

## British Unions: A Cultural Analysis

W. Campbell Balfour

Volume 13, numéro 3, juillet 1958

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1022425ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1022425ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Département des relations industrielles de l'Université Laval

ISSN

0034-379X (imprimé)

1703-8138 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Balfour, W. (1958). British Unions: A Cultural Analysis. *Relations industrielles / Industrial Relations*, 13(3), 313–329. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1022425ar>

Résumé de l'article

On a jusqu'ici étudié le syndicalisme surtout comme une institution économique, politique et juridique, à la suite des travaux, admirables mais d'allure un peu officielle et statique, de Sidney et Beatrice Webb (*Industrial Democracy, History of Trade Unionism*). Une telle perspective demeure partielle et quelque peu trompeuse. D'où l'importance d'études inspirées par l'anthropologie sociale et la sociologie sur le syndicalisme contemporain.

Traditionnellement, le syndicalisme anglais fut la réponse à l'exploitation et à l'arbitraire patronaux de la part de salariés vivant dans la pauvreté et l'encombrement. On commença par voir dans les syndicats des conspirations illégales, et dans les syndiqués des criminels à mettre au ban de la société. De cette période noire sont restés certains souvenirs, symboles et rituels, mais guère autre chose. Ces rituels, aujourd'hui, rendent compte moins d'une réalité sociale hostile que d'un besoin de mousser la loyauté et la solidarité des membres du syndicat. Et si le vocabulaire de l'exploitation est demeuré assez riche, les attitudes des chefs syndicaux surtout se sont modifiées considérablement.

Le syndicalisme vise des objectifs plus larges que le ventre plein et le porte-monnaie bien garni, comme en fait foi l'enthousiasme des syndiqués, il n'y a pas si longtemps, à s'efforcer de transformer le régime économique de concurrence en un régime de coopération, de propriété publique.

La plupart des travailleurs anglais ont le syndicalisme dans la peau. C'est la chose la plus normale du monde pour le jeune ouvrier de faire partie du syndicat; toutes sortes de pressions subtiles s'exercent d'ailleurs sur lui en ce sens. Toute la famille est pour le syndicat, et l'enfant en entend parler dès son plus jeune âge. Il comprend tôt le sens et la nécessité de la communauté d'action pour faire contrepoids à la force de l'employeur; cela est surtout vrai chez les enfants des familles moins fortunées, qui, faute d'espace au foyer, doivent s'amuser dans la rue où ils acquièrent vite le sens et la discipline du groupe. Et quand le jeune homme entre à l'usine, son infériorité sentie devant ses supérieurs trouve un remède dans l'adhésion au syndicat, source de force et d'appui. La grève renforce la solidarité des syndiqués.

D'autre part, la diversité des industries entraîne la diversité des syndicats. Ainsi, les unions de métiers différeront en certaines matières des unions industrielles; les mineurs ne se comporteront pas nécessairement comme les électriciens, ni les métallos comme les tisserands. Mais au-delà des divergences, mineures au fond, subsistent les similitudes profondes qui elles sont autrement importantes pour expliquer le phénomène syndical.

Peu à peu, le syndicat se développe comme une institution, distincte à certains égards de ses membres pris individuellement, et avide elle aussi de sécurité et de stabilité. Avec les années, le syndicat peut accumuler des fonds imposants qu'il placera dans toutes sortes d'entreprises (clubs, édifices publics tels que cinémas, etc.). Une bureaucratie s'installera pour en diriger les destinées.

Le syndicalisme, en somme, est le produit d'un arrière-plan culturel précis sur lequel, en retour, il influe d'une certaine façon. Mais depuis un quart de siècle, cet arrière-plan s'est modifié considérablement, et avec lui le visage même du syndicalisme anglais. Aujourd'hui, le syndicalisme en Angleterre est accepté comme pièce intégrante de l'économie industrielle, et a ses coudees franches auprès des gouvernements; le plein emploi est la réalité du jour; et surtout, le travailleur manuel a progressé dans l'échelle sociale en même temps que son revenu s'apparentait à celui de l'employé de la classe moyenne. Sans compter que la presse, la radio, la télévision et le football ont rapproché toutes les classes en comblant d'une façon anodine le vide idéologique des travailleurs.

Les changements technologiques ont également fait éclater les métiers traditionnels et les solidarités et défenses qu'ils provoquaient, tout en modifiant considérablement la structure de l'industrie elle-même. Les écarts de salaires ont été réduits peu à peu. Au lieu du front commun contre l'employeur, on commence à constater la rivalité intersyndicale (les fameux conflits de juridiction) et les tensions entre les travailleurs qualifiés et les moins qualifiés.

La campagne de productivité lancée en 1948 sous un gouvernement travailliste imposa au syndicalisme une politique de collaboration avec le patronat; et la politique du « wage restraint », de mesure dans les revendications économiques préconisée par le même gouvernement et suivie pendant quelques mois par le TUC, en édulcorant la fonction syndicale par excellence, provoqua de nombreux conflits non autorisés et dut être abandonnée après quelques mois.

Aujourd'hui, l'attitude du syndicalisme anglais à l'égard des nationalisations comme panacée est beaucoup plus pragmatique, ce qui a entraîné chez les syndiqués une désaffection partielle à l'égard de l'action politique, surtout depuis que le « Welfare State » a réussi à améliorer les niveaux de vie, l'habitation, la santé et l'emploi.

D'autre part, la concentration et l'intégration industrielles ont entraîné le gigantisme syndical, avec son cortège de bureaucratie et d'impersonnalité et l'affaiblissement de l'enthousiasme des syndiqués.

On peut toutefois noter, depuis l'arrivée du gouvernement conservateur au pouvoir (1951), un certain retour des attitudes syndicales traditionnelles. Un certain chômage, fortement ressenti en certaines régions, a créé du mécontentement. L'inflation a provoqué des batailles assez vives sur le plan des salaires. Et des luttes s'annoncent sur celui de la législation, un projet de loi se préparant pour prohiber certaines formes extrêmes de sécurité syndicale.

Bref, le syndicalisme anglais tend à se rapprocher de plus en plus des modèles américain et canadien; il a décidément perdu en radicalisme, en conscience de classe et en activité politique au cours du dernier quart de siècle.

# British Unions: A Cultural Analysis

W. Campbell Balfour

*Trade unions in Britain have developed against a particular cultural background, and many of their attitudes and aims stem from this environment and its effect on their members. The last twenty or thirty years have seen great changes in political, social and economic backgrounds: this has led to certain strains and tensions in the union structure, and to the gradual abandonment of traditional symbols, beliefs and modes of action.*

There has been a number of studies of trade unionism from the view-point of political theory, of economics (influence on the labour market, wage determination, etc.) and of law (legal identity, restraint of trade, etc.).<sup>1</sup> There has been little or no study of the trade union as a sociological institution, shaping and moulding the sentiments and attitudes of members and, in turn, being itself changed by their views and by the pressure of social and economic forces. The classic studies of the Webbs,<sup>2</sup> admirable though they are, give a formal and static analysis which does not consider either the background influences which shape the worker before he joins the union, or the way in which the union itself affects the working group in the factory. Later trade union studies have followed in the path of the Webbs and there has been little attempt to break new ground.

This formal analysis of trade unionism, culled from documents, rule-books and journals, necessary as it is, gives only a partial aspect of the whole and can lead to a number of misconceptions about the nature and function of the union.

BALFOUR, W. CAMPBELL, lecturer in Industrial Relations, University of South Wales and Monmouthshire, Cardiff; graduate of the London School of Economics; Fulbright Scholar at the University of Chicago; visiting associate professor, University of Texas.

(1) B. and S. WEBB. *Industrial Democracy*. London, 1897.

(2) DUNLOP, J.T. *Wage Determination under Trade Unions*. London, 1944.

### *The Much Needed Sociological Approach*

An institution can be said to be « a defined need and the culture surrounding it »<sup>3</sup> and, in the case of the trade union, there are certain characteristics, patterns of behaviour and ritual which could best be examined by the social anthropologist: though we are more fortunate than the anthropologist in that we can trace the development of this particular institution through a well documented span of time.

The « defined need » which the union met was the defence of the wage-earner against what he considered the unrestrained power of the employing class. The culture surrounding this « defined need » was one of acute poverty with large numbers of people crowded into cramped quarters. In such surroundings organisations such as trade clubs, political bodies or secret societies flourish. An account,<sup>4</sup> which deals with the Luddite risings of 1812, describes the oaths of secrecy about meetings and names under penalty of death, this to be administered by fellow members who swear to punish any traitors. Some twenty years later we hear of the « Scotch cattle » in the Merthyr area, an organisation which carried out raids against employers and black-legs.<sup>5</sup> The execution of the chief organiser merely drove the organisation underground and they reappeared at intervals over a period of ten years, leaving their sign as a warning to traitors and others. During the period when trade unions were illegal (1799-1825), Cole and Filson point out that the « Yorkshire Trades Union and its constituent societies, like many other unions which had grown up during the period of repression, used initiation ceremonies and administered oaths of secrecy. »<sup>6</sup>

We see that the foundations of the unions were laid in a period when they were regarded as illegal conspiracies, when the community refused to recognise them and punished workers for belonging to them. To some extent the attitudes formed in this period have left their mark on the union. The oaths, ritual and symbols, common to a number of organisations and institutions, were meant to emphasise the nature of the struggle and make manifest the need for loyalty. A parallel may be drawn between these early societies and some of those, though of a different nature, now active in Africa and Cyprus.

(3) CITRINE, N.A. *Trade Union Law*. London, 1950.

(4) F. PEEL, *Risings of the Luddites*, 1895, p. 52. (Quoted by Cole and Filson, *Working Class Documents*, p. 115.)

(5) *Ibid.*, p. 260.

(6) *Ibid.*, p. 276.

The symbols and ritual have tended to linger, although the initiation ceremonies are now only carried out by some of the craft unions. Until the early 1900's some union officials wore special aprons, hats and other symbols of office. The initiation rites are many, ranging from being « ducked » in a barrel (coopers, barrel-makers) and being sent for a left handed spanner. These « rites of passage » are less exacting than those of tribal societies but have much in common. Ceremonies tend to reinforce sentiments of loyalty towards the union and the union itself constantly emphasises the need for acting in concert, for solidarity in economic and social action. This need is stressed, not only verbally at meetings and in conversation, but in union rules and pamphlets, e.g.: « It is essential for the progress of the worker that he should combine with his fellows: the concentration of means thus enabling him to make his power felt... Organisation gives to men a special character, and is a source of strength »<sup>7</sup>; « divided they fall, united they stand ».<sup>8</sup> Constant reference is made for loyalty to the union, the need for workers to recognise their rights and explicit statements of hostility towards the employers. « Trade Unionism... clearly recognises... there are only two classes, the producing Working Class, and the possessing Master class. The interests of these two classes are opposed to each other ».<sup>9</sup> Sentiments as strong and more sharply put than those mentioned have been widely expressed in working class circles for decades past and, in spite of the changing attitude of leading trade unionists and officials, are still heard today. This situation has to be recognised before it can be dealt with, or talk of « increased productivity » and « joint participation in industry » will fall on barren soil.

### *The Broader Goals*

One of the defects of viewing the trade union as a purely economic institution is that this ignores the wider aims, implicit in the enthusiasm shown in the past by members, their proselytising activities amongst their workmates and their sometimes dedicated service which has often adversely affected the living standards of their wives, children and relatives.

These wider aims may be primarily seen as the wish to transform a competitive economic system into a co-operative one, e.g., « until

(7) Preface to the *Rule Book* of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, 1926.

(8) Foreword to *Rules*, N.U.G.M.W., 1924.

(9) *Ibid.* (Foreword).



some more general principle of co-operation shall be acknowledged in society». <sup>10</sup> «To seek the abolition of capitalism and the substitution of common ownership»; <sup>11</sup> «Public Ownership and control of natural resources and of services». <sup>12</sup> These aims are usually mentioned in the rules or standing orders of the union or expressed collectively at the Trades Union Congress. Politically, most of the unions express themselves officially as in support of the Labour Party. These wider aims, which stretch beyond the pay-packet, help to explain the sentiments which cluster round the union as an institution.

### *Environment and Union Sentiment*

The union did not originate these sentiments, which are to some extent accepted by the youths entering industry from a working-class neighbourhood prior to their joining the union. The Webbs <sup>13</sup> point out that the boy constantly hears references to the need for working-class solidarity in his early life: this was still the case in the 1920's and 1930's. <sup>14</sup> The writer has been in a working class household when the factory hooter blew: the father got up, put his cap on and remarked, «In the old days, they drove us to work with whips; now we're so tame they only have to blow a whistle». In an atmosphere like this, not uncommon in some working class neighbourhoods, the child grows up with his attitudes towards the employer taking shape. The necessity for communal action is to some extent accepted by him as, in some working class streets, there are no such things as private troubles. The young worker develops in an atmosphere which stresses collective as against individual effort. «Members of the middle class, it is hinted, characteristically seek advancement through individual effort. Workers, not less characteristically, seek it through collective action. Workers... look for the improvement of their standard of living to some method or other of mass-action». <sup>15</sup> This acceptance of the need for collective effort is developed in the child from poorer areas in Britain by the fact that he plays most of the time in the street — the home being too

(10) A.E.U. *Rule Book*.

(11) Durham Miners Association, *Rule 2*, 1925.

(12) Standing Orders of the T.U.C., 1928.

(13) B. & S. WEBB. *History of Trade Unionism*. London: Longmans Green & Co., 1920, p. 444. See also pp. 444-452 for a description of branch life.

(14) See Leslie Paul, *Angry Young Man* (Faber) for one account of the 1920's

(15) C.A. MACE (Preface to *The British Worker*, F. Zweig. London: Pelican, p. 14). In this context, see also: Allison Davis. "The Motivation of the Under-privileged Worker", *Industry and Society*, ed. by William F. Whyte. New York & London: McGraw-Hill Book Company, Inc., 1946, Chapter V, pp. 84-106.

crowded — and runs around with large gangs or groups (this is not to say that there are no gangs or large play-groups amongst children in better class areas but, due to the spatial and other factors mentioned, they are far more common in poorer areas). The average number of children in the working class family has been, till recently, greater than in the middle class income groups: the child from the poorer area, as a member of a large family, is usually made aware from an early date of his responsibilities towards his kinship group, e.g., during the inter-war years those children left school at fourteen in order to assist the family financially (this often occurred even when the child had the opportunity to prolong his education).

The young worker enters industry with very little knowledge of the world and, in many cases, with a sense of inferiority vis-à-vis his supervisors and superiors stemming from the differences in clothing, speech, habitation and culture. In such a situation the union represents a source of strength and support: it hardly ever occurs to the youth to question the principles of trade union organisation, it is accepted by his workmates as a matter of course that he joins the union.

### *In Times of Stress...*

For the inactive unionist, participation is confined to times when an industrial dispute or a special wage claim is pending. The dispute and its more special case, the strike, show how the union serves the economic interests of the worker (or what he considers to be his economic interests) and also presents him with an opportunity to discharge his aggression against the employer. From a psychological angle, the strike enables the workers to function as a collective body and to reinforce the sentiments of «solidarity» and of group membership. Sentiments formed or reinforced during a strike tend to be enduring: the writer recalls having two or three dockers pointed out to him in 1938 as «blacklegs» in the General Strike of 1926. In many of the mining areas of the country, the community expectations reinforce those sentiments of collective action which cluster round the union. Social disapproval of «deviants» from trade unionism is strong and ostracism of the outcast is made almost complete by the tightly knit nature of the community.

In times of emotional stress, such as strikes or political demonstrations, symbolic culture traits such as banners, embroidered with the

historical events, episodes or name of the union, appear. Those banners, marches and demonstrations are manifest symbols of the « solidarity » of the union.

### *The Union As An Institution*

Although the culture surrounding the union stresses the need for collective action, the worker's immediate response is to his individual union, rather than trade unionism as a whole. This often means a tightening of the bonds of membership inside the union in order to combat other unions which challenge organising rights or employment privileges. Bakke says of the union: « They develop an institutional life of their own beyond the lives of individual members. A basic objective of that development is strength and power and prestige as such. Internal conflicts must be ironed out. The membership must be bound together by a common philosophy and achievement... Protection against other unions must be sought. A strong internal government and leadership must be developed ».<sup>16</sup>

### *The Variety of Union Attitudes*

Naturally, there can be no blanket description which will fit all unions. Three broad classifications can be drawn between craft, industrial and general unions; but the lines of division between the three categories have become so blurred that few unions can be pigeon-holed in this manner, *e.g.*, the Amalgamated Engineering Union (A.E.U.) and the Electrical Trades Union (E.T.U.) began by being craft unions but they expanded into industrial unions and now it is claimed that, by enrolling semi-skilled and in some cases unskilled, they show some of the characteristics of a general union. Again, unions are viewed in different ways by their members according to the trade which is followed, the industrial relationships which exist in the industry and the pattern of life of the particular community. The attitude of a steelworker to his union is different to that of a coal miner: the steel industry has a long record of good industrial relations, due, to some extent, to the low ratio of wages to total cost, and on the hierarchical organisation which exists on the workers' side of the industry, where promotion

(16) E. Wight BAKKE. *Mutual Survival*. New York and London: Harper & Brothers, 1946, pp. 3-4.

is along a certain ladder and one has to wait until the man above is promoted — or dies. So the worker begins as a boy doing some labouring and finishes, if he is lucky, as a First Hand Melter.

The steelworkers are reluctant to upset this structure: the wages at the top of the ladder are high and can reach between \$75. and \$100. weekly and the way to the top is clearly marked out. Traditionalism is very marked in the steel industry and grading in rolling-mills or steel-mills depends on seniority, which is often rigidly applied. The writer asked a District Secretary in South Wales why the system of up-grading could not be more flexibly applied in order to allow able men to rise more rapidly: the reply was that some thirty years ago up-grading had often depended on the whim of the foreman and the workers had insisted on the seniority principle to avoid favouritism and victimisation. The moderate views of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation can be seen from the statement of Sir Lincoln Evans: « We believe in the peaceful settlement of differences. We believed in it fifty years ago when in the climate of trade union opinion at that time it was almost heresy to do so ». <sup>17</sup>

The miners, on the other hand, due to the nature of their calling and their comparative isolation from other sections of the community coupled with the long record of bad industrial relations in the industry, have a fiercely loyal attitude towards the union that is lacking in many steelworks. In South Wales entire communities suffered together in long drawn-out strikes and the attitudes formed then have persisted to the present day. Indeed, an article which was written a hundred years ago <sup>18</sup> expresses views which were held in South Wales mining areas until a few years ago: « The coal kings in the neighbourhood (N. Staffs) are a mean, dirty, despicable race of profit hunters ».

We see then, that different industries can develop a different type of union. But one must not overstress the differences between unions as the underlying similarities are far greater: the basic need which the workers feel for protection against the employer; the sense of

---

(17) Foreword to *Men of Steel*, by One of Them. Iron and Steel Trades Confederation, London, 1952, p. XIII.

(18) Article on the miners of N. Staffs in the *People's Paper*, Nov. 12th, 1853. Cf. *Labour's Formative Years*, ed. by J.B. Jeffries. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1948.

identification with a powerful and respected body; and the economic gains which the union constantly stresses.

### *More On Institutional Features of Unions*

At the same time, as Bakke pointed out, they « develop an institutional life of their own »: attempts are made to expand the range of union influence and the union, with often a hundred years or more of history and tradition behind it, becomes a powerful force in the community. In South Wales, as in other mining communities in the country, local politics are dominated by the National Union of Mineworkers (N.U.M.) in the valleys. In most of the mining towns and villages there it is virtually impossible to become a local councillor without the backing of the union. Some go further and select the candidates themselves. In national politics, the mining areas have « hereditary » representation in the industrial sense, in that the M.P. is nearly always succeeded by another miner.

As the union funds swell, the union develops utilitarian culture traits in the form of real property: clubs, halls, buildings. In South Wales the N.U.M. local lodges, directly or indirectly, control or own 45 cinemas as well as institutes, libraries and clubs. No attempt is made, however, to use those cinemas as vehicles for union or political propaganda; they are run as business concerns and show as high a quota of "Westerns" as any other.

Basically, the government of the unions has not changed a great deal. In the last few years there have been numbers of criticisms made (mainly by the interested section of the Press) about over-centralisation of control in some unions. Criticism of this nature misses the point, as the Webbs mentioned over 50 years ago when they wrote that the trade unions soon left the state of "primitive democracy" behind: "The setting apart of one man to do the clerical work destroyed the idea of equal and identical service by all the members and laid the foundation of a separate governing class".<sup>19</sup> Some unions are more centralised than others but in practice most officials of the type who have to stand for reelection at frequent intervals are usually re-elected. In which case their term of office usually lasts as long as the officials appointed for life. Finally, one has only to read the Webbs' account of the activities of the Junta

---

(19) S. and B. WEBB, *Industrial Democracy*, p. 15.

to see how autocratic they could be on occasion with their members.

We have attempted to draw a picture of the union as a sociological institution, not the formal organisation for purely economic ends as it is so often depicted. We saw that the union rises out of the cultural and industrial background of the working class neighbourhood, that it continues, in a sense, the community life and communal expression inside the factory itself (though the tightly knit working class neighbourhoods are now tending to break up and their inhabitants are being settled — often on the outskirts of cities — at a great distance from the place of employment. (This may serve to explain some of the troubles on the London Docks, where the old dwellings areas had been pulled down and the dockworkers scattered in a large area for re-housing.)

The emphasis has been on the union as an "ideal type", *i.e.*, a model for analysis and comparison, though the description has been of the union mainly as it existed some twenty-five to fifty years ago. We will now consider the union to-day in order to see if any signs of change can be detected.

### The Changing Role of Trade Unionism

In the preface to the 1920 edition of *Industrial Democracy*, the Webbs, commenting on the first edition of their book in 1897, wrote: "In 1897 some critics ridiculed the idea of attaching so much importance to the workman's organisations as to write a book about them. In 1920 the same critics are uneasy in their minds as to whether the despised workmen's organisations are not destined to swallow up all other social institutions." In 1952, Lincoln Evans (now Sir Lincoln Evans and a member of the reconstituted Steel Board) wrote in his foreword to *Men of Steel*: "Today, trade unions are accepted as an essential part of industry, without which it could not function, and where their views are sought by Governments on matters of industrial and social policy."<sup>20</sup>

### *A Modified Background*

It can be seen that there has been a great change in the social climate of opinion about trade unions in the last fifty years: how far

---

(20) *Op. cit.*, p. XIII.

has the changing cultural background, with full employment for the past 12 years, the rise in status of many manual occupations such as mining and building and a relative rise in the income of the working class (with a 10% rise in real income terms over 1938<sup>21</sup>) compared with that of the higher income groups, affected the ideas and attitudes of trade unionists?

### *Cultural Changes*

There has also been a great increase in the power and effectiveness of what is known in America as the "mass media of communication": radios are a commonplace even in the poorest homes and it is estimated that  $\frac{2}{3}$  of all TV sets sold are to the lower income groups (under \$1,800 a year). The cinema-going habit is also more deeply ingrained in most workers than it was 20-30 years ago and many go twice weekly, some more often still though TV has cut attendances. Football pools vie with the cinema as a form of entertainment and with many families filling in several "lines" per head, Thursday night is almost fully accounted for in most working class households. Workers have backed horses and dogs for many years, but the tremendous growth of football pools and the cinema habit may show that these fill a definite need in the ordinary person's life: there has been a marked decline in the influence of ideologies, religious and political, so that the worker feels he needs something to hope for and the pools help to fill the ideological vacuum.<sup>22</sup> The interest in sport itself is very marked and conversation in workingmen's clubs and bars continues unflinching on this subject, where many people show a detailed and encyclopaedic knowledge. The amount of interest in sporting matters can also be seen by its large coverage in the daily newspapers, though this is by no means a recent growth, rather a feature of the popular newspaper since its beginnings — the difference now is in the greater amount of leisure time enjoyed by workers, the development of travel facilities and the media of TV and radio for spreading interest. The development of easier travel facilities, e.g., the bus in the Welsh valleys has had a considerable influence in helping to break up the traditional community.

(21) Dudley Sears, *Levelling of Incomes*. London, 1949.

(22) Dr. ZWEIG (*The British Worker*) quotes a conversation: "Sports are doing for men what religion once did", and goes on to say that "(sport) has contributed to the formation of the ethical code of modern society." Pelican, 1952, p. 124. At the same time there has been a growth of Christian "action" groups inside some trade unions.



Along with this changing cultural background has gone a change in the industrial economy itself: the rise of new light industries, the decline of the labour force in agriculture and in the heavy industries, and the increase in the distributive trades.

### *Technological Changes*

These technological changes, the greater development of mechanisation and automation with the attendant standardisation, simplification and specialisation of processes, has caused a shift in the recruiting policy of former craft unions such as the Woodworkers, Engineers, Electricians and others. Such unions are spreading their membership net downwards, in terms of skill, to the semi-skilled, and in some cases, the unskilled. From the technological side, this has a levelling effect on wage differentials: on the political side, the former craft union now has a large block of semi-skilled members voting for flat-rate wage increases instead of the percentage increase which would benefit the craftsman. On top of such changes in wages has been superimposed the third party influence of the State which had been supporting more than opposing wage increases to the lower paid in the 1930's and 1940's. All these factors assisted the levelling process.

When we contrast this with the traditional working class and trade union attitude to wage differentials, we find strains beginning to appear in the trade union structure. Instead of a common front against the employer, there is a shift to interunion rivalry over recruitment and job assignments ("demarcation disputes") and intra-union tensions between the skilled man and less skilled members. One easy assumption, « working class solidarity », is therefore disintegrating.

Then the traditional role of the trade union has been as a defence mechanism against the untrammelled workings of a free enterprise economy. Under such a system, as has been indicated, there was considerable resentment towards the employer and little talk of « co-operation ». Measures for increasing productivity tended to be resisted, partly arising from the group norms of output common to most working groups in industry and partly due to the lack of effective demand and the underemployment of men and resources. Since 1945 in Britain there have been appeals for greater productivity. These were made by the Labour Government, which to a great extent is dominated by the trade

unions. This in itself forced a certain change in attitudes on the part of the rank and file unionist which was reinforced by the Productivity Campaign.

### *Towards Co-Operation and Restraint*

The Campaign was launched in 1948 under the aegis of Sir Stafford Cripps, then Chancellor of the Exchequer. Under the programme, teams from many industries — usually with one-third trade unionists — visited similar industries in the United States.<sup>23</sup> The report which concerns us as having the maximum influence on the trade unions, was that describing the Trades Union Congress (T.U.C.) Team visit.<sup>24</sup> The Team were concerned chiefly with the attitudes of American trade unions to productivity and their Report makes the bold suggestion that a more positive attitude to productivity should be taken by the British unions: "Where managements are not sufficiently enterprising and progressive, are unwilling to step up efficiency or extend markets through lower prices, then unions must press them to do so."<sup>25</sup>

That the T.U.C. could make such a recommendation shows the change in the social climate from the 1930's when the main concern of most unions, made explicit in the correspondence courses of the largest union, The Transport and General Workers — was to avoid over-production and employ the maximum number of men.

While the need for greater productivity and some degree of co-operation with employers was seen by trade union leaders, it was not so manifest to ordinary members. The strains set up in the internal union structure were exacerbated by the period of post-war inflation and the attempts to restrain this. One such attempt, the policy of « wage restraint », was launched by the Chancellor of the Exchequer in the White Paper on *Wages, Prices and Profits*.<sup>26</sup> Some backing was given to this by the T.U.C. and its member unions and a mild policy of "wage restraint" was followed for some months before it collapsed with the aftermath of the September 1949 devaluation of the pound and the Korean crisis which gave a new twist to the inflationary spiral.

(23) Some seventy reports have been published. A full list can be had from the British Productivity Council, 21 Tothill St., London, W. 1.

(24) *Trade Unions and Productivity*, T.U.C., Smith Square, London, S.W. 1, 1949.

(25) *Ibid.*, p. 59.

(26) H.M.S.O., London, 1948.

Both the factors mentioned, the Productivity Campaign and « wage restraint », required a change from a defensive trade union role to one of positive involvement in the national economy with decisions being taken which might be, and sometimes were, unpopular with members. One sign of internal tension was the number of “unofficial” (“wildcat”) strikes and the increase of wage earnings as compared with wage rates which showed that the policy of restraint was being circumvented by many branches (locals) at works level.

We have indicated the wider aims of the trade unions, the transformation of a capitalist from of society into a more socialist or co-operative one, and the means, through the Labour Party, by which this was to be achieved. In 1918, the Labour Party programme, “Labour and the New Order”, contained the phrase “the nationalisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange”: this rhetorical phrase became part of the belief structure of Labour and it was held in the 1920’s and ’30’s that nationalisation would transform the employer-employee relationship. The post-war period saw the nationalisation of the mines, railways, electricity supply, gas and road transport. Labour relations were better than they might have been under the old employers, but there remained many traces of the old hostilities and this cast doubt on nationalisation as a panacea.<sup>27</sup> The attitude to nationalisation is now more pragmatic and this has led to a weakening of the belief in political action.

### *A Weakening of Union Militancy*

The declining interest in politics may be symptomatic of the higher standard of living, the better housing available on the council estates, (housing projects) now expanded to house between one third and one fourth of working class families, and the absence of the more glaring social injustices, unemployment, disease, poverty, which served as a spring to radical and trade union organisation in the past.

Yet another trade union symbol has been transformed by the logic of industrial growth. As industry has become large-scale, so have the trade unions. This has resulted in many strains and grievances, grumbles over the impersonality of the large organization and its bureaucratic and undemocratic structure. Trade union meetings are poorly

(27) *The Miners’ Point of View*, Acton Society Trust, London, 1952.

attended, and, in the absence of a democratic mandate, executives and leaders pursue their own policy, casting a weather eye over their shoulder from time to time.<sup>28</sup>

Linked to the problems of size, unforeseen by the older generation of trade unionists, is the decline in voluntarism. Thousands of shop stewards work unpaid for the Labour movement: these seem to fall into two main categories, the first group being the dedicated, usually politically oriented, who see the trade unions in their traditional role as a vehicle of social protest. They are the symbol of service which is held before the weaker brethren. The second group subdivide into those who reluctantly agree to serve and view it as a specific, work structured function, the others are attracted by status, power and prestige considerations. The latter is naturally not excluded from the thoughts of the most selfless servant. Along with the decline in the ranks and quality of the voluntary workers has come a corresponding increase in salaried staff which in turn leads to a decline in the incentive to do voluntary work. Linked to this is the problem that the British unions pay their officials low salaries in contrast to comparable posts in industry: the top figures in British trade unionism do not earn much more than \$4,500.

Then there is the paradox that the instrumental goal of the unions, the creation of the Welfare State, has resulted in a weakening of trade union functions. Prior to World War II the union served both as an employment agency and an insurance or friendly society. Full employment policy has weakened the union employment agency role while the massive development of social security has weakened the appeal and effect of union insurance benefits. The remaining important function, collective bargaining, was threatened by "wage restraint" and the continued effort on the part of Labour intellectuals to reach agreement with the unions on a "wages policy". Such a policy, at its simplest, visualised an allocation set aside for wages out of the national income. This was to be divided among the unions and many were the methods suggested for the computation and allocation of such a sum. One defect which the wage policy advocates wish to remedy is the weakness of the T.U.C. This central body is a loose federation of unions, none of whom have surrendered any part of their sovereignty

---

(28) See J. Goldstein's *Government of British Trade Unions* for an analysis of this. London, 1952. For an opposing point of view, V.L. Allen, *Power in Trade Unions*, London, 1954.

to the central committee. The T.U.C. can lead, they need not follow. It can advise, they need not listen. But it is unlikely that the T.U.C. will be given greater powers in the next decade.

### *A New Model Needed*

We have traced the factors in the post-war scene which have most influenced the unions and changed their traditional views and roles. It would seem that the traditional model of the 1920's and '30's proved inadequate for the post-war period. To some extent, the rule of the Conservative Government from November 1951 to date has led to a revival of more traditional trade union attitudes, due to the rise in unemployment recently — only 1.9%, but high in some localities. Disputes over wages in an inflationary period have led to more officially-sanctioned strikes, and the unions are now faced with suggestions that trade union law be codified to weaken the "100% per cent union shop", to protect individual workers against unjust expulsion, and to investigate doubtful union electoral practices. These suggestions are unlikely to become law unless the Conservatives continue in office well into the 1960's, but are indicative of the changing social scene in that many moderates would support legislation to protect individual workers against the unfair use of trade union power.<sup>29</sup> But in spite of the recent changes in government, the unions will not revert to the 1930's, for they are now passing through a transitional phase where new symbols and orientations are being gradually formed. The newer institutions which emerge in the future will almost certainly be closer, in structure and function, to the American and Canadian union patterns. New developments in urbanisation, technology, political legislation of the Welfare State type, including almost universal education, high standards of living, have all contributed to a lessening of radical political and militant union trends and to less class consciousness in the short space of a quarter century.

---

(29) C. GRUNFELD. *Trade Unions and the Individual*, Fabian Society, London S.W. 1., 1957.

## LE SYNDICALISME ANGLAIS: UNE ANALYSE SOCIO-CULTURELLE

On a jusqu'ici étudié le syndicalisme surtout comme une institution économique, politique et juridique, à la suite des travaux, admirables mais d'allure un peu officielle et statique, de Sidney et Beatrice Webb (*Industrial Democracy, History of Trade Unionism*). Une telle perspective demeure partielle et quelque peu trompeuse. D'où l'importance d'études inspirées par l'anthropologie sociale et la sociologie sur le syndicalisme contemporain.

Traditionnellement, le syndicalisme anglais fut la réponse à l'exploitation et à l'arbitraire patronaux de la part de salariés vivant dans la pauvreté et l'encombrement. On commença par voir dans les syndicats des conspirations illégales, et dans les syndiqués des criminels à mettre au ban de la société. De cette période noire sont restés certains souvenirs, symboles et rituels, mais guère autre chose. Ces rituels, aujourd'hui, rendent compte moins d'une réalité sociale hostile que d'un besoin de mousser la loyauté et la solidarité des membres du syndicat. Et si le vocabulaire de l'exploitation est demeuré assez riche, les attitudes des chefs syndicaux surtout se sont modifiées considérablement.

Le syndicalisme vise des objectifs plus larges que le ventre plein et le portemonnaie bien garni, comme en fait foi l'enthousiasme des syndiqués, il n'y a pas si longtemps, à s'efforcer de transformer le régime économique de concurrence en un régime de coopération, de propriété publique.

La plupart des travailleurs anglais ont le syndicalisme dans la peau. C'est la chose la plus normale du monde pour le jeune ouvrier de faire partie du syndicat; toutes sortes de pressions subtiles s'exercent d'ailleurs sur lui en ce sens. Toute la famille est pour le syndicat, et l'enfant en entend parler dès son plus jeune âge. Il comprend tôt le sens et la nécessité de la communauté d'action pour faire contre-poids à la force de l'employeur; cela est surtout vrai chez les enfants des familles moins fortunées, qui, faute d'espace au foyer, doivent s'amuser dans la rue où ils acquièrent vite le sens et la discipline du groupe.

Et quand le jeune homme entre à l'usine, son infériorité sentie devant ses supérieurs trouve un remède dans l'adhésion au syndicat, source de force et d'appui. La grève renforce la solidarité des syndiqués.

D'autre part, la diversité des industries entraîne la diversité des syndicats. Ainsi, les unions de métiers différeront en certaines matières des unions industrielles; les mineurs ne se comporteront pas nécessairement comme les électriciens, ni les métallos comme les tisserands. Mais au delà des divergences, mineures au fond, subsistent les similitudes profondes qui elles sont autrement importantes pour expliquer le phénomène syndical.

Peu à peu, le syndicat se développe comme une institution, distincte à certains égards de ses membres pris individuellement, et avide elle aussi de sécurité et de stabilité. Avec les années, le syndicat peut accumuler des fonds imposants qu'il placera dans toutes sortes d'entreprises (clubs, édifices publics tels que cinémas, etc.). Une bureaucratie s'installera pour en diriger les destinées.

Le syndicalisme, en somme, est le produit d'un arrière-plan culturel précis sur lequel, en retour, il influe d'une certaine façon. Mais depuis un quart de siècle, cet arrière-plan s'est modifié considérablement, et avec lui le visage même du syndicalisme anglais. Aujourd'hui, le syndicalisme en Angleterre est accepté comme pièce intégrante de l'économie industrielle, et a ses coudées franches auprès des gouvernements; le plein emploi est la réalité du jour; et surtout, le travailleur manuel a progressé dans l'échelle sociale en même temps que son revenu s'apparentait à celui de l'employé de la classe moyenne. Sans compter que la presse, la radio, la télévision et le football ont rapproché toutes les classes en comblant d'une façon anodine le vide idéologique des travailleurs.

Les changements technologiques ont également fait éclater les métiers traditionnels et les solidarités et défenses qu'ils provoquaient, tout en modifiant considérablement la structure de l'industrie elle-même. Les écarts de salaires ont été réduits peu à peu. Au lieu du front commun contre l'employeur, on commence à constater la rivalité intersyndicale (les fameux conflits de juridiction) et les tensions entre les travailleurs qualifiés et les moins qualifiés.

La campagne de productivité lancée en 1948 sous un gouvernement travailliste imposa au syndicalisme une politique de collaboration avec le patronat; et la politique du « wage restraint », de mesure dans les revendications économiques préconisée par le même gouvernement et suivie pendant quelques mois par le TUC, en édulcorant la fonction syndicale par excellence, provoqua de nombreux conflits non autorisés et dut être abandonnée après quelques mois.

Aujourd'hui, l'attitude du syndicalisme anglais à l'égard des nationalisations comme panacée est beaucoup plus pragmatique, ce qui a entraîné chez les syndiqués une désaffection partielle à l'égard de l'action politique, surtout depuis que le « Welfare State » a réussi à améliorer les niveaux de vie, l'habitation, la santé et l'emploi.

D'autre part, la concentration et l'intégration industrielles ont entraîné le gigantisme syndical, avec son cortège de bureaucratie et d'impersonnalité et l'affaiblissement de l'enthousiasme des syndiqués.

On peut toutefois noter, depuis l'arrivée du gouvernement conservateur au pouvoir (1951), un certain retour des attitudes syndicales traditionnelles. Un certain chômage, fortement ressenti en certaines régions, a créé du mécontentement. L'inflation a provoqué des batailles assez vives sur le plan des salaires. Et des luttes s'annoncent sur celui de la législation, un projet de loi se préparant pour prohiber certaines formes extrêmes de sécurité syndicale.

Bref, le syndicalisme anglais tend à se rapprocher de plus en plus des modèles américain et canadien; il a décidément perdu en radicalisme, en conscience de classe et en activité politique au cours du dernier quart de siècle.

Rapport du XI<sup>e</sup> Congrès des  
relations industrielles de Laval

**La stabilité de l'emploi**

- Prospérité économique et paradoxe de l'emploi — CHARLES LEMELIN
- Le chômage structurel et cyclique — RENÉ TREMBLAY
- Le chômage saisonnier et frictionnel — J.-M. MARTIN
- Implications sociologiques de l'instabilité de l'emploi —  
FERNAND DUMONT
- L'expérience canadienne: l'Etat — PIERRE HARVEY
- L'expérience canadienne: le secteur privé de l'entreprise —  
EUGÈNE FORSEY, R.B. MACPHERSON et W.M. BERRY
- Aspect normatif de la stabilité de l'emploi — MAURICE TREMBLAY

*En vente à :*

**Les Presses Universitaires Laval**  
28, Ste-Famille, Québec.  
1956