions from conscription and food price regulations. From the point of view of the war effort, trade union leaders were as important locally as they were on a national level.

The developments that are to be considered happened in a very similar way in different parts of the country. Perhaps the best illustration of the similar attitudes which existed can be seen in the reaction of the various trades councils to the beginning of the war. Many local bodies had been closely involved in the trade union militancy of the pre-war years, so much so that one Scottish secretary wrote just before the war started that "to all appearances we are only just entering on

the inevitable struggle between Capital and Labour.”¹ During the period a general strike in the event of the outbreak of war had been called for by the trades councils at Sheffield, Bolton, Blackpool, Belfast, and elsewhere.² When the war started, although some half-hearted efforts were made to act on the basis of these expressed attitudes, very soon a similar mood of bewildered pessimism can be seen in many local bodies, as virtually every one forgot the issue of the war itself, and concentrated instead on the social distress which was expected to follow its outbreak. In Birmingham as soon as the war started, the Trades Council secretary conferred with the local Independent Labour Party secretary and took “preliminary steps for a ‘Stop the War’ agitation”, but under pressure from both local and national Labour Party leaders, soon dropped this, and concentrated instead on the issues of unemployment and the relief of distress. In Oldham also, the strong Trades and Labour Council, as its recent historian put it, soon became “more concerned with the practical than the moral question raised by the war”. Such an attitude was justified by the Nottingham secretary in the opening days of the war in the following way:

“We find ourselves plunged into catastrophe without our knowledge or consent. This action is not of our seeking, nor is it the will of the Industrial Workers of those nations now urging war, neither

¹ Clydebank T & LC 1913 AR, p. 20. The following abbreviations will be used in these footnotes. T & LC is Trades and Labour Council, and TC is Trades Council, terms which are largely interchangeable in this period. LP is Labour Party and LRC, Labour Representative Committee, which also often refers to a very similar body. AR is Annual Report, for the period up to 31st December in the year given, otherwise the year up to the end of the month specified, or up to the date if one is given. YB is Year Book, which usually contains the Annual Report of the previous year. These are mainly printed booklets, of which I have given the pagination if there is any, though sometimes they are duplicated or even simply typed. There are important collections of these reports at the Labour Research Department (LRD) and at the library of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), both institutions which I must thank for giving me access to them. The LRD also kindly gave me access to what remains of the survey of trades councils undertaken by the organisation in 1917, and the abbreviation LRD Reply refers to the filled in circulars that were sent out to local organisations at that time.

² Sheffield T & LC Delegate Meeting Minutes, 24th September 1912, and Sheffield Daily Telegraph, 25th September, 1912: here the motion itself did not refer to a strike though most of the speakers seemed to assume that it implied that, including one who prophesied: “Let there be another war, and all questions of a strike would disappear from the workers’ mind and give place to a jingo sentiment.” Bolton United TC Jubilee Souvenir 1866-1916 (Bolton 1916), p. xvii; Blackpool TC 75th Anniversary History Report and Directory (Blackpool 1966), p. 21; Belfast Trades Union Council 1851-1951. A Short History (Belfast, 1951), p. 14.

can the people at this stage stop the war, although they may at any rate do much in the direction of mediation at the appropriate time ... in the meantime the people are suffering, as they always suffer. Most of us will not only lose those who are near and dear to us, but also wives and children will undergo privation."¹

It was to concerns such as these, and the powers and responsibilities that flowed from them, that the trades councils in all parts of the country were to address themselves in the early months of the war.

II

At the beginning of the war trades council leaders flung themselves into surveying, discussing and agitating about the economic distress which was widely expected to follow the declaration of war, with an energy that makes one suspect a certain desire to forget about the issue of the war itself. The trades councils had often in the past been concerned with the local Distress Committees set up under the Unemployed Workmen Act of 1905, but these had done very little, and by 1914 there were only sixteen still in existence.² On the outbreak of the war, the government pursued a similar policy to the 1905 Act, using a voluntary fund under the patronage of the Prince of Wales. On 4th August a government committee for the relief of distress was set up, and two days later local authorities were circularised and urged to set up local relief committees "whose functions it shall be to consider the needs of the localities and co-ordination and distribution of such relief as may be required." Among those who were definitely to be represented on these committees were trade unionists.³ In this way, right from the beginning of the war, the government tried to bring the trade unionists at every level into administration, and trade unionists in their turn were to

¹ Birmingham TC Minutes of the Special Meeting of the Executive Committee and the Political Section, 5th August 1914; A. Bennett Oldham Trades and Labour Centenary 1867-1967 (Oldham, 1967) (no pagination); Nottingham TC July 1914 AR, p. 6.

² In Reading, Leicester and Portsmouth there was such representation, and the work of the committee was constantly being discussed in Oxford. (Reading T & LC March 1909 AR; Leicester TC 1910 YB, p. 10; Portsmouth T & LC 1912 AR, pp. 22, 50; Oxford TC Delegate Meeting Minutes, 21st January and 21st December 1907, 3rd November 1909, and 26th October 1910); W. A. Orton *Labour in Transition. A Study in British Industrial History since 1914* (1921), p. 13. (The place of publication of books and pamphlets is London unless otherwise stated.)

³ Memorandum on Steps taken for the Prevention and Relief of Distress Due to the War [Parliamentary Papers (hereafter PP) 1914, LXXI, Cd 7603], p. 4.

find themselves at every level of administration directly involved in the solution of some of the problems that faced them.

The War Emergency Workers National Committee (WEWNC) was set up in the opening days of the war by most of the established national leaders of the political and industrial working class movement. It tried to see that local labour organisations were aware of their rights, and immediately circularised them urging them to claim representation on the relief committees. The local position varied a great deal, depending largely on the strength of the trade union movement and the political complexion of the local authorities. In Liverpool, where there had already been a conference between the mayor and local working class leaders on 5th August on the question of relief of distress, the setting up of such committees had been advocated. When this was done twenty-one labour representatives were invited to join the committee. In Peterborough, the Trades Council was asked to send eight representatives to the relief committee, an event which it later saw as its "first recognition as an authoritative body", and usually it seems that local trade union organisations were satisfied with the representation that they secured. This was not always the case, however. Matters came to a head on the question of representation in Camberwell, where the newly established Trades and Labour Council was under the secretaryship of the 23 year old Arthur Creech Jones, later to be a very significant figure in the labour movement. On 12th August a town meeting summoned by the Mayor set up a Relief Committee of 29 persons, including three representatives of labour. None of these was considered acceptable by the Trades and Labour Council, and it was reported that "in Trade Union circles, complaints regarding their non representation were very bitter indeed." A full scale local dispute soon developed, large meetings were held by both sides, and at the end of October it was said "the Mayor of Camberwell had expressed his intention to resign rather than to appoint the nominees of the Camberwell Trades Council." It was after the end of the term of office of the Mayor in November that the Trades and Labour Council secured six representatives on the committee.¹ As shall be seen later, disputes such as this were to recur.

There were to be other problems also, which often arose from the seriousness with which local labour organisations took their work. In

¹ WEWNC, Report August 1914 to March 1916 (1916), p. 4; Liverpool LRC 1914 AR, p. 7; Peterborough TC, Diamond Jubilee 1899-1959 (Peterborough 1959), p. 15; on Camberwell see S. and B. Webb, Reports and Papers on the Relief of Distress, Volume 1 [British Library of Economic and Political Science Miscellaneous Collection, 242] (hereafter R & P), pp. 197-204. In Bethnal Green eight trade union representatives out of sixty were "not considered enough" (Ibid., pp. 183-95).

Edinburgh there was already a Labour Emergency Committee set up by the Trades Council before the war started, and in Huddersfield the Trades and Labour Council had a committee that was prepared to formulate the claims of anybody who wanted to apply for relief. In Grimsby, the Trades and Labour Council, after threatening to boycott the local relief committee in a successful effort to increase its representation from three to six, claimed that before the end of 1914 it was responsible for getting the press admitted to committee meetings, for increased scales of relief, and even for getting one sub-committee to pass by 14 votes to 3 a motion calling for national control of food supplies.¹ Despite these successes, very soon dissatisfaction was expressed. In Wolverhampton, the Trades and Labour Council complained that they had only three representatives, and had "suffered disrespectful treatment ... at the hands of the Mayor". It wanted a separate trade union relief committee "if better treatment is not meted out in the future and the business democratically carried out". One writer sympathetic to the attitudes of the working class organisations wrote late in 1915 that the local committees

"consisted largely of 'social workers', of those who have been connected with the Poor Law, the Charity Organisation Society, and other relief agencies. The Labour representatives ... were nearly always swamped by the mass votes of the officials and the charity-mongers."

The hatred of the working class organisations for the old Victorian relief agencies and the ideas and attitudes enshrined in the 1834 Poor Law is clear from the statement of a left wing working class paper just before the war, which spoke of "the doctrine-ridden inhuman pedants who belong to the Charity Organisation Society, people whose instincts and feelings are not strong enough to enlighten their brains as to the absurd narrowness of their economic theories." In Bethnal Green the Trades Council secretary reported on the results of the activities of these people. "The whole machinery of the Relief Committee has the degradation of the 'charity taint' and decent people are largely deterred from applying."²

As the relief Committees began their work, many working class representatives found themselves dissatisfied. They were continually

¹ H. MacKinven, *Edinburgh and District Trades Council Centenary 1895-1959* (Edinburgh, 1959), p. 53; *Huddersfield Associated T & LC August 1915 AR*, p. 4; *Grimsby T & LC 1915 YB*, pp. 10, 29.

² *Wolverhampton T & LC 1915 YB*, p. 12; *Federationist*, January 1915; G.D.H. Cole, *Labour in Wartime* (1915), p. 86; *The Syndicalist*, July 1914; R & P, pp. 183-95.

protesting about scales of relief, the categories of those entitled to it, and the inadequate publicity given to those on a position to claim it. In Rushton the Trades Council was horrified when the local Relief Committee began its work by advocating the release of children of thirteen from school to replace the men who had enlisted. In Southampton and Hebden Bridge labour representatives objected when men who were supposed to be able to go into the army were refused relief. This, it was said, "makes the committee into a recruiting sergeant, and, as only the poor were affected, the principle involved was worse than the adoption of conscription." There was strong objection to giving aid to the dependants of soldiers, who should have been maintained out of public funds. In Fulham the Labour Council even persuaded the Mayor to run a demonstration on this issue.¹ There was also considerable friction about how the committees carried on their business. Although Sidney Webb characteristically reminded the working class members of local committees that the use of food tickets was "an old-fashioned device, now discredited by administrative science", many local committees adopted such methods, as instructed by the Government. In Bethnal Green and elsewhere such methods were used, in the face of opposition from the working class members of the committee. They had to be abandoned, however, after cases were reported of families "sitting in the dark with parcels of dry tea and uncooked meat, because they had not a penny for coal or gas". "All over the country the Relief Committees earned an unpopularity that did much to irritate the workers."² In Motherwell the secretary of the Trades Council reported that within a month of the operation of the relief scheme there was "a growing suspicion that the spirit of the provisions proposed by the government is being departed from", and in Cardiff in the following January suspicion was clearly deepening when the Trades Council urgently demanded the publication of the full accounts of the National Relief Fund.³

However, grievances of this kind did not come to a head because the distress which the relief committees had been formed to deal with did not in fact materialise, except for a short period at the very beginning of the war, mainly in textile areas. Within a year most local committees had suspended their activities, and the National Relief Fund was

¹ WEWNC Minutes, 11th September 1914 (these are printed); *Federationist*, February and March 1914; Fulham Labour Council January 1917 AR.

² WEWNC, *The War Emergency; Suggestions for Labour Members on Local Committees* (1914) (written by Webb); R & P, p. 191. The other quotations are from *The Nation*, 31st October 1914, p. 143, and G. D. H. Cole, *op. cit.*, pp. 91-2.

³ Motherwell United TC October 1914 AR, p. 11; WEWNC Minutes, 14th January 1915.

mostly used subsequently to help not the poor at all, but those who suffered from air raids, or lodging house keepers who lost their living because of the war.¹

Another important question with which trade unionists concerned themselves in the early days of the war was the influx of Belgian refugees. On the whole they were welcomed by trade unionists, though "not as cheap labour". A Belgian musician was used in a trade dispute at Burnley, and Belgians were used instead of local musicians at Nelson. Despite these incidents, trade unionists tried to bring them into their movement. At Coventry, the Trades Council set up a special branch of the Workers' Union for Belgian metalworkers, and a similar union branch affiliated to the Letchworth Trades and Labour Council.² Despite the obvious concern of trade unionists with this matter, it is interesting to note that local authorities at this stage of the war at first took little account of their views. During August and September 1914 local reception committees were set up, at first spontaneously and later at the behest of the Local Government Board. By the end of the year there existed at least 1,400 such local committees, initially simply finding accommodation for the refugees, but later charged with looking for jobs for them as well. Though separate from the relief committees, they often consisted of much the same people. In November the Local Government Board circularised local authorities, dealing with the constitution of such committees, and recommending that they should include representatives of labour. A Board of Trade Departmental Committee found however that little was being done about this. There were no working class representatives on many of the committees, and at Manchester the local committee was said to be "quite unrepresentative of feeling in the district". At Sheffield the committee chairman was not even sure if there were working class representatives. The central government was prepared to agree with C. W. Bowerman, secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC that "anything of this kind is not complete without the trade unions being represented on it." Presumably as a result of the activities of the Departmental Committee, the Trades Council secretaries at Oxford and Newport were soon taken onto their respective local committees, and by the end of 1914, the

¹ On the work of the committees during 1915 and 1916 see: Leicester TC 1916 YB, p. 48; Great Harwood T & LC February 1916 AR, p. 6; Cowes and East Cowes T & LC March 1916 AR; Hammersmith Labour Council March 1916 AR. See also A. Marwick, *The Deluge. British Society during the First World War* (1967 edition), p. 213.

² *Herald*, 20th March 1915; Oldham T & LC 1914 AR, p. 9; Great Harwood T & LC February 1916 AR, p. 5; Coventry TC 1914 AR, p. 6; *Federationist*, February and May 1915, and June 1916.

Wrexham Trades and Labour Council had three representatives.¹ From now on it became increasingly recognised that labour representation should be automatically assumed in “anything of this kind”, and government pressure became less necessary to establish the fact.

III

The pre-war Liberal welfare legislation had been accepted but *grudgingly* by trades council leaders. Labour exchanges were on the whole regarded with the utmost suspicion: they could do nothing to provide employment, they might interfere in trade disputes, and they could well have the effect of reducing wages.² It was only after many visits from labour exchange officials and many searching discussions in trades councils that the attitude of undiluted hostility was modified. In York, the secretary felt constrained to explain that it would be worth while following their activities closely since

“incidents have happened elsewhere which indicate how susceptible these exchanges are to influences hostile to trade unionism and to point to the need for Trade Unionists to take an active interest in their administration if they are not to be used as instruments against the interests of organised labour.”³

This was the general attitude which was adopted on the matter, though before the war the opportunity for active participation in the administration of labour exchanges was confined to sending representatives to Juvenile Advisory Committees, which had very limited functions. Trade unionists were also hostile to the National Insurance Act introduced by the Liberals, and a very large proportion of the time of the trades councils in 1912 was spent in discussing its excruciatingly complicated provisions. Objections were voiced among other things, to the contributory principle and to the power that was given to the private insurance societies. Once the measure was passed, however, efforts were concentrated on trying to get trade unionists to insure through the movement, and on trying to see to it that those elected to

¹ Local Government Board, Report on Special Work Arising out of the War [PP 1914-16, XXV, Cd 7763], p. 14; First Report of the Departmental Committee... to consider ... the Reception and Employment of Belgian Refugees [PP 1914-6, VII, Cd 7750], pp. 35-6; Minutes of Evidence Taken before the Departmental Committee [Id., Cd 7779], pp. 33, 86, 118; Newport TC 1915 AR, p. 2; Oxford TC Delegate Meeting Minutes, 12th January 1915; Wrexham T & LC 1914 AR, p. 2.

² A long and detailed catalogue to this effect will be found in Bradford T & LC 1911 YB, p. 7.

³ York TC 1911 YB, p. 7.

the workers panels on the Courts of Referees, and some of those on the local Insurance Committees that dealt with health insurance, were acceptable to the trade union movement. Even Old Age Pensions, which the movement had advocated for some years, were regarded as too small and too surrounded with restrictions.

With the war however, increased responsibilities on matters such as these were given to the trade union movement clearly to a great extent to allay possible objections of this kind. The demand of £1 a week for all widows and dependents of soldiers, as well as for discharged and disabled soldiers themselves, was probably first heard at a local conference run by the Poplar Trades Council on 2nd September 1914, but the whole problem first became widely publicised with a letter from George Barnes to the *Daily Citizen* in the following month. The £1 demand was subsequently put forward in many localities, often in conferences organised by trades councils and under the auspices of the WEWNC.¹ In November the Government set up a Select Committee to deal with war pensions, and a year later a Naval and Military War Pensions Act was passed, which set up a national statutory committee and local bodies to administer government provided finance. The local committees, which were to include "women and representatives of labour", were given quite wide powers. They could inquire into specific cases, and give supplementary and urgent grants to those entitled to them. Provision was also made for local sub-committees consisting solely of representatives of employers and workers. This legislation involved trade unionists in directly administering policies which they advocated, and gave them a degree of power which they had not previously secured in their representative work. It also gave them a stake in the welfare services which they had previously not possessed.²

The government was again concerned to obtain trade union support for the work of the war pensions committees. The Statutory Committee in a circular to local authorities appointing the committees sent out in February stressed the importance of "Trades Councils in which the local Trade Unions are usually combined", among the working class organisations that had to be considered. Showing a good understanding of difficulties that often arose in these situations, the Statutory Committee warned that what was important was

¹ *Daily Citizen*, 2nd October 1914. For the various local discussions and conferences see *Federationist*, September, November and December 1914; G. D. H. Cole, *op. cit.*, pp. 107 and 129; WEWNC Minutes, 9th November 1914; and Bradford T & LC 1915 YB, p. 13.

² E. T. Devine and L. Brandt, *Disabled Soldiers and Sailors Pensions and Training* (New York, 1919), pp. 102, 121, 128-37. Oldham T & LC 1916, pp. 41-4 gives a detailed summary of the Act, and of the policy of the labour movement regarding it.

“not merely the presence on the Committee of persons who are cognizant of working class conditions or who themselves belong to the manual working class, but the representation on the Committee of working class opinion and the cordial and continued cooperation of working class organisations in the work of the Committee.”¹

Despite such admonitions as these, and the clearly stated provisions of the Act, the path to working class representation was not always a smooth one. The secretary of the Edinburgh Trades Council for one, had some serious complaints.

“Attempts were made by various County Councils to ignore the recommendations on the Statutory Committee that one-fifth of the Pensions Committee should be representatives of Labour, and the Association of County Councils practically recommended that the injunction be ignored.”

However, after some effort, the Trades Council got seven representatives, and also helped to secure two for the Midlothian Trades Council on its local committee. The Edinburgh secretary felt that this represented an important achievement.

“it is by such vigilance that we gain both respect and influence. The importance of the work of these Local Pensions Committee and its direct bearing on social conditions cannot be overestimated.”

In Warrington the borough council objected to the representatives of the Trades and Labour Council because they had expressed opposition to the war, but the matter was cleared up after appeal to the statutory committee. More typically, in Leicester the Trades Council was approached to appoint five representatives on the committee, an invitation which was “readily accepted ... as this marked a new feature in legislation, where Labour appointed representation.”²

The work of the war pensions committees often took up a considerable proportion of the time and energy of the trades councils in the war period and after. It was even an aspect of the work of local organisations in which the TUC took an interest, setting up a special war pensions department, and circularising the local organisations about the importance of securing representation, though after most of them had

¹ W. Milne-Bailey, *Trade Union Documents* (1929), p. 473, reproducing a “Circular issued to Counties, County Boroughs etc., by the Statutory Committee on War Pensions, 19th February, 1916”.

² Edinburgh TC March 1917 AR; Devine and Brandt, *op. cit.*, p. 136; Leicester TC 1917 YB, pp. 3 and 50-1.

already made efforts to do so.¹ It was later claimed by those sympathetic to the older forms of voluntary charity that

“representatives of labour organisations and local officials have not, as a matter of fact, taken an active part in the work of local committees, but in most places the same people who were doing the work before the creation of the Statutory Committee continued to do it under a new name.”²

This statement is certainly not borne out by an investigation of the activities of the trades councils. War pensions were constantly discussed at their meetings, and representatives were carefully selected, frequently reported on their work, pressed for changes in government policy and met working class representatives from other areas. For example at the meeting of the local branch of the National Association of Discharged Soldiers in September 1917, the representatives of the Hartlepool Trades Union Council on the local committee

“asked the delegates to make known as widely as possible what the duties of the War Pensions Committee are, and also to let it be known that the members of the committee were eager to ready to assist all legitimate claimants to obtain their rights.”

In Northampton the Trades Council claimed to have been responsible for increasing the amount payable in numerous individual cases, for preventing evictions, and even for stopping the committee from soliciting charitable donations, though this was in fact government policy.³

However, trade union representatives did not always find their work concerning war pensions so successful. In Liverpool, the delegates of the Trades Council found once again that their influence was limited because of the “domination of middle-class ladies of the charity organisation persuasion”. In general this was not as much of a problem as it had been with the relief committees, since, as the same representatives reported, “the work is mostly of a dry and routine nature ... [and] there is little scope for our sympathies.” In Dewsbury the Trades Council secretary Ben Turner found his activities as a representative “heartbreaking work”, in the absence of such measures as a minimum rate of allowance for the dependent mothers of soldiers. The Hampstead

¹ TUC 1916 Report, pp. 118-26.

² Devine and Brandt, *op. cit.*, p. 156.

³ *Federationist*, October 1917; Northampton TC June 1916 AR, p. 4; July 1917 to December 1918 AR, p. 2; and LRC 1916 AR, pp. 4-5.

Trades and Labour Council reported that there were numerous cases where the regulations did not allow for sufficient pensions to be paid in deserving cases. The Trades and Labour Council members of the local committee found that they had to confine themselves to informing people of the rights that they possessed, though they considered these rights inadequate. In Finchley the representatives of the Trades Council, together with those of the Discharged Soldiers and Sailors Federation, after a running battle with the majority of the local sub-committee withdrew their representatives in 1919, and hoped that after the boycott was over, "a firmer and juster policy will be the result".¹ An example of the kind of reaction produced by the efforts of trade unionists in this field can be seen from the views of one writer who considered that private relief agencies were preferable for such work on the grounds that they spent less. He considered that the local committees had "brought the unhealthy atmosphere of local politics into relief work". This applied particularly to

"some of the delegates from working class associations who are too class-conscious to be a success in any judicial position. Working men, when administering their own funds, show very careful regard for economy, but when administering public money, some of them appear to think that virtue only lies in open handed benevolence."²

It appears from these comments that the trade union representatives, despite their own feelings as to the inadequacy of their powers, succeeded in doing something on behalf of those who suffered most in this terrible war, even if their efforts did not always meet with everybody's approval. They were achieving something in a general way on behalf of those they represented, and were at the same time being recognised as people responsible enough to wield more power in the representative functions they were asked to perform.

This was made clear later in the appointment of Local Employment Committees by the new Ministry of Labour in 1917. These were intended to involve local interests more closely in the work of employment exchanges, especially by making surveys of the local labour situation, and good representation was secured in many areas. Although this brought the labour and trade union movement again into the workings of the welfare services, the results were not always happy, as

¹ Liverpool TC March 1918 AR, p. 36; Dewsbury TC 1916 AR; Hampstead T & LC March 1917 AR; Finchley TC 1919 AR, p. 7.

² Edinburgh Review, January 1917, p. 156, on "The Work of the Soldiers and Sailors Family Associations".

is clear from this account of what happened about the local committee in Finchley, by the Trade Council secretary.

“It was rather amusing to find that such a newly proposed body for dealing with local industrial distribution and conditions of employment should be so fastidious in desiring to ignore the Trades Council as the representative body of the organised workers. Resource had to be had to the Ministry of Labour who politely instructed the Committee to “recognise” the Trades Council. Two representatives were subsequently elected, but it was found that, like so many bodies constituted by the capitalistic governing class, no useful function can be performed by this committee, although the representatives of the workers are doing their best under the biased circumstances.”¹

This pattern of a struggle for representation followed by a growing disillusionment about what could be achieved once such representation was secured became more and more common as the war went on.

IV

Further disillusionment was to follow with the development of new responsibilities in the field of conscription, which involved the trades councils in work with which they had considerably less sympathy. The eventual acceptance of compulsory military service showed how trade unionists were being absorbed into the political structure both locally and nationally. The campaign against conscription was initiated by the national leaders of the movement, taken up with enthusiasm locally, and then dealt a series of blows by humiliating retreats on the part of the national leaders, which considerably eased the government's task in introducing the measure.² Eventually the local trade union leaders found themselves forced to modify in practice policies which they found extremely distasteful.

The labour movement had always been very strongly opposed to military conscription, to a great extent because of fear of the power that it would place in the hands of the employers, since it might lead to

¹ Details of the work of Local Employment Committees are to be found in the LRD Monthly Circular, July 1917, and in N.B. Dearle, *Dictionary of Official War-time Organisations* (1928), p. 135. On Finchley see the 1919 TC AR, pp. 7-8. In Nottingham there were twelve trade union representatives (TC 1918 AR, p. 26), and in Bolton three (TC 1917 AR, p. 5).

² On this much of what follows see M. I. Thomis, *The Labour Movement in Great Britain and Compulsory Military Service* (London University MA thesis, 1959).

“industrial conscription”. This remained the main and often the only argument of trade unionists against military conscription, both before and after it was introduced. During the campaigns of Lord Roberts and his National Service League in the immediate pre-war years, there were numerous protests from trades councils, who often held meetings of their own in opposition and always attributed the blackest motives to those initiating the campaign. In a characteristic outburst, the Liverpool Trades Council said conscription “would be the master stroke of capitalism, backed up by landlordism, and bolstered and supported by war material mongers.” Though it was correctly prophesied that some labour leaders would support the measure, nevertheless there was a remedy to hand. “The strike of the future will be the national strike against any form of compulsory military service.”¹ When the campaign in favour of conscription was begun in earnest particularly in the Northcliffe press during 1915, it was often linked with charges of drunkenness and indolence made against the workers, charges which were usually propounded by people who had in the past seldom shown much concern with the welfare of working people, or with defending their organisations. This led to a flood of bitterly hostile motions from virtually every trade union and labour meeting in the summer of 1915. Typical was the motion passed by the Coventry Trades Council at its meeting on 17th June, which said that conscription

“is contrary to the sentiments and principle of the British people; subversive of the free democratic character of their traditions, and involves a serious menace to the freedoms of the labour movement.”

At the Newcastle and Gateshead Trades Council on 26th August there was no support whatever for military conscription, but alternatives were suggested. “Conscription of wealth and land in the interests of the whole people however is receiving much support on Tyneside.” Before the end of the summer it was said with no obvious exaggeration that “The whole of the Trades Councils of Great Britain are unanimous in their opposition to conscription.”² This view was shared by every other kind of working class organisation.

In the autumn however, the situation changed. In October the government launched the “Derby scheme” for recruitment, aiming to use virtually every means short of compulsion to persuade unmarried men to enlist. At the same time some sections of the trade union

¹ Liverpool TC March 1914 AR, p. 4. Plymouth TC Half Yearly Report January to July 1913, describes a series of meetings held locally, and the Oxford TC Minutes, 26th January 1910 and 5th June 1913, refer to meetings on the matter to which members were delegated.

² *Federationist*, July and September 1915.

leadership launched a recruiting campaign of their own. Both of these efforts were put forward as the only possible alternative to military conscription. On 4th November, W. A. Appleton, Secretary of the General Federation of Trade Unions spoke at the meeting of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council and advocated that union officials should become recruiting agents, working closely with the army.¹ This matter led to considerable heartsearchings in the trades councils, and they were about equally divided about whether to support recruitment as the only alternative to conscription, or to wash their hands of the whole business. In Northampton, the Trades Council changed its mind during the course of the year, just avoiding resignations from the executive committee when it agreed to support recruitment. The Birmingham Trades Council claimed that it was "chiefly instrumental in the success of the Derby scheme", which was "the alternative to conscription". In Carlisle the Trades and Labour Council refused to take an attitude on the question, and among the trades councils which remained actively hostile were those in Huddersfield, Bristol and Sheffield.²

Most of the national leaders of the labour movement, with the help of diplomatic efforts by the government, before the end of the year replaced their opposition to conscription with an enthusiasm to increase the size of the army. On the whole the local labour movement did not show the same change of heart. At the September TUC the strongest speeches against conscription came from John Stokes and Duncan Carmichael of the London Trades Council. It was the London Trades Council delegates also who moved the motion to reject conscription at the Central Hall conference of labour organisations on 6th January, held after the first measure of conscription had already been announced. This involved the enlistment of unmarried men. However, although the Manchester and Chorley trades councils were not prepared to agree to conscription in any shape or form, the more conservatively inclined bodies at Oldham and South Shields seemed willing to accept some limited measures. Despite the strong opposition to conscription expressed at the Central Hall conference, Henderson remained in the Cabinet and summed up for the government on the second reading of the Military Service Bill. In the light of this it was hardly surprising that the labour movement's demand for 50 per cent representation on the Tribunals to administer exemptions could be brushed aside by the

¹ Thomis, *op. cit.*, p. 88.

² Northampton TC 26th June AR, p. 8; June 1916 AR, pp. 10 and 12; Birmingham TC 1915 AR, p. 5; Carlisle T & LC February 1916 AR, pp. 7-8; Labour Leader, 4th November 1915; S. Bünger, *Die sozialistische Antikriegsbewegung in Grossbritannien 1914-1917* (Berlin 1967), p. 94.

government, who simply promised that the representation would be "adequate".¹

This sequence of events was an important turning point in the growing disillusionment of the local labour organisations with the drift of events in these years. Once the first measure of conscription had been introduced the national leadership of the movement did not consider it necessary to do anything more to oppose it. The Labour Party conference late in January refused to continue the campaign against conscription and the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC would not have considered the matter further had it not been for a communication from the London Trades Council.² Trades councils continued to discuss it however. In Glasgow in January the Trades Council voted by 90 to 3 to continue their protest, and in Walthamstow in the following month the secretary called upon branches "to support any action in the direction of the repeal of the Act that may be decided upon by Trades Unionists". The Woodford secretary found himself driven to some uncomfortable reflections. "Surely something will be done of a drastic character or are the votes at Labour and Trade Union conferences merely pious expressions of opinion?" In Liverpool, when the Trades Council in conjunction with a number of other local working class organisations, decided to hold a meeting late in January in support of the decisions of the Central Hall conference, they found themselves assailed by the local press as "pro-German", and interviews with the Labour members of the government were used by the papers to reinforce support for the government's policy and to encourage people to break up the meeting. The Trades Council was much aggrieved by all this, especially as it had loyally cooperated with the Derby Scheme, and was only carrying out what were after all official labour policies. The meeting, held on 23rd January was a success, and 2,000 people attended to pledge to continue the fight against conscription. The Trades Council's delegate to the London conference reflected the growing mood of resentment when he asserted that "we were sold by our MPs like pigs in a poke". Despite the attitude of Henderson and others, bitter opposition to conscription was still shown by local organisations.

At the Colchester Trades Council meeting in May such sentiments were expressed, and a strongly worded leaflet was issued ending "ENGLAND SHALL BE FREE". The Reading Trades Council exemplified a widely-felt feeling in a motion passed at its meeting on 23rd May. "This Council protests against the actions of those leaders

¹ TUC 1915 Report, pp. 79-92; Thomis, *op. cit.*, pp. 154, 166, 183, 190 and 199.

² Labour Party 1916 Report, p. 124; Thomis, p. 220.

who have assisted in fastening the chains of conscription upon the workers without first obtaining the will of the rank and file."¹

Such sentiments, though common, were by no means universal, and in most trades councils 1916 was spent as actively in making conscription work, as 1915 had been spent in opposing it. The government handled this matter carefully from the start, and tried to win over the local as well as the national trade union leaders. When the local organisations were being set up to administer the Derby scheme in November 1915, the President of the Local Government Board was careful to deal with this matter:

"I desire in particular to refer to the representatives of labour. The work of the tribunals will closely concern the working classes, and it is imperative that they should be adequately represented on these tribunals ... what is desired is that the Tribunals will contain a number of members of the working class in which the latter will have confidence."

It was these Tribunals which, when conscription was introduced, were transformed from recruiting agencies into bodies that had to consider claims for exemption, occupational, "conscientious" or otherwise. By the end of February 1916 there were over 2,000 tribunals in Britain, and they had already acquired a reputation for "bias and injustice", which, if not entirely merited, has remained with them to this day.² Although the Local Government Board sent out a further circular to local authorities on 31st January 1916 insisting that "a fair proportion of the tribunal should be direct representatives of labour", this does not appear to have been carried out in by any means all possible cases. In Harrow labour representatives were specifically excluded, and in South Shields the Labour Party, "emphatically protested" at the composition of the local tribunal.³ In general, the

¹ H. McShane, *Glasgow District Trades Council, Centenary Brochure 1858-1958* (Glasgow, 1958), pp. 26-7; *Federationist*, March 1916. On the Liverpool events see S. Maddock, *The Liverpool Trades Council and Politics 1878-1918* (Liverpool University MA thesis, 1959), pp. 182-7, Liverpool TC March 1916 AR, pp. 4-5, and the printed letter about the matter from the LRC dated 28th January 1916, of which there is a copy in the LRD collection. The Colchester TC leaflet is also in the LRD collection, and the *Federationist*, June 1917, gives the Reading motion.

² The quotation is in J. M. Rae, *The Development of Official Treatment of Objectors to Military Service* (London University PhD thesis, 1965), p. 158. P. 160 gives Rae's assessment of the work of the tribunals. He does not deny the main stories about the cruel treatment they meted out, but considers that such things were untypical.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 168 and 160-5.

local authorities appear to have been concerned to appoint people of whom they approved rather than those who had the support of the trade unionists. One account of the tribunals says that only labour men known for their support of the war were appointed. "Activity in furthering the recent Derby scheme was a passport to appointment." In Oxford the Town Clerk maintained that the labour representatives did not have to be trade unionists, though he later agreed to appoint the secretary of the Trades and Labour Council. In Boston, Lincolnshire, the nominees of the Trades and Labour Council were rejected on the grounds that there were already labour representatives but these were repudiated:

"these gentlemen have no connection whatsoever with the Trade Union Labour movement, and therefore could not claim to represent working men who may have to appear before the tribunal."

Even in Crewe, where there were two representatives, these were considered to be outweighed by the two Liberals and four Conservatives who were also on the tribunal.¹ There was little they could do to deal with such important grievances of the trade union movement as the conscription of their officials.² In both Huddersfield and Glasgow meetings of the local tribunals were interrupted by the singing of *The Red Flag*, and at the Yorkshire Appeal Tribunal, Ben Turner complained of the regulations being broken, an issue which led to the resignation of one of the labour representatives in Leeds.³ Dissatisfaction was rising to a pitch where the usefulness of such representative work was being questioned altogether, and where the representative work of the trades councils was found to be by no means as automatically useful to the movement as had at first been assumed.

¹ J. M. Graham, *Conscription and Conscience* (1922), p. 65; Oxford T & LC Minutes, 24th November 1915 and 23rd February 1916; *Federationist*, June 1916; W. Challenor, *The Social and Economic Development of Crewe 1780-1923* (Manchester, 1950), p. 277.

² For complaints on this score see *Federationist*, June and July 1916. In Aylesbury there were protests against the conscription of a union official who was "blind in one eye, and partially blind in the other and had a wife and eleven children to support" (E. Cheshire, *25 Years of Progress: History of the Aylesbury and District Trades Council* (Aylesbury, 1936), pp. 21-2).

³ Leeds Mercury, 21st, 24th and 28th March 1916; Glasgow Herald, 16th March 1916.

V

Rising prices, particularly of food, were probably the most discussed topic in the trades councils during the war years. The drastic remedies they advocated included government control, price fixing and rationing, and were eventually adopted in part as the policy of the government, largely because of the agitation in which the local labour organisations played a prominent part. It was to no small degree the responsibilities which the trades councils were given in this field that prevented them from becoming very disillusioned indeed about the course of events during the war years.

The sharp rise in prices in the first days of the war was followed by a period of constant inflation, which meant that by the middle of 1917, prices in general were twice what they had been at the beginning of the war, and food prices in particular rose rather faster than this. Though this is a very complicated topic, the general weight of academic opinion is that wage rates did not rise as fast as this, though average earnings may have done so.¹ Trade unionists were never convinced, however, whatever the truth of the matter, that their wages were rising fast enough to keep up with prices. From the first days of the war the trades councils discussed, publicised and agitated about the rising prices. On 7th August 1914 the Bradford Trades and Labour Council met

“to consider the effects of the panic action of the capitalist class who rule the destiny of the workers... [We] at once began to investigate retail and wholesale prices of foodstuffs and the result of our efforts disclosed that the workers are being exploited to the utmost.”

Within weeks the same solutions to these problems were being put forward by trade unionists in every part of the country. From Gloucester to Aberdeen, from Burnley to Camberwell, trades councils were calling for government control of food supply and prices.² Much of the inspiration behind the campaign came from the WEWNC, who issued propaganda, and initiated numerous local meetings in the early part of 1915.³ The national leaders of the trade union movement took

¹ On the whole matter see A. L. Bowley, *Prices and Wages in the United Kingdom 1914-1920* (Oxford 1921), and S. Litman, *Prices and Price Control in Great Britain and United States during the World War* (New York, 1920).

² Bradford T & LC 1915 YB, pp. 9 and 11; *Federationist*, November 1914 and February 1915; Burnley T & LC Delegate Meeting Agenda for 2nd February 1915 (LRD Collection).

³ The trades councils constantly referred to the various editions of the Memorandum on the Increased Cost of Living during the War, issued by the WEWNC. For the local meetings see Cole, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-133, the WEWNC Minutes, and

a particular interest in this campaign, especially after their self-denying ordinance on the question of wages. For local organisations the campaign was also very important. It brought together all sections of the movement including the cooperative societies as no problem had done in the past. It brought new work to the trades councils who before 1914 had largely lost what normal industrial relations functions they had once had. The local organisations could and did speak on behalf of all sections of the labouring poor on this issue, and thus asserted their authority both within the trade union movement, and in the local community of which they were part. However, the campaign in the early part of 1915 was a failure. The government did nothing and prices continued to rise. G.D.H. Cole, writing later in 1915, spelt out the consequences. "The Labour unrest followed the prices campaign, and was to a great extent the result of its failure." The policies of the labour movement were at this stage of the war quite inconceivable for the government.¹

Although the food prices campaign abated to some extent after this date, other related matters were still being considered. The Liquor Control Board, established late in 1915, was viewed with an enthusiasm which seems to have diminished the further south one went. There was some support for the restriction of drinking hours in the North and Scotland, but very little elsewhere. However, the trades councils were often represented on local committees because of the work of establishing industrial canteens, a policy for which there was considerably more widespread enthusiasm. The second report of the Liquor Control Board praised the work of local organisations in this regard.

"A general record of the working of the Board Order would be incomplete unless it acknowledged, in the frankest and most cordial terms, the loyal support given to the Board by Trades Councils and other Labour organisations."²

During 1916, the general question of food prices came to be considered again, partly because food prices began to rise more steeply than ever before. Another cause was probably the change in government and the

the annual reports of the trades councils of Bradford, Northampton, Oldham, Sheffield and elsewhere.

¹ Cole, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-6.

² The report is quoted in H. Carter, *The Control of the Drink Trade in Britain. A Contribution to National Efficiency during the Great War 1915-18* (1919), p. 272. The Burton Trades Council was particularly vitriolic in its opposition to restrictions, for obvious reasons. The Trades Council had six representatives on the Liquor Control Board at Northampton (June 1916 AR, p. 3), and at Carlisle the Trades and Labour Council participated in local efforts which were to prove more permanent (February 1917 AR, p. 5).

general political atmosphere. In the summer the report of a departmental committee of the Board of Trade called for "a large measure of public control" as the only solution to the problem. Now that "the tide of collectivism was definitely in flood", not only was the problem becoming more acute, but a satisfactory solution seemed more likely.¹ During the summer and autumn of 1916 there were numerous local meetings and conferences held, though not apparently nationally coordinated. It was during this period that

"cries of hands off the people's food ... [were] heard at mass meetings held by labouring organisations throughout the country."²

When it became clear that the government had no intention of acting on such demands, the tone of these meetings became distinctly sharper. The Castelford Trades and Labour Council in June called on the government

"to take all the necessities of production and exchange, and so prevent the unnecessary fleecing of the workers."

A special conference by the Walthamstow Trades Council before the end of the year called for a general strike if there was not immediate action from the government.³ Despite the appointment of Lord Devonport as Food Controller, and the tentative efforts at government control in the early part of 1917, the local labour movement was by no means impressed. The sudden alarming growth of food queues, described by one Trades Council secretary with a certain exaggeration as "probably the greatest scandal brought about by this terrible Armageddon", emphasised that little was being done to solve the problems of which trade unionists had been complaining. At a meeting sponsored by the Chatham Trades and Labour Council and the local ILP, Robert Williams complained about the "masterly inactivity" of the government.⁴ The vast and unofficial "May strikes" were the most eloquent testimony of the general discontent among working people. The Commissioners for Industrial Unrest in the following months consulted with numerous trades council officials throughout the country, and all their reports agreed with the conclusion of the East

¹ Committee Appointed by the Board of Trade to investigate ... the increase in the Price of Commodities ... Interim Report [PP 1916, XIV, Cd 8358]; A. Marwick, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

² S. Litman, *op. cit.*, p. 98. The Battersea Trades and Labour Council ran meetings in the park during the summer (1916 AR, p. 8), and the Leicester body had a conference for delegates in October (TC 1917 YB, p. 5).

³ *Federationist*, July and December 1916.

⁴ Bradford T & LC 1917 YB, p. 7; Chatham T & LC June 1917 AR.

Midland Commissioners. "All the witnesses concurred in considering [food prices] the chief cause of unrest."¹

In seeking a solution to these problems the government looked from the beginning to the organised labour movement. At first there was an effort to persuade Robert Smillie to be Food Controller, perhaps to silence one of the most vociferous critics of government policy, but in the end Lord Rhondda was appointed to replace the incompetent Devonport, and J. R. Clynes, sometime secretary of the Oldham Trades and Labour Council, was his deputy. During 1917 maximum prices were fixed on a wide range of foodstuffs, and 2,000 local authorities were told to set up local committees to enforce them. In August 1917, it was suggested that these committees should have 12 members, including at least one trade unionist and one woman; a year later it was said there should be two or three labour representatives on the larger committees in the big towns. In general fairly high representation was accorded to the labour movement. By November 1917 they had one-eighth of the members of these local committees, though private farmers and traders had over 27 per cent representation. Within a year, the representation of the labour movement, together with women, increased, being nearly double what it was before.² Much of the usual type of discontent was expressed by the local organisations, however. At the Lancashire and Cheshire Federation of Trades Councils meeting on 29th September, there was a discussion on a matter which was said to effect a number of similar bodies.

"Complaints were stated that Labour "representatives" on Food Control Committees had been chosen by Town Councils. ... It was not the number that was the primary grievance but the selection of Labour men by bodies who had no claims to chose them ... It was agreed that in no case where 'labour representatives' had been coopted by local authorities would the Councils recognise them as 'labour representatives' and it was reported that in several cases those chosen had refused to act."³

Other grievances came up also. In Bury the Trades Council asserted that, "private interests ought not to be represented", in Plymouth

¹ The reports are in PP 1917-8, XII. The quotation from the West Midlands Report (Cd 8665) is on p. 2.

² R. Smillie, *My Life for Labour* (1925), pp. 174-80; W. H. Beveridge, *British Food Control* (1928), pp. 51-8 (the proportions of representation are calculated from figures that appear there); S. Litman, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-38; F. Coller, *A State Trading Adventure* (Oxford, 1925), p. 77; N. B. Dearle, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

³ *Cotton Factory Times*, 5th October 1917. A similar complaint about the War Pensions Committees was discussed by the federation at the meeting reported in the same paper on 6th July 1917.

it was found that at first nobody else was represented, though in Leicester the local working class leaders claimed to have ensured that "no member of the interested trades should be elected". In Luton the struggle for working class representation was particularly intense. Not only did the Trades Council demand six seats on the local committee, they also wanted the original body completely reorganised in order to fight for a programme of full municipal control of the food supplies. Early in 1918 the Trades Council called a large demonstration on the issue, and there was even a strike.¹ Soon more substantial disagreements began to be expressed about the basis of the work of the committees themselves. In Ayr the Labour Council thought that "until the Government take control of the whole supply and distribution of food nothing can be done by these committees." In Aylesbury the Trades Council was still calling in January 1918 for a full national system of rationing, and in the same month the Manchester body supported a strike by the district committee of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers on this demand.²

However, the work in the food committees was an important safety valve for trade unionists who were discontented, especially as the committees often took quite important initiatives under their influence. In many areas the food control committees engaged in requisitioning and rationing activities of their own. For instance, by November 1917 sugar rationing was introduced by the Gravesend Food Control Committee, and on the first day of 1918 tea, butter and margarine were rationed in Birmingham.³ Fears of violent manifestations of working class discontent played an active part in all official actions. The North-West regional controller later explained how he dealt with the problem, by having on the staff somebody "well acquainted with the leading men of the Labour and Trade Union movements", and C. H. Pearce was appointed

"to act as peripatetic lecturer to Trades and Labour Councils and other similar bodies ... There can be no doubt that the salary paid to Mr. Pearce was money well spent. He had all the latest

¹ *Ibid.*, 7th September 1917; H. R. Williams, *History of the Plymouth and District Trades Council from 1892 to 1952* (Plymouth, 1952), p. 16; Leicester LP 1917 AR, p. 9; Luton TC, *Thirty Years of Progress. Short History of the Trade Union Movement in Luton and District* (Luton 1941), p. 14.

² Ayr Labour Council 1917 AR, p. 5; E. Cheshire, *op. cit.*, p. 20; L. Bather, *A History of the Manchester and Salford Trades Council* (Manchester University PhD thesis, 1956), p. 136.

³ W. H. Beveridge, *op. cit.*, pp. 196 and 224; S. Pollard, *The Development of the British Economy 1914-1967* (1969), p. 52.

information and corrected misapprehensions and rumours – all complaints made were taken up.”¹

The trades council representatives found that their activities involved a great deal of extra work, and the trades councils discussed the work of the local committees in meticulous detail. In Nottingham the Trades Council's work in this field increased its prestige and standing in the local community. It was in connection with food control that in 1918 the Trades Council was “for the first time in its history honoured by a visit from the Mayor”, together with the Town Clerk and the Sheriff. This civic deputation was assured of “the fullest measure of support”.²

There were other aspects of government policy on prices in which the trades councils were closely involved also. Though there was little or no enthusiasm for the Food Economy Committees which were supposed to be set up in Autumn 1917,³ the subsequent development of National Kitchens and of profiteering committees was of considerably greater interest to trade unionists. The National Kitchens were publicly run restaurants which were set up by the Food Control Committees, largely under pressure from trade union representatives. Where they survived they were usually taken over by the cooperative movement.⁴ The Profiteering Committees, set up just after the war, were supposed to punish shopkeepers who were making “excessive” profits. Their main purpose was not of course to perform this impossible task at all, but as one civil servant later wrote “to ease the public mind”, mainly as expressed by the trade union movement. 75 per cent of the cases considered by the 1,800 local committees were dismissed as irrelevant, and only £2,000 in fines was ever exacted. But through representation on them, labour organisations were given a position of some apparent power against the inflationary prices.⁵

¹ H. W. Clemesha, *Food Control in the North West Division* (Manchester 1922), pp. 7 and 22.

² Nottingham TC June 1918 AR, p. 4 The Hereford TC Delegate Meeting Agenda for the 5th May 1918 (in the LRD collection) indicated the detail in which these things were discussed. It refers to “Supplementary, Invalid and Overtime Rates; Butter and Margarine Distribution; Registered Transfers; and other matters affecting the work of the Food Control Committee”.

³ W. Gallacher, *Revolt in the Clyde. An Autobiography* (1936), pp. 72-5 describes how the preliminary meeting of the local “food economy committee” at Paisley was abandoned because of the comments of the Trades Council representatives. Marwick, *op. cit.*, pp. 207-8 describes the whole of the somewhat bizarre episode of “food economy”.

⁴ On this see Beveridge, *op. cit.*, p. 235. For examples of trades council participation see Nottingham TC June 1918 AR, p. 4; Liverpool TC March 1918 AR, p. 24.

⁵ Beveridge, p. 289, and Dearle, p. 271. The quotations are from Collier *op. cit.*, pp. 229-32.

VI

The powers of the trades councils had developed a great deal in the war period. From outsiders speaking on behalf of a small group of workers, they had become in a much more general way representatives of all sections of the poor, whether organised in unions or not. The Middlesborough secretary described the effects of some of the changes that were taking place.

“the usefulness of the Council in focusing the aspirations of the workers, and emphasising the necessity for Labour solidarity has never been more important than at the present crisis in our history.”

The secretary of the Trades Council at Northampton thought that the new responsibilities of these years had made it clear that the organisation was

“prepared to play its part in very necessary administrative work ... [and] has shown that its meetings are not merely held for passing pious resolutions of protest or condemnation.”

The Newport secretary was enthusiastic about what could be achieved. Through “representation of all possible governing bodies” trade unionists could make themselves

“so persistent that public opinion will force the most antiquated and sleeping body to move, and make them realise the workers are a body to be considered, and our claims for justice and right must be accounted to.”¹

The sequence of events described by the secretary at Hereford typified the way trade unionists were accepted into the local community.

“The Hereford Trades Council has had an uneventful career for several years until 1914, when the circumstances arising out of the war brought into prominence the workers[,] making it the medium for pressing [their] interests forward before the various authorities and by its means the trade unions have secured representation [on] War committees ... Owing to the rapid growth of the Council even the Conservative and Liberal Parties are becoming more friendly.”

The consequences of such increasing friendliness was often a lessening in the independence of the local body, as is made clear by these com-

¹ Middlesborough T & LC 1916 AR, p. 3; Northampton TC 26th June AR, pp. 1-2; Newport TC 1916 AR, p. 10.

ments of local representatives on pensions and food control sub-committees in the suburbs of Liverpool.

"... the work in connection with these committees is interesting and educative and an opportunity is afforded for coming into contact with people of widely divergent views from ours... we have always experienced every courtesy and consideration from our fellow members... our relation is of a harmonious character... the differences of opinion are frequently of an educative character."

From this it is clear that the aristocratic embrace was felt right to the humblest levels of local administration!¹

It was also as general agitational bodies that the trades councils remained important during the war years. Tom Quelch told them in the paper of the General Federation of Trade Unions in 1915 of the powers that they possessed.

"In times like these the Trades Councils can do a tremendous amount of effective work. They can keep the workers alive to the dangers which threaten them and their organisations. They can awaken the consciousness of the people to their own needs."

By middle of the following year, the secretary of the Woolwich body could write of the success in the field of agitation on food prices, conscription, rents and wages.

"It can be seen that public opinion has been largely influenced on these questions by action of the Trades Councils throughout the country."²

Probably the matter on which this claim could be most justified was that of house rents. The passing of the Rent Restriction Act in December 1915 has sometimes been portrayed as resulting simply from the events on the Clyde, and the rents strikes that took place there.³ However, agitation on this question had taken place in every part of the country, usually directed by the trades councils. In Camberwell before the end of 1914 the Trades and Labour Council had already issued a leaflet which the authorities tried to suppress, advising tenants:

"Do NOT worry if you are unable to pay your rent. No landlord will evict you under the extraordinary circumstances caused by the war."

¹ Hereford TC, LRD Reply, 6th June 1918; Liverpool TC March 1918 AR, pp. 23 and 25.

² *Federationist*, September 1915 and May 1916.

³ The origin of this story is perhaps the account of the passing of the Act in W. Gallacher, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-8.

During 1915 local organisations in every part of the country ran meetings, organised tenants, issued propaganda and publicity about the increases that took place, and in general undertook the kind of agitation that made the government feel that a Rent Restriction Act was necessary. After the measure was passed both the Woolwich and the Coventry Trades Councils claimed that it was they who were responsible for its enactment. It was after this, however, that local organisations probably did their most useful work. Numerous leaflets were issued publicising the Act, particularly for the benefit of landlords who affected to be ignorant of it. Numerous individual cases were taken up, and even fought through the courts, and Tenants Defence Leagues were set up to defend the interests of those affected. In Oldham the Trades and Labour Council

“found its work cut out advising tenants how they were to claim refunds, hunting out and reversing illegal rent rises and educating its members in the intricacies of the law. At one stage almost all the full time Secretary’s time was spent on this work.”

It is interesting to see how the secretary justified this.

“This class of work may not appear to be strictly the work of a Trade Union, but we consider it the duty of the Council to attend and assist not only the Trade Union branches but its individual members also.”¹

A great deal of success was gained in work of this kind. In Hartlepool the Labour League secretary asserted early in 1918 that “we can justly claim to have saved the workers of this town thousands of pounds” and in Hull the figure of £25,000 was actually specified after the war.²

It was the success of agitational work in this field, and in others previously mentioned, that prevented the considerable discontent and tension that existed from coming to a head. Gradually, however, many aspects of the conduct of the war and much else besides increased the militancy of the local organisations. The Birkenhead secretary said that in the first year of the war trade unionists were “torn between

¹ On Camberwell, R & P, p. 205. On Woolwich see Woolwich Pioneer, 24th June 1924. On Coventry the TC 1915 AR, p. 7. Local agitations are frequently described in the Federationist during 1915, and the Manchester T & LC in the same year issued a pamphlet called Report on the Increase of House Rents in Manchester and Salford since the Commencement of the War... On activities after the passing of the Act on see Bennet, *op. cit.*, and material relating to tenants meetings and trades council meetings in Oldham in the LRD collection. The WEWNC leaflet, How the Rent and Mortgage Act protects Tenants was widely distributed, though some local bodies wrote their own versions.

² Hartlepool Labour League 1917 AR; Hull TC, TUC Souvenir for 1924, p. 6.

defending their country and defending their conditions". Although at first most trade unionists supported the war, they were prepared less and less to forget the latter of these tasks. By the end of 1915, the Treasury Agreements, which had at first been accepted as an important recognition of the position of the trade union leaders, were now taken to show them "so readily agreeing to surrender the rights of Labour while employers are permitted to exploit the people at will". The Munitions Tribunals, in which the trades councils occasionally became involved, sometimes providing representatives of labour, also became more and more the objects of discontent. By November 1916, the Coventry Trades Council was circularising all similar bodies in an effort to secure the release from prison of the local organiser of the Workers Union, for an offence which seems to have amounted to refusing to carry out the dilution schemes which had been agreed by the national leaders.¹ The Munitions Act, the Defence of the Realm Act, and the general erosion of civil liberties were matters constantly discussed in the trades councils, and their protests grew more and more strident as the war dragged on. Early in 1915 the Rotherham Trades and Labour Council was already pointing out that its support for the war was not to be misinterpreted. "This does not mean that the right to free speech and criticism have been abated." Trades councils are constantly to be found protesting against the breaking up of pacifist and anti-war meetings, even at times when they refused to have anything to do with such meetings themselves.² Trades councils also frequently protested against the treatment of conscientious objectors, particularly the well-known cases of Charles Dukes, secretary of Warrington Trades and Labour Council and of the Lancashire and Cheshire Federation of Trades Councils, and George Beardsworth, a delegate to the Blackburn Trades and Labour Council. The Liverpool Trades Council and the Labour Representative Committee in opening a fund for the welfare of these men with the hefty donation of £10 were careful to make their own position clear.

"We do not support Beardsworth and Dukes as Conscientious Objectors – most of our people, including the writers, dissent from their views – but our concern is to resist the Prussianisation of the British army."

Many trades councils expressed themselves strongly against the disenfranchisement of the conscientious objectors. Many also affiliated to the

¹ Birkenhead TC March 1916 AR, p. 3; Plymouth TC 1915 AR, p. 5; Coventry TC printed letter dated 20th November 1916 in the LRD collection.

² Rotherham T & LC 1914 AR, p. 4; Northampton TC June 1917 AR, pp. 19 and 22.

short-lived earlier version of the National Council of Civil Liberties, in order, as one secretary put it somewhat bitterly, "to safeguard what few remaining privileges are left to us".¹

The militancy in the trades councils was very different in character from what was developed in the main sphere of trade union militancy in the period being considered, the shop stewards' movement. It is not true, as one book dealing with working conditions in the period says, that "Trades Councils ... [in] character and attitudes... leaned rather to the shop stewards than to the Central Executives."² Trades councils were organisations of the trade union machinery itself not in any way adapted to the workshop problems which arose in the period and expressed themselves in the shop stewards' movement. Though largely ignored in this time by the trade union leaders, the trades councils on the whole reflected their policies and attitudes, even if usually in a somewhat more radical form. Thus the relationship of the trades councils with the shop stewards movement was one of sympathy rather than active support. In Sheffield, for example, one searches in vain in the Trades Council minutes of the war period for any detailed information on the activities of the important local shop stewards' movement. It is not ignored, but the Trades Council is by no means active in it. Its militant activity was simply supported, as is the custom of trades councils in most such cases. In Glasgow also the leaders of the shop stewards consciously abstained from securing office in the powerful Glasgow Trades Council, presumably because they equated it with the ordinary official trade union machinery.³ Towards the end of the war the Paisley Trades and Labour Council published the theories of two leading local shop stewards in the area in a pamphlet. In general the attitude remained that of sympathetic outsiders, however. When the Southampton Trades Council considered the first of the Clyde strikes at its meeting on 3rd March, 1915, they thought that the Scottish workers had been "unpatriotic" but nevertheless they had shown "what the workers were prepared to do". Later on a deputation of the deportees was received by the Sunderland Trades and Labour Council, and they were made "Freemen" of the Liverpool Trades Council in 1916 during

¹ The Liverpool TC LRC duplicated circular of November 1918 is in the LRD collection; Chatham T & LC June 1917 AR.

² H. Wolfe, *Labour Supply and Regulation* (Oxford 1923), p. 130.

³ J. Mendelson, W. Owen, S. Pollard and V. Thornes, *The Sheffield Trades and Labour Council 1858-1958* (Sheffield 1958), p. 67 describes the development of very radical attitudes in the Trades Council quite separately from the development of the shop stewards' movement. On Glasgow see W. Kendall, *The Revolutionary Movement in Britain 1900-21* (1969), p. 140.

their enforced sojourn in the area.¹ A typical statement of the somewhat remote but warm sympathy of those who were prominent in the trades councils for the shop stewards can be seen after the visit to J.T. Murphy, leading *ideologue* of the movement, to the Birmingham Trades Council in 1918:

“[The Trades Council] unanimously agreed that these Committees inside the shops and various industries were a step in the right direction towards proper control, further, that they should be properly recognised by the Trade Union Executives and Employers ... All must realise that there are brains, determination and enthusiasm behind the Shop Stewards movement – qualities which the Trade Union leaders must encourage, foster and wisely guide.”

The influence of militant attitudes associated with the shop stewards can be seen from the general rejection by the trades councils in the later period of the war of the numerous schemes for permanent harmony between the employers and workers put forward then. Even the comparatively conservative Liverpool Trades Council set up a sub-committee in 1918 which rejected the Whitley schemes, in which leaders of the movement had participated, as part of

“the persistent efforts now being made, and in very dubious quarters, to convince the organised workers particularly that there is a delightful and satisfactory identity of interest as between Capital and Labour”.²

This militancy on trade union questions was paralleled as the war went on with a militant attitude on more general questions also. During 1917 there were numerous resolutions and meetings in support of the overthrow of the Russian Tsar.³ There was also considerable interest in and enthusiasm for the Leeds Convention, and the meetings of Workers and Soldiers delegates that followed it. 207 delegates from Trades Councils and local Labour Parties were at the Convention, which was described in Liverpool as “a landmark in the labour move-

¹ W. Gallacher and J. Paton, *Toward Industrial Democracy – A Memorandum on Workshop Control* (Paisley, 1918); *Federationist*, April 1915; Sunderland T & LC & LRC 1916 AR; T. L. Drinkwater, *A History of the Trade Unions and the Labour Party in Liverpool 1911 to the Great Strike* (Liverpool University B.A. thesis 1940), p. 33.

² Birmingham TC 1918 AR, p. 5; Liverpool TC March 1918 AR, pp. 31-4.

³ Manchester T & LC 1917 AR, p. 3 describes a local meeting held by the Trades and Labour Council to celebrate the March Revolution, at which apparently there was also considerable enthusiasm for the memory of James Connolly, the recently martyred Irish revolutionary leader (Bünger, *op. cit.*, p. 153).

ment's history", and at Chatham it was thought that it "promises to be epoch making in its results", though this did not prove to be the case.¹ The very revolutionary implications of the Leeds Convention were in contrast to the more respectable policies of the ILP and the Union of Democratic Control (UDC). The latter organisation in seeking "to extend its influence ... in the ranks of organised labour" aimed at "above all trades councils and local branches of the ILP". In May 1915, Egerton Wake, who had previously represented trades councils on the national executive of the Labour Party, became "special commissioner" for the UDC and by the following Autumn he had spoken at 85 trades councils and labour parties, and secured the affiliation of 30 of them. By the beginning of 1916, 49 such local organisations were affiliated.² In the following months one can see in local organisations, whether they were affiliated to the UDC or not, the growth of opposition to secret diplomacy, a demand for the ending of the war by negotiations, and for the statement of war aims, policies of the kind that the UDC was advocating. The call for a negotiated peace was put forward by the Bradford Trades and Labour Council in 1916 and in numerous local resolutions and meetings, especially in areas where the ILP was strong. Support for a league of nations grew in labour organisations in the final months of the war. "By the end of the war, then, British Labor was a most important political force behind a drive for a league of nations." The local organisations were important in the development of this kind of feeling.³ The Nottingham secretary, as usual, well reflected the mood of troubled determination in the local organisations at the end of the war:

"we entered into this awful was not only because ... agreements made between our nation and others had been broken with imminent danger to ourselves, but also with the determination that there should be no future wars. The real guarantee of no future wars can only be made by peoples and not by rulers and governments."⁴

¹ Council of Workmen's and Soldiers Delegates, *What Happened at Leeds (1917)*; Drinkwater *op. cit.*, p. 36; Chatham T & LC June 1917 AR.

² H. H. Hanak, "The Union of Democratic Control during the First World War", in: *Bulletin of the Institute of Historical Research*, November 1963, pp. 177-8; H. N. Swanwick, *Builders of Peace. Being Ten Years History of the Union of Democratic Control (1924)*, p. 51; Orton, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

³ Bradford T & LC 1918 YB, p. 5; H. Winkler *The League of Nations Movement in Great Britain 1914-1919 (New Brunswick 1952)*, p. 198.

⁴ Nottingham TC July 1918, AR, p. 3. The Liverpool TC secretary considered that President Wilson was somebody "to whom mankind owes so much for his far-sighted policy and his earnest desire to establish a real and lasting peace" (March 1919 AR, p. 4).

VII

Much had happened to the trades councils during the war period. They had become responsible, recognised, and more powerful. If their responsibilities had produced tensions and disputes, they had also made them feel more an established part of their communities. But it was the war itself and disillusionment especially about the industrial policies used to carry it out, that left the most enduring impression on the attitude of the local labour organisations. The war had "brought with it in increased intensity the cry of the poverty-stricken and down-trodden", and there were very few trade unionists who at the end of the war considered that the problems of such people had been solved. In Chatham the secretary wrote in 1917 that

"the rights and privileges won by our forebears, and upheld by ourselves for so long have been wrested from us by false pretences, aided by the laxity and shortsightedness of our leaders, without any adequate guarantees."

In August 1916 the Huddersfield secretary waxed very bitter indeed.

"During the past twelve months the position of the working class has been put back a century and the outlook is far blacker than it has been at any time since Waterloo. The shackles of Military and Industrial Slavery are being rivetted on us, and we shall have to take steps we may think necessary, in order that we may pass on to our children as goodly a heritage as our forefathers handed to us."

Time after time the leaders of local organisations asserted that "with the close of hostilities no matter how long deferred will come the battle between organised labour and the employers."¹ As the war dragged on, and as no solution appeared to the social and economic problems which the war had posed to the organised workers, the trades councils felt more and more the need to prepare for such struggles and to preach their necessity. The post-war period was not to prove them wrong.

¹ Wolverhampton T & LC 1915 YB, p. 18; Chatham T & LC June 1917 AR; Huddersfield T & LC February 1916 AR, p. 6; Hyde T & LC March 1915 AR, and similar anticipations in Great Harwood T & LC February 1916 AR, p. 6.