

THE STRUCTURE OF THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

J. E. Mortimer

"STRUCTURE, particularly in the trade union movement, is a function of purpose." This point was made strongly by Mr. George Woodcock, the General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress, when he spoke at the 1962 Congress on a successful motion, moved by the Union of Post Office Workers, urging that the British trade union movement should adapt its structure to modern conditions. The motion instructed the General Council of the T.U.C. to examine and report on the possibility of reorganizing the structure both of the T.U.C. and of the British trade union movement.

The mover of the Congress motion, Mr. Ron Smith, the General Secretary of the Union of Post Office Workers and a member of the General Council of the T.U.C., spoke cautiously. He recalled that the whole subject was one which had been discussed many times before in British trade union history and that it was one which had tremendous emotional impact for active trade unionists. He felt that, although not as much progress had been made as many would have hoped, nevertheless much more had been achieved than the critics of the trade union movement normally acknowledged.

Mr. Smith said that trade unionists could not be satisfied with the level of trade union membership in Britain. Only about half the male workers and about one-quarter of the female workers in the country were in unions. Though Mr. Smith was careful to say that the motion which his union was sponsoring was deliberately designed to avoid committing the Congress to any particular line, he indicated in his general remarks that he was thinking mainly of the possibility of closer working and amalgamation between unions with related trade, industrial or occupational interests.

The seconder of the successful Congress motion was Mr. S. Hill, the General Secretary of the National Union of Public Employees. The fact that his union seconded the motion was of significance because for many years they have been among the strongest advocates of industrial unionism. This has brought them on many occasions into conflict with other unions, particularly the National Union of General and Municipal Workers and the Transport and General Workers' Union, both of which include local authority workers among their members.

Mr. Hill was forthright in his criticism of the existing structure of the movement. He pointed out that the number of trade unionists affiliated

to the T.U.C. represented less than fifty per cent of the working population eligible for trade union membership. "One is entitled to assume, therefore, that there is something seriously wrong with the present trade union structure which can attract less than fifty per cent of the potential membership." In the view of his union, he said, the present competitive structure of the movement provided all the opportunities and the excuses the disinterested worker required to remain outside the ranks of the trade union movement.

Mr. Hill urged that there should be a reduction in the number of competing trade unions in each industry. He also felt that a national wages policy was essential in the interests of workers and that a more rational structure was needed to make such a policy possible.

Earlier Reviews

The decision of the 1962 Congress for a thorough review of trade union structure was by no means the first such decision in the history of British trade unionism. Resolutions on trade union structure have been adopted by the T.U.C. on a number of occasions going as far back as 1874. Two major reviews have been conducted since the end of the First World War. The first was between 1924 and 1927 and the second in 1943-44.

The review in 1924 was launched at a time when there was a strong leftward trend in the trade union movement. Big industrial struggles had taken place in the immediate post-war period and many active trade unionists were aware that the unions had been handicapped by divisions which existed between themselves. They were also conscious that further large-scale industrial struggles were likely in the near future and that, if workers' interests were to be defended, the maximum amount of industrial unity should be fostered.

The 1924 Congress endorsed the principle that as far as possible industrial unions should be established. The resolution was carried by a comfortable majority.

The enquiry conducted by the General Council after the passing of the 1924 resolution revealed, however, that many sections of the movement were not committed to, and were, indeed, opposed to the principle of industrial unionism. The enquiry lasted for more than three years and at the end of it the General Council declared that the 1924 resolution had placed on them an impossible task. They reported that the varying structures and methods of working of unions, the differing circumstances in the various trades and industries, and the impossibility of defining industrial boundaries made the general application of any particular scheme impracticable. Any attempt to compel unions to conform to the principle of industrial unionism would, said the General Council, destroy all hope of a united front among the unions. On the contrary, it would create bitterness and strife among them.

The General Council found that it was impossible for such a body

as the T.U.C. to reach agreement of any specific form of reorganization. The T.U.C. report did, however, make a number of suggestions for changes. It felt that there were advantages in the development of trade union federations. It was unquestionable, the report said, that federal unionism opened the easiest line of approach for improved trade union organization. The close federation of unions with related industrial interests, with suitable provisions against secession, was considered much more likely to be acceptable than any theoretical plan which entailed the dismemberment of affiliated unions.

The report pointed out also that though craft unionism was incompatible with the terms of the 1924 Congress resolution there was, nevertheless, a tendency among certain of the craft unions to widen their ranks and to embrace some skilled and unskilled workers.

The main recommendation of the General Council was that unions with closely related industrial interests should enter into joint working arrangements on all industrial matters with a view to joint negotiations on pay and working conditions. These joint arrangements should also have as their purpose the elimination of competition for members between one union and another.

The General Council also recommended that there should be more uniformity in rates of trade union contributions, and that they should be sufficient to ensure the establishment of adequate funds for all purposes and the speedy recovery of a union's financial position after a prolonged dispute.

Following the 1927 report of the General Council, unions were asked whether they were prepared to participate in amalgamation negotiations with other unions; the extent to which they were prepared to agree to joint working arrangements with other unions; and with which unions, in their opinion, there was the greatest possibility of progress towards amalgamation or for joint working arrangements. As a result of this initiative discussions took place in a number of industries.

The results were not dramatic but a certain amount of progress was made. The discussions influenced several subsequent amalgamations. The amalgamation of the Workers' Union and the Transport and General Workers' Union was completed in 1929, and amalgamations took place affecting the tailoring and garment trades, the paper trades, wool textiles and clerical workers. Many arrangements were also made for joint working between unions.

Despite all the difficulties revealed in the enquiries the General Council expressed the view that greater co-ordination within the trade union movement was essential. The most effective way this could be done, they said, was by unions with closely related trade interests to seek amalgamation.

The 1944 Report

The next major review of the structure of the trade union movement took place in 1943 and 1944 as a result of a resolution adopted by the

1943 Congress. This resolution was carried at a time when active trade unionists were very conscious of the new and wider social responsibilities which would fall upon the trade union and Labour movement in the post-war period.

The resolution was, however, more modest in its terms than the resolution of 1924. It called upon the General Council to examine and to report on trade union structure "with special regard to:

- "a. Uneconomic overlapping and competition;
- "b. What amalgamations are desirable;
- "c. Structural or other changes necessary to ensure maximum trade union efficiency in the future."

The report of the General Council, prepared as a result of the adoption of this resolution, was presented to the 1944 Congress.

The report recalled that proposals for the reorganization of the trade union movement had been made from time to time but examination had always shown that any drastic proposals would be impracticable. The T.U.C., the report said, could not compel affiliated unions to make substantial changes in their organization. Each union was autonomous and was at liberty to accept or reject the advice of the General Council. The report concluded that it remained true in 1944 as at the time of the earlier 1924-27 enquiry that it was impossible for the General Council to propose practical schemes of reorganization which involved radical changes in the structure of the movement. As much as they could do, they said, was to encourage such tendencies towards better organization as had revealed themselves.

The report drew attention to the fact that inter-union competition and friction still existed. This was detrimental to the prestige and efficient working of the trade union movement. In many cases, the report said, the cause of this rivalry was the varying theories of organization of the different types of unions. Craft unions felt that they must maintain their right to cater for craftsmen in whatever industry they might be working. Industrial unions sought to preserve their own scope to organize everyone within a given industry, and general workers' unions were anxious that their wide field of activity should not be curtailed.

The General Council said that amalgamations could not be forced, and the prerequisite of success in discussions on amalgamation was a conviction among participating unions that it was desirable to achieve unity. The main difficulties, the General Council pointed out, had been described in the earlier 1927 report and they remained much the same in 1944. They were:

- (a) The fear of loss of trade identity and autonomy.

This, said the General Council, was frequently the most difficult and fundamental problem, and it was essential to deal

with it in a generous and sympathetic manner. The recommendation of the 1927 report was quoted which stated that "special provision should be made, where definite craft and occupational interests arise, for the preservation of certain craft or occupational autonomy."

- (b) Marked differences in scales of contributions and benefits.
- (c) Disinclination to pool resources with a union in a weak financial position.

The General Council expressed the hope that in any amalgamation negotiations the wealthier organization, particularly if it was a large union, would make a concession to the smaller union in the general interests of unity.

- (d) Conflicting policies on the basis of organization, wages policy and general affairs.
- (e) Difficulty in placing officials.

The General Council were emphatic that despite the problems which were known to exist the unions themselves should strive for unity. The trade union movement, said the General Council, could not in a changing world retain its **pre-war** conception of organization if it were to prosper and efficiently fulfil its ideological and practical functions.

The report listed the main functions of trade unions. They were as follows:

- (a) Negotiation of wages, hours and conditions of labour.
- (b) Formulation of industrial policy.
- (c) Recruitment of non-members.
- (d) General protection of members in their employment.
- (e) Collection of contributions.
- (f) Payment of benefits.
- (g) Educational work.
- (h) General servicing of members.

The report offered a number of observations on these trade union functions. It said that if the function of collective bargaining were to be carried out efficiently facilities for research and adequate statistical and specialist technical services must be available. On the subject of recruitment it pointed out that that the designation "trade union organizer" was often a misnomer. The amount of time which a trade union official spent on recruitment was small. Most of his time was occupied in negotiations and in other services for the existing membership. Organizing recruitment, particularly through effective publicity, was the work of specialists. Specialist services were also required on a wide range of issues affecting the welfare of members including, for example, advice on national insurance and on compensation problems.

The General Council pointed also to the development of trade union educational work. In addition to the activities of the Workers' Educational Association and the National Council of Labour Colleges a number of unions had started to undertake training courses to fit members for office. The General Council stressed how important was this education.

After reviewing the various functions of trade unions the General Council concluded that for the full development of the unions' economic functions, including collective bargaining and the formulation of industrial policy, efforts should be made to strengthen the existing industrial trade union federations.

The **1944** report also dealt with the structure of the T.U.C. It pointed out that Congress machinery had developed considerably during the previous twenty years, but that it was still open to examination as to how far the T.U.C. had the necessary facilities to discharge its responsibility on wide questions of national policy.

The report recalled that when the constitution of the T.U.C. had been revised after the First World War it had been envisaged that the General Council would give close attention to the problems of specific industries by appointing a number of industrial group committees. These group committees, however, had never been properly developed. The **1944** report suggested that, instead, a system of advisory committees should be extended to as wide a range of industries as possible, and that in each case representatives of the federal trade union body in the industry concerned should become part of the advisory committee. It was envisaged that through this system the research and other facilities of Congress would be made available to the trade union federations.

Following the acceptance by Congress of the **1944** report a number of meetings were arranged with unions in separate industries with a view to promoting amalgamation and/or closer working. These discussions helped to promote a number of amalgamations and new working arrangements between unions but, as at the time of the earlier discussions following the **1927** report, no dramatic changes were made in the structure of the movement. The slow process of amalgamation and the establishment of closer working arrangements has continued ever since **1944** but at no stage has it ever appeared likely that a drastic reorganization would take place.

The 1963 Congress

At the **1963** Congress the General Council presented an account of the first stages of their new enquiry into trade union structure. After pointing out that previous reports had described the diversity of union structure the General Council reaffirmed that "no single form of organization is suitable for all circumstances and that the diversity of circumstances within industry, as well as between industries, implies some diversity of trade union structure."

A paragraph was, however, included stating that the belief that industrial unionism is inherently superior to any other form of trade union organization was at the bottom of most of the motions on structure which had been brought before Congress. The General Council made the interesting observation that there are many people who, though they agree that it would not be possible to establish industrial unionism in Britain, nevertheless think that if it were possible it would be the best basis upon which to reconstruct the trade union movement.

The General Council indicated that in their ultimate report they intended to set out the arguments for and against industrial unionism and, in particular, the severely practical limits within which it might be possible and desirable for some unions to come more closely to an industrial basis of organization.

The, 1963 report of the General Council stressed that changes were constantly taking place within the British trade union movement.

"Amalgamations have gone on steadily and are still continuing. Craft unions have enlarged and modified their qualifications for membership. Workshop representation has been developed. Federations have been established. The T.U.C. has been reorganized and its scope extended. Unions are associated in joint negotiating bodies. Many unions have agreements or understandings directly with each other. The T.U.C. has established committees for unions dealing with special groups—non-manual workers, local government service, wages councils, women and nursing."

The General Council also reported that they were seeking discussions with the Minister of Labour about the present legal requirements concerning trade union amalgamations. In the view of the General Council the present legal requirements are unnecessarily strict. Trade union amalgamations require a fifty per cent vote with a twenty per cent majority in each union. Furthermore, a registered trade union must obtain the consent of two-thirds of its membership before it can change its name. The General Council suggested that one new statute should cover amalgamations, transfers and changes of name instead of a number of statutes, as at the present time. There should be no provision that a fixed percentage must vote for amalgamation provided that all members have a proper opportunity to vote. In other words, the issue should be decided by a simple majority of those voting. The General Council suggested that the new statute might require a union to provide members with a statement about the effects of the merger or transfer **on** the methods of government of the union, on contributions and on benefits; and that the Registrar of Friendly Societies might be asked to certify the correctness of the statement about benefits. For changes of **name** the General Council suggested that a ballot should not be compulsory, but that it should be sufficient if the change were approved by the supreme authority of the union.

In his speech presenting these preliminary findings of the General

Council to Congress Mr. Woodcock struck what many present felt to be a rather pessimistic note. It would be unfair to criticize Mr. Woodcock for this because his task was to present to Congress not his personal point of view but the views of the General Council. It was widely reported at the time that Mr. Woodcock would have been pleased if the General Council had been somewhat more ambitious in their preliminary observations, and that the manner in which he presented the report to Congress was intended to bring home to the delegates that nothing very startling was likely to emerge from the review being undertaken by the General Council.

"WE have come firmly to the conclusion", he said, "that diversity of structure is a characteristic of British trade unionism and always will be". He added: "We see no hope whatsoever of persuading our present multiplicity and diversity of trade unions into acceptance of a uniform structure, especially an industrial structure." Mr. Woodcock acknowledged that if uniformity were to be preferred the British trade union movement would be driven eventually to industrial unionism. The General Council believed, however, that this would be impracticable because it would be impossible for the T.U.C. to define the boundaries of industry in such a way as to enable unions to be constructed with clear-cut divisions, one from the other.

The second reason why it would be impracticable, he said, was that the T.U.C. had no power to impose its conceptions upon affiliated unions. It had to proceed by persuasion, and they had to face the fact that there was no hope of persuading existing trade unions to accept a form of industrial organization.

It has been necessary to describe at length the various reviews of trade union structure made by the T.U.C. since the First World War because it points to one obvious conclusion: that the new enquiry which the T.U.C. is conducting will not lead to the reorganization of the British trade union movement. It is likely to do no more than accelerate—and that by not very much—the very slow process of amalgamation and closer working which takes place, despite all the obstacles of trade union conservatism, by the very force of industrial circumstances. It will be the argument of the following part of this essay that this will not meet the real needs of the situation. Something much more ambitious is necessary.

Trade Union Purpose

Mr. Woodcock's point, that any discussion on trade union structure should start with an **examination** of trade union functions, is a good one. The object of structural change should be to enable the trade union movement to fulfil more effectively its basic purposes.

What, then, are the purposes of trade unionism? They are:

First, to improve the standard of living of workers through collective

bargaining with employers on wages and **other** conditions of employment.

Secondly, to influence the Government and other bodies to pursue policies which will lead to full employment and help to create the most favourable economic environment for a steady and progressive rise in living standards.

Thirdly, to assist in winning support among the working people for radical social changes, leading towards a socialist society.

Nearly all trade unionists—and some who are outside the movement—would readily accept the first two of the above three aims. The third would be rejected by some trade unionists.

I make no apology, however, for including it, though it is not possible in a short essay on trade union structure to argue the case at length. Very briefly, the desire of working people for permanent full employment, for a steady and continuous rise in living standards, for greater equality and for a democratic voice in the control of industrial and economic affairs cannot be satisfied within capitalism.

To attain the objectives set out in the preceding paragraphs it is essential that the trade union movement should become stronger than it is at the present time. Ten million members out of an employed population of more than double that number is quite inadequate. Too many unions have insufficient funds, are understaffed, and their educational and training services are meagre.

Changes in structure will not, of course, by themselves guarantee that trade union objectives will be achieved. Much also depends on the kind of policies which the movement pursues. If its policies are wrong strong organization will not compensate for them. There are many examples in history of well-organized unions with timid policies and with a vision blinkered to exclude any of the wider industrial, economic and political issues which affect workers' interests. Nevertheless, without organizational strength the unions are unable to influence events in the direction which they desire.

Collective Strength

The organizational strength of trade unionism is provided by the unity of workers. Each worker, when face to face with his employer, is in a position of weakness. The employment relationship in modern large-scale industry between an employer and an individual worker is grossly unequal. By combining together workers secure for themselves collective strength which would otherwise never be theirs. Workers who are employed by the same employer or in the same industry have a common interest which, if the trade unions are to be effective, must be reflected in the structure of the trade union movement.

With every passing year the concentration of ownership and control

of Britain's major industries proceeds apace. The industrial giants take over more and more of their competitors. The most influential employers extend their grip. This trend ought to be matched by corresponding developments in the trade union movement. It ought to be the constant endeavour of the unions to build the strength and unity of their organizations.

Changes in industrial technique have undermined, are undermining and will continue to undermine the old craft divisions. In the mass production industries the common interest of workers as the employees of a single giant undertaking overrides their sectional differences.

All this points the way to the future. There is really no practicable alternative to the evolution of a new trade union structure, based upon industrial identity. There is no need to be dogmatic about the precise form it might take, but it is essential that those who are responsible for guiding the trade union movement should have clearly in view the direction in which it ought to proceed.

The problem, however, is not so much to distinguish what is needed as to suggest how it should be achieved. The British trade union movement is not starting from scratch. As outlined earlier, the forces opposed to any radical change in structure are very strong. Indeed, it is probably realistic to predict that the forces of trade union conservatism are so strong that they will prevent the necessary changes taking place.

The resistance will come from many sections of the movement. Many of the craft unions are likely to insist on retaining their right to organize craftsmen, irrespective of the industry in which they work, and the general workers' unions will insist on maintaining their wide scope of recruitment. Even the unions which are based on a mixture of occupational and industrial identity are likely to resist radical changes. If all insist—as seems likely—on maintaining their point of view the changes will be few in number and the trade union movement will continue to suffer in consequence.

One possible line of development would be to strengthen substantially the power of the existing trade union federations. At present, their powers vary one from another. The one with the least power is probably the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions, even though its affiliated membership is the largest of any of the industrial federations.

It ought to be possible from the practical experience of the British trade union movement to evolve a structure which takes into account not only the common interest of workers within a single industry but also caters for their occupational differences. There is no reason why an industrial union, or a powerful industrial federation, should be monolithic in structure. Groups with special occupational or craft interests could preserve a substantial measure of autonomy, including their own branches and special services. They could also preserve their own separate negotiations on issues which are peculiar to themselves.

At the same time, the existence of a wider industrial union or more powerful industrial federation would enable the full strength of all workers in the industry to be exerted on issues of common concern.

It is encouraging to note in this connection that in recent years the Amalgamated Engineering Union, which is by far the largest union in the engineering industry, has shown a readiness to consider a form of trade union integration which would provide a very substantial measure of autonomy to organizations with a special craft or occupational interest.

Workplace Representatives

The problems of trade union structure are not concerned solely with the relative merits of craft, general or industrial unionism. Whatever form of trade union organization is adopted the role of trade union representatives at the place of employment is specially important. It is essential that they should be given every possible support by their unions.

The tasks of workshop and office representatives are fundamental to the effective existence of the trade union movement. It is their job:

- to ensure that national and local agreements are observed;
- to make representations to the management on workshop or office grievances;
- to negotiate with the management on issues which fall to be determined at workshop or office level;
- to recruit new members to the union;
- to collect union subscriptions or, in unions where this is not the practice, to check that the subscriptions of members in the workshop or office have been paid;
- to help in stimulating trade union consciousness and to take the initiative in trade union activity in the workshop or office;
- to ensure that the literature of the union is distributed to all members;
- to submit reports to the union about wages, working conditions, the degree of trade union organization and employment prospects.

No union can be strong if it lacks virility in the workshops and offices where its members are employed. It is no accident that in the industries which are well known for their trade union strength—printing, for example—there is a tradition of highly effective workshop organization.

In recent years shop stewards have come in for a lot of abuse from the Press. Whenever there is a strike it is the practice of some newspapers to pin responsibility for it on the active representatives of the workers. Little or no attention is given to the real causes of the dispute.

Industrial disputes are the results of grievances. Men and women who play an active part in seeking to win redress ought to be praised and not condemned for their efforts. As the T.U.C. report on disputes and workshop representation, presented to the 1960 Congress, said:

"The responsibility of employers for strikes is largely ignored or played down. Employers or managements are shown as the injured parties. Usually this is not so."

Grievances which lead to strikes—particularly so-called lightning stoppages—concern not only wages and piecework prices but also non-recognition, breach of agreements by managements, victimization, the introduction of changes by management without consultation, or out-dated insistence on managerial prerogatives.

The unions owe a great deal to their representatives in workshops and offices. The representatives ought to be protected and assisted in every way. To victimize a trade union representative is the most grievous crime an employer can commit against a union. It ought to be made clear beyond any shadow of doubt that trade union representatives will be protected against victimization at whatever cost.

There are other steps too which ought to be taken to strengthen the position of workshop and office ~~trade union~~ representatives. Employers should give them time off for the training of trade union representatives. A recommendation to this effect was contained in a recent joint statement from the T.U.C. and the British Employers' Confederation.

Unions ought to make provision for the training of their representatives. The syllabus for training should cover the rights and obligations of workers under the negotiating procedure agreements, the provisions of national agreements, the structure of the union of which the representatives are members, and the industrial policy of the union. The training ought to be conducted by the union concerned, and its whole purpose should be to make the representatives more effective agents of the workers' interests and union policy in the place where they are employed.

In every factory and office where trade union membership exists provision ought to be made for occasional workshop or office meetings. Employers hold their meetings within working hours and equity demands that the same rights should be extended to workers. Facilities at workshop or office level for the proper discussion of problems and grievances can help to promote better industrial relations.

The trade union movement has had to face the fact that during the ~~last~~ twenty-five years the focal point of interest has shifted from the branch room to the workshop or office. This process was inevitable with the strengthening of the trade union movement and the lessening of the fear of victimization which full employment brought about, particularly in the larger and well-organized factories. In earlier years much of what is now discussed at factory level had to be discussed within the secrecy of the branch room.

In conditions of mass unemployment more importance was also attached to national agreements, Nationally negotiated rates and conditions were fairly strictly observed in most factories. In more recent years, particularly in the engineering industry, the basic rates have been

held down by the employers at a very low level, and the workers' representatives in the workshops have claimed and negotiated higher local rates.

Most negotiating procedure agreements between employers' organizations and trade unions are seriously deficient. Most of them are much too narrow in scope. Many issues which ought properly to be discussed between employers and workshops or office representatives are outside the scope of the official agreements. In this respect negotiating procedure agreements in Britain are very much inferior to those which exist in a number of other European countries.

The British engineering employers, to give but one example, are notoriously restrictive in their attitude to negotiations. For generations they have insisted, quite unreasonably, that many matters which ought properly to be discussed are outside the scope of negotiations and are the subject of managerial prerogatives. In the last few years, there have been many instances in the engineering industry where the unions have had to fight desperately hard to win for themselves the right of consultation on impending redundancy.

Many negotiating procedure agreements are also one-sided. The agreements do not insist that all major changes, whether initiated by the employers or the workers, should be subject to negotiations before they are introduced. The T.U.C. report to the 1960 Congress put it this way:

"If workers want a change to which managers object they must go without until the procedure is exhausted, but if managers want a change to which workers object the change stays while the procedure is being gone through."

The growing concentration of ownership in industry also has implications for the structure of the trade union movement. It is surely understandable that workers employed in the different establishments of one large combine should seek opportunities for their representatives to come together to discuss matters of common concern and interest. In some unions, provision has been made for this development in recent years by the calling of special advisory conferences of representatives drawn from the separate establishments of various large groups. Other unions might profitably follow this example. If unions do not provide means for this consultation to take place officially then inevitably workers' representatives will seek to do it unofficially.

The control of union policy must, of course, be vested in the properly elected bodies representative of the whole membership, such as the annual conference or the executive committee. For this reason gatherings of shop or office representatives from different factories within a single combine can be no more than advisory in function. Nevertheless, they can have an important part to play in promoting joint activity in support of aims that are in conformity with union policy.

There is undoubtedly a problem when shop stewards' committees,

representing various unions, seek to consult with each other. Because they represent different unions a meeting of shop stewards' committees is not responsible to any official body in the movement. The real trouble here, however, is not the desire of the workers to consult with each other but the existence of a number of unions of diverse structure within a single industry. So long as this structure remains unchanged the natural desire of workers, irrespective of their craft, employed in different firms in a single combine to consult together will be frustrated.

The Role of the T.U.C.

In any examination of the structure of the trade union movement the place and role of the T.U.C. deserves special attention. The T.U.C. is the national trade union centre and it rightly commands prestige and influence within the trade union movement. It is to the credit of the British trade union movement that it has created and maintained over many years an undivided national trade union centre. Despite the many differences which have always existed within British trade unionism the existence of the T.U.C. has never been seriously threatened by political, religious or industrial divisions. Although there are still one or two fairly large non-manual workers' unions outside the T.U.C. it is a significant fact that the T.U.C. has succeeded in attracting to itself the majority of organized white-collar workers in Britain.

At the 1963 Congress it was reported that the affiliated membership of the T.U.C. was 8,315,000, enrolled in 176 different unions. Within the constitution of the T.U.C. the part played by the elected General Council is vital. The members of the General Council are, with the exception of the General Secretary of the T.U.C., usually, but not always presidents or general secretaries of affiliated unions. They serve on the General Council in a part-time capacity. The General Secretary of the T.U.C. is the senior full-time member of the staff.

The first thing to be said about the role of the T.U.C. is that it is of a complex nature. It is the servant of its affiliated unions; it can rarely be their master, but it has substantial scope for leadership. In the ultimate, each union is responsible not to a central authority to which it is affiliated but to its own rank and file members. It is right that this should be so.

The crux of the problem is to combine democratic control from below with effective leadership from above. Tremendous responsibility for leadership rests on the T.U.C. Its power and influence, however, can never be formally measured by a written constitution. What matters is whether or not the members of the affiliated unions will respond to the policies and calls which are made in their name.

The experience of the British trade union movement shows beyond reasonable doubt that workers rarely fail to respond when a firm and vigorous lead is given on behalf of their interests. There are far more examples in British trade union history of failures to give adequate

leadership than of failures on the part of the rank and file to respond to leadership once it has been given. Those who are constantly urging that the formal powers of the T.U.C. should be increased appear often to have overlooked this fundamental lesson of trade union history.

The purpose of the T.U.C. is to serve the interests of the affiliated unions. There are some who argue, quite wrongly, that the main job of the T.U.C. is in various ways to restrain unions from carrying out the very functions for which they exist. Many of these, for example, who speak of the need for a national trade union wages policy do so not because they want the T.U.C. to strengthen the efforts of unions in support of their wage claims but because they want the T.U.C. to restrain them.

Put briefly, the formal functions of the T.U.C. are:

To promote common action by the trade union movement on matters of general concern to **affiliated** unions; to assist, when requested, the efforts of individual unions on matters of special concern to them; and to assist any union which is attacked on any vital question of trade union principle.

To represent the views of the trade union movement to the Government and other national authorities and to do whatever might be possible to influence Government policy and legislation in the interests of working people, particularly on such matters as the maintenance of full employment, economic expansion and industrial legislation.

To enter into relations with the trade union movements of other countries with a view to promoting common interests.

To help resolve disputes between affiliated organizations.

The central theme of all T.U.C. activity should be the co-ordination of the work of affiliated unions so that the trade union movement becomes a more effective agent on behalf of workers' interests. This co-ordination should rest on the voluntary goodwill of affiliated unions which, in turn, depends on the trade union consciousness of the rank and file. The extent to which this consciousness will exist will depend in substantial measure on the kind of leadership which is given from the centre. Thus, vigorous leadership and democratic control are not necessarily mutually exclusive. On the contrary, each is necessary for the other.

The existing constitution of the T.U.C. already provides the General Council with the formal powers that are essential for leadership. What matters is whether these powers are used, and whether the right qualities of leadership are displayed. There is thus no need for any radical change in the constitution of the T.U.C. as it affects the powers of the Congress or of the General Council.

There is, on the other hand, something to be said for reviewing the present system of trade group representation on the General Council.

At the present time the General Council consists of thirty-five members, including the General Secretary. With the exception of the General Secretary the members of the General Council are elected in nineteen different groups. The groups, with their total membership and the number of representatives on the General Council to which they are entitled are listed below:

<i>Group</i>	<i>Number of representatives</i>	<i>Total membership</i>
Mining and quarrying	3	563,990
Railways	3	446,059
Transport (other than railways)	3	1,450,244
Shipbuilding	1	131,646
Engineering, founding and vehicle building	3	1,662,989
Iron and steel, and minor metal trades	2	208,287
Building, woodworking and furnishing	2	530,194
Printing and paper	1	351,228
Cotton	1	99,340
Textiles (other than cotton)	1	89,285
Clothing	1	163,921
Leather and boot and shoe	1	99,495
Glass, pottery, chemicals, food, drink, tobacco, brushmaking and distribution	2	475,293
Agriculture	1	135,000
Public employees	1	310,667
Civil servants	2	499,286
Non-manual workers	1	310,681
General workers	3	787,727
Women workers	2	—

Nominations for each group are confined to the unions within the group but the elections take place by a vote of the whole Congress. Thus, for example, in mining and quarrying, which is entitled to three representatives, each of the unions in the group has the right to nominate up to three candidates but all the unions affiliated to Congress are entitled to vote.

The system of trade group representation has been modified from time to time but it still reflects the distribution of trade union membership at a time when, for example, mining, textiles and railways were proportionately more important than they are now. The result is that the declining industries are over-represented on the General Council and the newer, expanding industries, particularly engineering, are **under-represented**.¹

There is also a special problem concerning the representation of salaried workers. Some non-manual workers' unions are in their respective trade group. The Draughtsmen's and Allied Technicians' Association, for example, is in the engineering trade group. Some other white-collar workers' unions are in a separate non-manual workers' group, which is entitled to elect one representative.

Each year the proportion of salaried workers employed in British industry and commerce rises. Many of the salaried workers' unions also have a steady rate of growth. The T.U.C. ought to take account of this inevitable trend and should consider revising the system of non-manual workers' representation on the General Council. They could, for example, split the non-manual workers' trade group into separate sections related to their industrial interests. White-collar workers' unions which at present are in separate industrial trade groups could then be allocated to their respective non-manual workers' trade groups.

Organized salaried workers include clerks and administrative staff in industry, banks and insurance, technicians, civil servants and public authority staff, and persons employed in entertainment. Any new system of General Council representation would have to be such that it did not give salaried workers any privileges in proportionate representation but it should take account of the growth of salaried employment, the diversity of occupation among white-collar workers and the need to attract them to the broad stream of the trade union movement and to the T.U.C. in particular.

Conclusion

This essay has not confined itself to a discussion of what is likely to emerge from the present T.U.C. review of trade union structure. It has been more concerned to say what ought to be done.

The need is for a radical reshaping of the movement, based on industrial organization, but with a considerable measure of craft or occupational autonomy. The important role of workshop and office representatives should be fully recognized. Finally, there is no need to make any far-reaching changes in the constitution of the T.U.C., but the composition of the General Council should be modified to **take** account of the present industrial and occupational distribution of trade union membership.

NOTE

1. A fuller study of changes in General Council representation was made by the present author in an article entitled "Changing the General Council," published in the first issue of "Trade Union Affairs," at the end of 1960.