

## THE CENTENARY OF THE BRITISH TRADES UNION CONGRESS, 1868-1968

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THE occasion of the centenary of the British Trades Union Congress in 1968 draws attention to the unique position which the British body holds among central trade union organizations. In no other country has a central union organization survived for so long without either being displaced from its role as the prime national representative body for organized labour or experiencing permanent splits in its ranks. Of course, the length of the TUC's life can be explained in part by the fact that Britain was the first nation to industrialize and give rise to the necessary and sufficient conditions for trade unionism. The ability of the TUC to survive, however, cannot be explained by this fact. In most countries, except where central union organizations have (not) been protected and perpetuated by the use of state power, ideological divisions have produced two or three or even four competing bodies. In Britain there has rarely ever been the possibility that this might happen.

A discussion about the character of the British Trades Union Congress raises questions concerning the nature of the British environment and the relationship of trade unions to it. Trade unionism is a universal phenomenon arising out of particular structural conditions. It has no ethnic, national or religious boundaries. Indeed it transcends these factors provided the class situation is appropriate. But the factors which go to determine different cultures and variations within a common culture influence the form which trade unionism takes. It is then an examination of such factors which will explain the peculiarities of the British form.

It is also the case that various parts of a superstructure are causally related to each other. The characteristics of the Trades Union Congress are derived from those of the trade unions which comprise it. It is for this reason that it is meaningless to suggest, as many have done, that the British TUC should model itself on, say, a Scandinavian pattern, or that it should draw on the experiences of other central union organizations over the issue of control over wage negotiations. Institutional forms are not readily transferable as British trade unionists themselves discovered when they attempted to build unions in tropical Africa on the British pattern. Only the name was trans-

ferable; the forms it described were either adapted to indigenous conditions or disappeared as irrelevant.

Central trade union organizations have common elements. They all consist of differentials of power, of skills and of values which interrelate with each other but where they differ is in the distribution of these elements and their relationships with each other. Take the British TUC in the context of the British labour movement and juggle around with the distribution of power between unions by making inter-union solidarity a necessity or by destroying the historically determined character of the movement as the German government did in the 1930's or as war has done in other countries, and a new type of central organization would result, perhaps resembling the Scandinavian or German models. Or, alternatively, alter the distribution of occupational skills by making non-manual work predominant in the place of semi-skilled manual work so that unions of clerical and administrative workers determine the decisions of the TUC and a new attitude to organization would emerge. Or, again, change the skills of employers in the class conflict either by breaking down the size of industrial units or by intensifying the trend to monopoly capitalism and the nature and degree of inter-union solidarity would also change. In other words, the form of a central union organization is determined by a particular set of historically evolved relationships between the elements of power and skill and values. Two central organizations, then, can only be similar if these relationships are precisely the same in two situations.

The existence of two or more central organizations in a common situation occurs as a result of a contradiction in the situation of organized labour. Any incompatibility between emerging forces and existing institutional forms will result in divisions between unions but these need not necessarily be institutionalized. For example, the British TUC is becoming increasingly representative of white-collar workers who are under-represented in the controlling body and unable to influence policy in the direction of their interests. Whether or not white-collar workers feel the need for their own central organization will depend upon the extent to which the TUC can satisfactorily make internal adjustments. The less flexible it is, the more will white-collar workers look elsewhere for representation. In the past, the TUC has been able to adapt itself to the needs of a changing occupational and industrial structure. Control by craft unions gave way under the pressure from organized unskilled and semi-skilled workers; the significant influence of the cotton textile workers was superseded by that of the miners which in turn was replaced by that of the general unions. A classic case of a fracture-creating contradiction was in the United States in the 1930's when the American Federation of Labour, dominated by craft unions,

was confronted by the spread of mass production industries which employed mainly unskilled and semi-skilled workers. The craft unions could maintain their domination only by refusing to organize mass production workers or by admitting them as second-class members, but neither of these courses could be pursued successfully because these workers were being impelled to take collective action by forces over which the American Federation of Labour had no control. The American Federation of Labour's inability to cope with the spread of trade unionism resulted in the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organization in 1935. In so far as the British trade union movement has had a comparable experience, it was following the London dock strike in 1889. There was then an equivalent spread of collective action but without any serious, permanent disruptive consequences. The British labour movement had a resilience which was absent in the American one and its contradictions were less intense.

The ability to survive is not by itself a positive attribute, though doubtless in a centenary year it will be highlighted as one. Better, perhaps, to have a short life but a principled one than a life made possible by compromises and concessions. In other words, existing is not an end in itself: concrete achievements and the choice of means to them have a bearing on the utility of existence. More than this, in the case of trade unions, means and the character of achievements determine in part the ability to take action in the future. Trade unions derive impulses from a concept of struggle which has to be fed on actual struggle and which in turn must be based on achievement. The future of the British TIJC rests heavily upon its past. An examination of the causes of its longevity will, therefore, explain much about the course the TUC can take in the future.



The TUC's main relationship is with the government of the day, whatever its political complexion. It aims to influence government decision-making on matters which are considered to be the concern of the trade unionists. It acts as a pressure group for organized labour. The means used for this purpose are the conventionally accepted means for bringing pressure on governments. The TUC submits memoranda to government departments, as it does, for example, each year to convey its views about the budget to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. It sometimes uses Members of Parliament to take up issues but largely prefers to deal with the government directly and for this purpose the TUC sends deputations to government ministers, waylays the Minister of Labour and waits on the Prime Minister. It protests, asserts, demands, then retires until the matter is either raised again through the government's action or inaction or dropped because other

decisions have had to be made. Sometimes the TUC makes public pronouncements on issues of policy and leaves it at that in the belief that due notice will be taken by policy-makers and their advisers and in order to show the world at large just where organized labour stands. In addition to these continuing but ad *hoc* measures, representatives of the TUC sit on government committees with representatives of other interest groups or simply with employers and civil servants. Such committees may be standing ones or those which are set up for a specific purpose such as committees of inquiry and Royal Commissions. In all of its activity, the TUC uses its power and exerts its pressure in order to influence government decisions. It is concerned with modification, adaptation, amendment, clarification of public policy issues. It is engaged in an essentially pragmatic approach to social change.

This approach involves more than tackling issues as they arise with conventionally acceptable devices of protest. It also entails treating issues according to circumstances at the time. This is what is meant by TUC leaders when they say that unions "must not blink at the facts", must "face harsh realities". Thus collaboration with a government is not a matter of principle but of expediency. It can be given and withdrawn as circumstances vary. The TUC accepts constraints on its own actions in the same way. In one set of economic and political circumstances it can agree that legislative control over incomes is necessary while in another set it rejects such a move as *unnecessary* or *unrealistic*. At one time it wants unrestrained wage advances while later, with a change in the situation, the TUC advocates wage restraint. The consistent element in this approach is inconsistency. Virtually any policy can be justified, as can any change of policy. Action is not determined by consistent and precise principles for these might cause it to be taken in the face of actually existing circumstances or through other than conventional means of protest. This is not to say that TUC action is unprincipled. There is no doubt that the TUC always acts in what it considers to be the best interests of trade unionists, but this is the kind of principle which can embrace a range of different acts and is never really an inhibiting factor. In an election period, for instance, *all* political parties justify their conflicting, sometimes contradictory, policies on the grounds that they are acting in the best interests of the community.

The TUC accepts the basic features of capitalism and aims for adjustments within it. It does not regard a qualitative change in the relations to the means of production as a pre-requisite for the fulfilment of trade union objectives. It does not, therefore, challenge property rights and the distribution of power which goes with them. The TUC, in its policy-making deliberations each year, has its aggressive moments during which it sees the futility of perpetually trying to adapt

and repair a defective distributive system. At the 99th TUC in 1967, for instance, a majority of the delegates approved a motion which advocated an extension of public ownership and a use of planning mechanisms. But these moments pass all too quickly into moods of acquiescence or cynicism or false optimism. In any event they do not result in action by the General Council of the TUC, which is responsible for applying policy decisions. The most that happens is that more strongly worded memoranda are written or more feeling is put into the representations made to the government by delegations.

Pragmatic action is not adopted by the TUC because of disillusionment with other methods or because of an increasing involvement of trade unions with the capitalist system. It is not a case of the TUC seeking the means of survival for it was never without them. From the outset the TUC has been involved with whichever establishment has held power, seeking to use its power in order to **influence**, trying to infiltrate so as to be better placed to exercise influence.

The first meeting of the TUC was held from 2nd to 6th June 1868 at the Mechanics Institute in Manchester. It was called by the Manchester and Salford Trades Council with the intention of assuming "the character of the annual meetings of the British Association for the Advancement of Science and the Social Science Association, in the transactions of which societies the artisan class are almost **excluded**".<sup>1</sup> It was proposed that "papers, previously carefully prepared, shall be laid before the Congress on the various subjects which at the present time affect the trade societies, each paper to be followed by discussion upon the points advanced, with a view of the merits and demerits of each question being thoroughly ventilated through the medium of the public press". This meeting made no demands on unions, required no sacrifice of autonomy and presented no challenge either to employers or the government. In this sense it was unlike all earlier attempts to bring unions together in an horizontal unity.

The situation, of 1868 and after distorted the main Congress purpose of relieving the profound ignorance which prevailed in the public mind with reference to the operation of trade unions. A Royal Commission of Inquiry into trade unions had been appointed in February 1867 arising out of the publicity given to the assaults upon **non-unionists** in the Sheffield file trades. There was a strong feeling that repressive legislation would be introduced to re-inforce an already repressively interpreted common law. Trade unions had no legal identity and had no means, therefore, of protecting their funds. This was a serious legal deficiency, particularly for the relatively large amalgamated unions. Unions, moreover, could not take strike action without risking criminal proceedings being taken against them for "threatening", "intimidation" or "molestation" in the course of picketing. Even

"black looks" at a strike-breaker were enough to warrant an arrest. The legal position of unions dominated the discussion at the first TUC and set not only the tone, but the purpose, of subsequent meetings. The TUC from an inauspicious beginning and only partially representative of the trade union movement, became a united, representative body in the early 1870's with the prime purpose of securing an alteration in the law relating to union action. A Trade Union Bill had been introduced by the government in February 1871 which with one hand granted full legal recognition to unions and with the other still left trade unionists liable for criminal prosecution for peaceful picketing. Pressure on the government managed only to secure a division of the Bill into two, a Trades Union Bill and a Criminal Law Amendment Bill. The TUC became involved in the agitation for the repeal of the second after it became law. It acted as the forum for assessing the feeling of trade unionists about this contentious issue.

The TUC started then with a limited objective which was attainable within the framework of the existing system of society. When this objective was attained in 1875 with the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, some union leaders considered the TUC to have completed its usefulness. Other union leaders saw the TUC as having a watch-dog function for unions in relation to the government. They set it a series of minor objectives such as securing amendments in the Factory Acts. The situation after 1875 was an anti-climax for the TUC and in a sense it had to start afresh justifying its existence and providing a rationale for the Parliamentary Committee which controlled its activities in between annual meetings. In practice, it combined its initial function as a debating society with a limited watchdog one. For many years after 1875 the TUC could have slipped into obscurity without any loss to the trade union movement. That it did not do so was, in part, due to the fact that the annual meeting fairly quickly became an institutionalized ritual.

It was not inevitable that the TUC should have started with a confined, limited, objective. Once the initial meeting had been called it could have been diverted to more aggressive activities or it could have acquired longer-term revolutionary aims. The political environment of the early TUC's was a highly volatile one. The first meeting in 1868 followed the successful agitation of organized labour for political reform. The period between the formation of the National Reform League in February, 1865 and the passing of the Reform Act in the summer of 1867 was characterized by organized agitations and mass demonstrations with undertones of class disaffection. An address issued by the League in May 1865 stated that "The Working Classes in our Country, the producers of its wealth, are in a degraded and humiliat-

ing position . . . the men who have fought her battles, manned her ships, tilled her soil, built up her manufactures, trade and commerce . . . are denied the most essential privileges of citizens. . . .<sup>11</sup> At one conference jointly sponsored by the League and trade unions, it was resolved that unless the working class was enfranchised it would be necessary to consider calling a general strike. The membership of the executive of the Reform League and the International Working Men's Association overlapped and to many upper and middle class observers so did their policies.

The agitation for the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act after 1871 resembled that which preceded the Reform Act in its intensity and direction but it was different in that it occurred against the background of successful working class action for reform and of evidence that working class voters had aided the return of a Liberal majority to the House of Commons. The extended franchise had, it seemed in the early 1870's, given trade unionists an additional weapon in their struggle.

Yet neither the methods of struggle nor the aspirations implicit in political struggles by the working class penetrated the fabric of the TUC as continuing factors. The reason for this was that the environment of the TUC was a complex one containing powerful consensus-making, disarming pressures as well as conflict-generating ones. It was not enough that conditions gave rise to class agitation; the movements arising out of unrest had to be given direction and purpose in order to make achievement possible. The nature of the direction and purpose could extend or curtail, distort or misdirect, encourage or discourage social movements.

The leadership of trade unions in the period from 1865 to 1875 was influenced by a new set of factors. Some of the unions, such as the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, formed through amalgamations, were large by contemporary standards and were stable organizations in that they possessed sufficient resilience to enable them to survive both trade depressions and attacks by employers. Their interests lay in survival, preservation and stability. In other words, institutional preservation became a motivating factor in trade unionism. Action was considered not only in terms of its impact on employers or the government but also in terms of its effect upon union organization. For such unions class collaboration was often more productive than class antagonism. Moreover, involvement in the system was a surer means of survival than rejection of the system.

The transition of some of the union offices from lay to full-time and the consequent professionalization of union leadership accompanied the growth of amalgamated unions. It was in the interests of full-time officials to perpetuate their organizations, to conserve funds, to remain

solvent. They pressed strongly for full legal recognition of unions in order to protect union funds; they deprecated strike action because it dissipated union resources. The activities of Robert Applegarth, general secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners, and William Allen, the general secretary of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers, epitomized this new type of union leader who saw merit in pedestrian achievements and wanted a share, no matter how small, in the material progress of Mid-Victorian Britain. Their limited aspirations and willingness to work within limits consistent with the preservation of capitalism were recognized by political leaders. Cracks, hair-line ones, appeared in the social structure and gave union leaders access to government officials, enabled them to serve political parties and to have intellectual middle-class friends. For the first time in the history of trade unionism, union leaders were drawn into the political power game, though only as hand-servants at first. But even the role of hand-servant had a politically demoralizing effect.

The TUC first elected a Parliamentary Committee in 1871. Its chairman was George Potter, once the reputed militant editor of the *Beehive* but in 1871 a mellowed, sober companion to the leaders of the large amalgamated unions who had acquired control of the journal. But even before Allan and Applegarth had acquired control of the *Beehive*, Potter had entered into a secret agreement with industrialist leaders of the Liberal Party whereby in return for financial assistance he was to "publish a series of *special articles* upon political subjects of the deepest interest, and circulate them widely among working-class voters, to guide them at this important crisis in sustaining the LIBERAL PARTY. . . ."<sup>3</sup> The crisis was over the manner in which the newly enfranchised workers would use their votes in the general election of 1868. The first secretary of the Parliamentary Committee was George Howell of the Operative Bricklayers' Society. Howell had been involved in much more shady dealings with Liberal leaders than had Potter. When Howell had been secretary of the National Reform League he had been in the pay of G. G. Glyn, the banker and Liberal Party Chief Whip, and Samuel Morley, the industrialist and prominent Liberal politician.<sup>4</sup> He had manipulated the machinery of the Reform League in favour of Liberal candidates and against working class candidates. Even after he became secretary of the Parliamentary Committee of the TUC he made an approach to Glyn for a favour. "Surely," Howell wrote, "there would be a chance of some good appointment where my qualifications would be a fair test". William Allan, who was the treasurer of the Parliamentary Committee, was openly committed to the Liberal Party. Even Robert Applegarth who became perhaps one of the keenest British supporters of the International was

on Howell's list of speakers for the official Liberal Party and was ever ready to help the causes of Liberal manufacturers.

The position was that the leading members of the Parliamentary Committee up till 1875 were ideologically committed to the Liberal Party and supported it either secretly or openly in election campaigns but at the same time they were compelled at least to pay lip-service to the demands of trade unionists for increased working class representation in the House of Commons. In addition, these same union leaders were drawn into the agitation against the Liberal government for the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act despite their own attachment to the government. Their position illustrated the contradiction which has always dominated the Trades Union Congress. From the outset union leaders with national organizational responsibilities coveted connections with the political establishment but had in some measure to satisfy the demands of ordinary members which conflicted with those of the establishment. The contradiction belonged to the situation. It did not develop or grow out of it.

The situation containing this contradiction has in part already been explained. It arises when organizational survival becomes a factor which influences action and this is all the more likely when the organizations are run professionally in a hostile environment. Aims and methods have to be accommodated both to organizational needs and the dominant ideology and, therefore, are distorted from the forms necessary to satisfy consistently the demands of members. This distortion is an inevitable consequence of the fact of organization but it appears in varying degrees. The extent to which officials give prominence to the preservation of their organizations in determining the action they take depends upon the nature of other determinants of their action. For instance, if a trade union official analyses situations and, therefore, decides upon action through the use of a theoretical framework which is dynamic in conception, he is more likely to advocate a course of action to alter things than if his theoretical framework for action is static in conception and related to the preservation of the status quo. If, moreover, his theoretical approach is expressed in formal ideological terms so that he has a consistent and constant guide to action he is even more likely to act irrespective of organizational needs. In other words, the only real protection a trade union leader has against distorting the prime purpose of trade unionism is the acceptance and use of a revolutionary ideology. Without this he is as a pawn in a struggle to keep things as they are.

Members of the Parliamentary Committee or General Council of the TUC have very rarely been anything but stodgily conservative in their approaches to trade union issues. There is relatively little evidence that any of them have been motivated to keep the system as

it is by the possibility of gaining financially from it, in the manner of Howell. Accusations were made against Henry Broadhurst, who succeeded Howell as secretary of the Parliamentary Committee, that he accepted shares from Brunner-Mond as a reward for supporting Sir John Brunner in an election in 1887, but the accusations were not substantiated. There have been suspicions about others since Broadhurst but the evidence against them has always been circumstantial. In any event it is not necessary to malign personal characters in order to make the point. Some union leaders no doubt hoped to gain from the distribution of political patronage and their expectations may have influenced their attitudes to political questions. In the main, however, they have regarded the offer of conventional honours such as peerages and knighthoods and lucrative part-time appointments on the boards of nationally-owned undertakings as recognition of union service and not as evidence of self-aggrandisement. Nonetheless, the opportunities for union leaders to become involved in the distribution of conventional rewards are wide and varied and this may play some part in directing their actions. The behaviour of union leaders in this respect is consistent with their general acceptance of the capitalist system. They are socialized to accept the framework of the system and this affects their actions.

Collectively, the leaders of the TUC have consistently sought either compromise solutions or solutions which unequivocally supported the government. Advice from TUC leaders invariably takes into account responsibility to the public or community as if these are identifiable in reality and possess a single common interest to which all classes and groups contribute. Responsibility of this kind is regarded as being synonymous with statesmanship, the prime virtue of the British establishment. When either the Parliamentary Committee or the General Council have advocated action of a one-sided kind in favour of the interests of trade unionists, it has been because the pressures from the rank and file could not be ignored without a serious rejection of TUC leadership. In other words, the policy of compromise or class collaboration has usually been rejected only for tactical reasons of leadership. The conversion of TUC leaders to progressive class policies has always followed, never preceded, agitations from delegates at the annual meetings of the TUC.

The Parliamentary Committee, according to the standing orders which were adopted by the TUC in 1873 had the function of watching over "all legislative measures directly affecting the questions of labour, and . . . initiating, whenever necessary, such legislative action as Congress may direct, or as the exigencies of the time and circumstances may demand. In effect it acted as the TUC in between the annual congresses. The TUC had no regular source of income until 1892 and,

apart from a part-time secretary, no administrative staff. The secretary was allocated a clerical assistant in 1902. From 1906 the post of secretary became a full-time one and he was appointed without having to seek re-election annually. No other assistance was employed until 1918. So for 50 years the Parliamentary Committee acted without any real administrative supports and guidance. The TUC had no bureaucracy to act either as a buffer or a link between the Parliamentary Committee and its affiliated members. For most of the time it was not a continuously operating administrative unit.

The absence of a permanent administration had a bearing on the internal power structure of the TUC. It was the function of the annual Congress to make major policy decisions while their application was left to the Parliamentary Committee which met intermittently in between Congresses. Whether or not the Parliamentary Committee carried out the decisions of Congress was determined mainly by the Committee and its secretary. The Committee could stall, evade or take contrary action as it pleased so long as it could produce arguments sufficiently cogent to convince delegates of its sincerity at the next Congress.

Following the re-organization of the TUC between 1919 and 1926 when the basis of a sub-committee system served by full-time administrators was laid, decisions of the TUC were acted on more promptly. A continuing administration curtailed the freedom of the Parliamentary Committee to ignore the annual Congress decisions because the administrators had to take up work if only to justify their employment. The heads of departments in the re-organized TUC continually fed material to the General Council (as the Parliamentary Committee was re-named), on which decisions were necessary. In one important respect, the creation of a specialist administration increased the power of the General Council in relation to the delegates at the annual Congresses. Increasingly, the General Council based its decisions on detailed, reasoned advice which was not always available to delegates and which was used as debating weapons.

The Parliamentary Committee and General Council were formally under the control of the Congress. They were elected annually by the Congress. The methods and bases of election were altered. First the elections were by a show of hands; then, in 1895, unions used their block votes. First nominations came from the Congress as a whole, then, from 1907, they were submitted on a group basis. Under the re-organization scheme, nominations were made according to a rearranged group basis and were voted on by Congress as a whole. This last method is still used. None of the alterations in the methods and bases of election, however, had a marked effect upon the personnel selected. The only significant result of the 1895 alteration in the TUC

standing orders was the elimination of John Burns, then a socialist, from the Parliamentary Committee. Both Burns and Keir Hardie were excluded from the TUC as delegates, at the same time because they were neither full-time officials nor working at their trade. The changes in 1920 increased the size of the Parliamentary Committee from 16 to 30 members yet of the new members only one, George Hicks of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers, could be described as an active socialist. Acknowledged left-wing union leaders normally were elected to the executive of the TUC only when there were no means of excluding them. The socialist leaders of the "new" unions of unskilled workers, John Burns, Ben Tillett and Will Thorne secured election to the Parliamentary Committee during the phase when socialist measures commanded a majority of the TUC votes in the early 1890's. In 1895, however, TUC opinion changed and Ben Tillett lost his seat until 1921. Since the re-organization of the TUC, rarely has a left-wing leader been elected to the General Council on a competitive basis. He has either been returned unopposed because the number of nominations in his industrial group equalled the number of seats allocated to that group or he has stepped in to fill a vacancy in between annual Congresses. A. F. Papworth, then a member of the Communist Party and the Transport and General Workers' Union, joined the General Council in 1944 because he was one of three nominations in the Transport group for three seats. Frank Cousins filled a vacancy in 1956 caused by the death of the general secretary of his union and afterwards was re-elected without a contest. The position of Will Paynter, a Communist and general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, was different in that when he obtained a seat on the General Council in 1960 there was no contest in the Mining and Quarrying Group, but the following year when there was a contest and Congress was able to vote he was defeated and never returned to the General Council. The list of union leaders who have not secured election to the General Council because of their left-wing politics is a long one.

The domination of the General Council by conservative elements has been largely possible because the annual Congresses have had little control over the composition of the General Council. Each of the industrial groups is represented by a given number of seats. If the unions in a group, from which nominations must come, agree amongst themselves to nominate only as many candidates as there are seats, then the matter is taken out of the hands of Congress and there is no contest. In each of the 22 Congresses between 1945 and 1967 there were no contests in an average of more than 11 groups out of the 19 or 20 which existed. The highest number of contested elections was in 1947 when there were 11, while the lowest number was 6 in the years 1959,

1960, 1961, 1964 and 1967. Where there were elections the results were usually determined beforehand by at least tacit agreement amongst the leaders of the largest unions. Either a union would agree to support another one's candidate in return for support for its own or agreement would be reached between unions on political grounds. For this reason it was by no means the case that the candidate of the largest union in a group would get elected. From 1946 to 1956, R. J. Jones, the secretary of the North Wales Quarrymen's Union, a tiny appendage of the Transport and General Municipal Workers' Union with less than 6,500 members, held one of the three seats in the Mining and Quarrying group. During that period, Arthur Horner the unquestionably able Communist general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, which had between 500,000 and 600,000 members, was consistently defeated in opposition to Jones. The tenure of Jones was significant only in that he was passed over when, in terms of seniority, he was due to be president of the TUC after Charles Geddes in 1955. A number of others have held seats on the General Council simply as a means to keep politically unacceptable men off it.<sup>5</sup> The elections in the main have been annual rituals.

Both the Parliamentary Committee and the General Council have been self-perpetuating oligarchies. The advent of John Burns, Ben Tillett and Will Thorne to the Parliamentary Committee in the 1890s made virtually no impact on the course of its deliberations. The possibility of a newcomer upsetting the General Council nowadays is even more remote for the General Council has its conservatism and oligarchic control protected by the bureaucratic form of organization introduced and developed by the then Walter Citrine who was general secretary of the TUC from 1926 until 1946. The General Council is now so divided into sub-committees, with a ranking order of priority and filled by members largely in order of seniority, that it is difficult for any newcomer, let alone one who belongs to a minority, to make an early impact on the Council. The Council in full session is largely a body which receives reports from its sub-committees. By the time the newcomer has intruded into the inner councils it is often sadly the case that he has mellowed or become cynical or become so conditioned by the General Council environment that he is unable to defy its traditions and penetrate its conservatism. Such was the case with George Hicks, Ernest Bevin, Jack Tanner and Will Lawther.

The constant and predictable element in the TUC is the General Council. The variable and unpredictable element is the behaviour of delegates. Within the TUC itself the General Council's main task is handling, curbing, restraining, moderating the militancy of the delegates in order to produce policy decisions which it considers to be consistent with its statesmanship. As each General Council member is a

leader of a trade union the question arises as to why there should be differences between them and the delegations they lead. Firstly, each person elected to the General Council is representative of an industrial group not a trade union. He is, therefore, in so far as his union is concerned, on the General Council in his individual capacity, free to take decisions independently of his own union's policy. The General Council thus is a body of individuals unrestrained by mandates from their own rank and file members. They can, and often do, act contrary to their unions' wishes. This was the case over the issue by the General Council of the anti-communist circulars 16 and 17 to affiliated unions and to trades councils in 1934 and 1935. The anti-communist attitude of some General Council members was not a reflection of their union policies. Similarly, in the periods when the General Council has advocated wage restraint, some members have walked out of meetings to pursue wage claims in accordance with their union policies. As the members of the General Council, with but a single exception, are traditionally full-time paid officials of unions they are already subject to environmental influences which separate them from their rank and file.<sup>9</sup> Once they are freed from the democratic policy-making mechanisms of their unions and sit as a group of individuals they are more likely than not to become instruments of their relatively abstracted environment with its bureaucratic controls.

The TUC consists of affiliated unions not individual trade unionists so the internal contradiction is reflected in policy differences between the General Council and individual unions. For most of the year the General Council makes its decisions and goes about its business in its own formal manner while the unions respond to the day-to-day pressures on them, determine their own policies and pursue them with little reference to what the General Council is doing. Occasionally issues arise which compel constituent parts of the TUC to consult but in the main the significant confrontation occurs at the annual Congress. The meeting is the principal image-creating activity of the TUC. It formally determines policy and is widely publicized. The arguments in debates are reported but the crucial determinants of the image are the votes on policy issues. The General Council's main concern is with the image and, therefore, with the way in which unions vote.

By and large unions determine their policies at policy-making conferences which are held every one to three years. Union delegations at each TUC meeting are usually required to vote as their respective unions have decided but this is often difficult to do because economic and political conditions may change to make policy decisions inappropriate in some degree between the period when the decisions are taken and the TUC meets. Union delegations, therefore, frequently

have the task of re-formulating or interpreting their union policies. This task is rarely performed during the debates at the TUC because union delegations contain diverse views which, under the block vote system, have to be represented by single votes. Each Union, moreover, tries to present a united front with selected speakers expressing its policy. The consequence is that vital policy discussions take place in private before the Congress meets at delegation meetings. When the Congress debates policy the attitudes of most unions are known and fixed and all that really matters is the counting of the votes.

The General Council, then, is understandably more concerned with pre-Congress delegation meetings than with debates. If it is convinced that sufficient unions of sufficient size support it, then it will virtually leave the debate to the opposition minority. Where there are known differences of policy between numerically important unions and the General Council, its members, in so far as they support its policy, turn their attention to their union delegations. They have been known to use arguments but where these have failed, a variety of devices have been resorted to. In the years of Labour governments, appeals to loyalty to the Labour Movement have been in constant use against left-wing opponents. Where these appeals have failed, some General Council members who have been chairmen of delegation meetings have used their authority over procedural matters to question the competency of delegations to determine or revise policy. When everything else has failed, the opinion of delegation meetings has been flouted and union block votes have been cast to meet General Council requirements. Because the policy-making functions of delegation meetings are rarely formulated in union constitutions, their authority is frequently determined by the needs of immediate situations. Where the rules are vague, the delegation chairmen have the authority to interpret them. The Amalgamated Engineering Union has a history of procedural wrangles about the policy-making rights of delegations which has been marked by bitterness and legal action. At the 1966 TUC, lay members in two unions sought legal injunctions to restrain the leaders of their union delegations from voting for General Council policies. The problem is a perennial one.

When the General Council has failed to get its own policies accepted, its reactions have varied according to the relevance of the TUC decisions for its all-the-year-round business and the strength of the pressures on it. In other words, when the decisions have affected the image of the TUC and nothing more, the General Council has worried little about Congress defeats. To a large extent, this has also been true for foreign policy issues such as unilateral nuclear disarmament and the Vietnam War. The General Council has also been able to carry de-

feats on political issues, on issues which have been declarations of political faith, with relatively little concern. In the 1890s, when the political declarations of the TUC became markedly more socialist, the activities of the Parliamentary Committee remained unaffected. A TUC resolution on public ownership or workers control does not affect the day to day operation of the Congress administration. At the most, a General Council deputation may have to put a case to a Minister with which it may disagree. The General Council can sometimes ignore Congress instructions on political matters as the Parliamentary Committee did on a number of occasions in the 1890s. The pressure for General Council action is greater when the issues concern the organization or administration of the TUC but even then resolutions can be dealt with in a dilatory fashion. Complaints about the inefficiency of the administration of the TUC began to be made in 1902 and the issue was raised at Congress on a number of occasions afterwards but no real steps were taken about the matter until 1918.

The situation is different when the issues concern immediate relationships with employers and the government. The General Council could not ignore the changing mood against wage restraint which began in 1950 and resulted in the rejection of General Council advice at the TUC that year. There was not an over-night conversion. At the 1951 Congress the General Council still advocated "moderation" and in 1955 opposed a motion which rejected any form of wage restraint. But by 1956, the General Council felt able to support the attack on wage restraint led by Frank Cousins, though it made no verbal commitment in the debate. The attitude of the General Council to Congress deliberations in general was put by George Woodcock, the General Secretary of the TUC when he said that "the General Council do not as a rule welcome motions on the Congress agenda. Our general attitude to motions is that if they tell us to do what we already intend to do they are redundant, and if they try to tell us what we do not intend to do they are offensive. . . ."

The essential point to consider in an examination of the power position within the TUC is the power situation of the TUC itself. The internal contradiction has been perpetuated and not resolved in either organizational changes or fission, because the pressures for resolution have been weak. On the one hand, the TUC has never been considered to have enough power to warrant its use as an essential medium for union action, while on the other hand the individual unions have never been bound or even restricted in their activities by TUC decisions. These two aspects are causally related.

The conditions in which unions operate are continually making greater unity necessary and are producing more unified action. Unions are a response to a capitalist environment and changes in it produce

changes, with time lags of course, in union organization. Such environmental changes are increases in the size of markets and, therefore, business organizations; increases in the degree of monopoly; changes towards capital-intensive methods of production; greater interdependence between economic units; alterations in the lines of demarcation between occupations and categories of work such as manual and non-manual and an increasingly influential intervention in economic affairs by governments. These factors create acute exigencies for people who live by selling their labour; they compel workers, such as those in non-manual employment like bank clerks or teachers or air-line pilots to organize collectively; they compel existing unions to collaborate or federate or amalgamate; they produce needs for centrally organized class action. In other words, they create the need for unity over different ranges and in various forms. If this need is not met, then the power of collective action is reduced.

Unions are always made conscious of the need for solidarity and attempt to achieve it but they are hampered and frustrated by forces which are divisive in their impact and which derive from the same environment as that which produces solidarity. Union organizations reflect the competitive free market mechanism. Workers with common group interests compete for job opportunities with those in occupationally related groups; the interests of those in contracting and expanding industries are pitted against each other. Whenever the market mechanism creates a diverse interest, it will in some way divide workers against each other in their struggle against the conditions which that mechanism creates. This is the secondary contradiction which determines the character of the whole trade union movement. Trade unions are institutionalized expressions of vested occupational interests; their main concern, therefore is with the protection and improvement of the interests they represent not only against employers but against each other.

The operation of the secondary contradiction can be seen in an historical study of inter-union relations. The dominant force is for solidarity because it is derived from the main structural contradiction between social relations and forces of production. The history of British unions, therefore, shows a process involving the merging of local unions into national ones; the amalgamation of national unions with similar industrial or occupational interests; the amalgamation of unions with a general class interest; and the formations of federations between unions on an industrial and a local and national class basis. Many of these moves for solidarity have failed or have been short-lived because of divisive forces. Others have persisted but have been contained by these forces. The TUC is an example of containment.

The TUC is a loose federation of trade unions for particular purposes. It does not impinge on the autonomy of individual unions. It has strictly limited control over its affiliated members, for the only sanction it possesses is expulsion and this has no adverse material consequences for unions. In central class struggle situations, this loose form of organization is deficient for it cannot mobilize working class forces against the owners of the means of production. This deficiency has been recognized from the inception of the TUC. Before 1868 most attempts to create horizontal, inter-union unity sprang from particular conflict situations. The prime need was for a general controlling strike organizing body. Each attempt was defeated partly because it was dependent upon the success of a particular strike movement, partly because both employers and the government attacked it as a threat to their power and partly because the degree of centralization involved was greater than that which even the individual unions themselves possessed. When the TUC was formed, it was as a debating society not a strike body. It made no demands on individual unions. Although by 1874, the TUC was involved in the agitation for the repeal of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, it was recognized that it was not strong enough for the task. The Congress in that year debated the possibility of reforming itself into a federation with wider powers. In 1879, the TUC voted to do this but the trade union movement was then seriously weakened by depression and employers' attacks. The membership of the TUC in 1879 was less than half of its 1874 figure. Then in 1897, the TUC set up a committee to consider the best means of federating trade unions. The committee produced a scheme which involved the formation of a parallel organization and left the TUC untouched. As a result, the General Federation of Trade Unions was formed in 1899 but this, too, was handicapped by the forces which pitted unions against each other. A concern over the weakness of both the TUC and the General Federation of Trade Unions caused the Miners' Federation, the National Union of Railwaymen and the National Transport Workers' Federation to form the Triple Alliance in 1915 to co-ordinate joint action on "matters of a national character or vitally affecting a principle". The declaration of the Triple Alliance in 1919 and 1920 caused the government and employers some anxiety, but it was in reality an alliance only of honourable union intentions bound by words and was not equipped to overcome inter-union differences in the face of common problems. It had no separate organization and no administration and specifically made no intrusion on the autonomy of the three organizations. The Triple Alliance collapsed in 1921. In the meantime, the TUC was re-organized in an attempt, by the principal architects at any rate, to form it into a "general staff of labour" in the event of outright national conflicts

with employers and the government. The re-organization, however, added no power to the TUC over its affiliated membership nor did it increase the confidence of unions in the ability of the General Council to give direction in a conflict. When the Miners' Federation was faced by an attack on miners' wages in 1925 it did not turn to the TUC but approached a number of unions in transport and heavy industry to form an Industrial Alliance. The mining situation reached crisis dimensions before the Alliance could be formed, so the Miners' Federation approached the General Council for assistance. From this point, the authority structure underwent a change which has persisted to 1968. In order to obtain direction and collective backing in the event of a clash between the miners and the government in 1925, the General Council summoned a special conference of trade union executives on 30th July, not a specially convened meeting of the TUC. That is, in order to get a decision which committed the trade union movement, it went to the union executives who alone had the constitutional authority to commit unions to action. The General Council did the same on the eve of the 1926 General Strike. On every occasion since then, when a crisis involving the trade union movement has occurred, the General Council has sought the backing of union executives rather than the TUC.

After 100 years, the power situation of the TUC in one respect has remained almost unchanged. Neither the General Council nor the Congress has the power to compel unions to take a particular course of action. In so far as these bodies have power, it is derived from the ethic of solidarity. The TUC has evolved a "common law", based on the Bridlington Agreement of 1939, to regulate inter-union relationships but this depends upon the ethic of solidarity. The TUC has no right to intervene in the affairs of individual unions except in two respects. Under rule 11(c) of its Standing Orders, the General Council can intervene in an industrial dispute "if . . . there is a likelihood of negotiations breaking down and creating a situation in which other bodies of workpeople affiliated to Congress might be involved in a stoppage of work or their wages, hours and conditions of employment imperilled . . . to use their influence to effect a just settlement of the difference. . . ." A union which ignores the advice of the General Council can be reported to Congress and, presumably, expelled. The second respect concerns the conduct of affiliated organizations. Under Rule 13(a), the General Council can summon a union to appear before it "if at any time there appears to the General Council to be justification for an investigation into the conduct of any affiliated organization on the ground that the activities of such organization are detrimental to the interests of the Trade Union Movement or contrary to the declared principles and policy of the Congress. . . ." Both rules

are applied cautiously in a way unlikely to create offence to unions. The intervention of the government in industrial relations and the growing centralized power of employers has confronted the General Council, however, with the need to make decisions on behalf of the trade union movement. It has sought authority for these decisions from conferences of union executives as a means of overcoming the weakness of the TUC. The actual power situation has changed in so far as the General Council now acts as the executive for the trade union movement as a whole rather than just for the TUC. The General Council, acting on behalf of a conference of trade union executives has no constitutional power to discipline recalcitrant union members but the executives which make the decision do have this power. The General Council, therefore, has greater authority as the executive of conferences of trade union executives than as the executive of the TUC. This, however, amounts to only a marginal accretion of power.

The TUC is a part of the centralization of trade union activity, which in turn is the institutionalized expression of solidarity. As has been stated above, the contradiction from which the trade union movement get its momentum is continually extending and intensifying solidarity. Trade union activity in consequence is becoming more centralized. The number of unions affiliated to the TUC is continually declining even though new unions seek affiliation in most years. More significantly, the membership of the TUC is becoming increasingly and highly concentrated in a small number of unions within the TUC. In 1967, 10 unions out of the 169 affiliated to the TUC had 5,381,072 members while the remaining 159 shared between them only 3,406,210 members. The process of centralization, though inexorable, is a slow one. It depends for its speed upon trade union crises. Individual unions merge with others usually only under the threat of extinction through insolvency but lesser and different pressures can force them to concede some autonomy. For many unions, government control is equivalent to insolvency and when this is interpreted in crisis terms, further centralization may take place. The TUC may be given powers to control some union activities in order to restrain government intervention. Or a different form of organization may be created out of the TUC. The only sure thing is that in some way solidarity will increase.

When examining the power situation of the TUC, it is necessary to separate illusion from concrete reality, The trappings of TUC involvement in political decision-making have become more numerous and apparent. The TUC *appears* to be exercising more power now because it consults and is consulted by the government, because the General Council has easy access to the Prime Minister, because the TUC is

represented on numerous government bodies, because in general the TUC is accepted by the established power-holders in Britain. These trappings, however, are a *façade* and create an illusion of power. What the TUC can do does not depend upon its bureaucratic involvement in society. Indeed, it can be argued that this involvement is a handicap on the use of power. Certainly, involvement is not power. The power of the TUC is much less than, and never can be more than, the collective power of unions and this without doubt depends upon their ability to exploit their economic strength. The concrete reality of power involves the class conscious use of economic strength and, in a capitalist society, this strength varies with the level of employment. In so far then as the TUC has any real power in 1968, it is determined by the employment situation. A sudden change in the level of employment would alter its power situation irrespective of the extent to which the TUC was involved in the formal decision-making apparatus. The power of the TUC has varied along a relatively constant trend. It has been high during war-time and periods of peacetime full employment and low during periods of unemployment. Occasionally, non-economic factors may temporarily intrude into the power situation. Universal suffrage was such a factor in the period between 1868 and the first World War. This was the period when political parties competed for the electoral allegiance of the newly enfranchised workers by promising, and in some cases making, concessions to the unions in the belief that the unions influenced the voting behaviour of their members. Political parties still compete for the votes of trade unionists but no longer believe that they have to make concessions to unions in the process. Capitalism in Britain is going through a crisis which may lead to the Corporate State. Before this state can be reached, and as a condition for reaching it, the power of unions has to be arrested by legislative measures. The arresting process has begun. But the attempt to control unions in which the present government is engaged is creating the very pressures which will force unions to strengthen themselves and, perhaps, the TUC as well. The TUC will have the complacency of its centenary year disturbed by the crisis of British capitalism.

## NOTES

1. From the original circular, reprinted in A. E. Musson, *The Congress of 1868* (1955), p. 33.
2. F. E. Gillespie, *Labor and Politics in England, 1850-1867* (Duke University Press, 1927), p. 252.
3. Royden Harrison, *Before the Socialists* (1965), pp. 192-193.
4. *Ibid.*, chapter iv. "The Reform League and the General Election of 1868".

5. Bryn Roberts, General Secretary of the National Union of Public Employees from 1934–1962, was one of those deliberately kept off the General Council. See his own account in *The Price of T.U.C. Leadership* (1961).
6. The single exception occurs because the Transport and General Workers Union insists on including a lay member of its executive as a nominee for the General Council.
7. *T.U.C. Report*, 1962, p. 298.