

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TRADE UNIONS IN BRITAIN

(http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/citizenship/struggle_democracy/trade_unionism.htm)

Skilled workers in Britain began organizing themselves into trade unions in the 17th century (preceded by guilds in medieval times). During the 18th century, when the industrial revolution prompted a wave of new trade disputes, the government introduced measures to prevent collective action on the part of workers. **The Combination Acts**, passed in 1799 and 1800, during the Napoleonic wars, made any sort of strike action illegal - and workmen could receive up to three months' imprisonment or two months' hard labour if they broke these new laws.

Despite the Combination Acts, workers continued to press for better pay and working conditions during the early part of the 19th century, and trade unions grew rapidly in London and elsewhere. Finally, after violent **luddites protests** in 1811 and 1812, Parliament repealed the Combination Acts in 1824 and 1825. Trade unions could now no longer be ignored as a political force, though employers remained reluctant to treat workers' representatives as their equals.

During the 1830s labour unrest and trade union activity reached new levels. For the first time men began to organize trade associations with nationwide aims, such as **Robert Owen's** short-lived **Grand National Consolidated Trades Union**, formed in February 1834. Agricultural workers were also adopting new forms of collective action - a notable example being the **Swing Riots** in 1830-1.

In March 1834, with the connivance of the Whig government, six agricultural labourers who had formed a trade union in the Dorsetshire village of Tolpuddle were arrested on trumped-up charges and transported to Australia. The unfair treatment of the **'Tolpuddle Martyrs'**, as they became known, triggered brief public protests throughout Britain. But **the harsh sentences discouraged other workers from joining trade unions, and many of the nationwide organizations, including the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union, collapsed.**

Rapid trade union growth

Although trade union membership continued to grow during the next two decades, up to around 1850 they tended to be overshadowed by political movements such as **Chartism**. But in the improved economic conditions of the 1850s and 1860s the foundations of a powerful trade union movement were established and membership rose from approximately 100,000 in the early 1850s to around a million by 1874.

Engineers, miners and agricultural labourers formed new national or regional trade organizations. **The Trades Union Congress (TUC)**, a national forum for coordinating trade union demands, was founded in Manchester in 1868. The 1871 **Trade Union Act**, introduced by William Gladstone's Liberal government, established the legal status of trade unions - although other legislation made it difficult for unions to organize picketing and strikes.

New unionism

The economic slump of the 1870s and 1880s presented new challenges. Labour leaders such as Thomas Mann, one of the chief organizers of the successful London dock strike (1889), argued that the trade union movement needed to become far more open and inclusive. **'New unionism'** reached out to the many unskilled workers in Britain who lacked union representation. **The first women's 'trade societies' also began to emerge during this period.** The strike by the female workers at the Bryant & May match factory, in the East End of London, in July 1888 highlighted the expanding boundaries of trade union activity in Britain.

By the early 20th century trade unions were larger and more influential than ever before. Particularly after the formation of the **Independent Labour Party (ILP)** in 1893, the trade union movement developed a close relationship with the political left. This bond was

strengthened by the **Taff Vale case** (1900-1), in which the House of Lords supported the right of the Taff Vale Railway Company to sue members of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants for striking in August 1900.

Many trade unions subsequently joined the **Labour Representation Committee** (LRC), an organization created to unite trade unionists and socialists in a single political movement. Between 1900 and 1906, the number of Labour MPs in Parliament rose from 2 to 29. The link established in this period between the Labour Party and trade unionism still exists today.

Source 1:

Trade union delegation ignored, 1830
PRO HO 44/23

My Lord/

The cool & very degrading manner in which the truly anxious exertions of the humble but meritorious Members of the Several trades in London were received at Court this day CAN NEVER be effaced from our memories, as being in every respect so totally in opposition to the declared sentiments of S[ir] R[obert] Peel that he wo[ul]d answer for our kind reception & we in addition having foolishly anticipated the happiness of seeing our Sovereign Face, in both which fond hopes we have been most miserably disappointed (the great & useless expense & serious loss of time being a minor Consideration) but we at the same time most unanimously state our Conviction that a deputation from Mr. Hunts Partizans would have been received with more attention & wo[ul]d not have been so unceremoniously dismissed (after being very uselessly detained in the Wet and Cold for upwards of two hours) with the cheerless and heartless message that "there was no Answer".

Your Lordships humble Serv[an]ts
52 Influential Members
of a body of 40,000 Artizans
8. Decr. 1830

Source 2:

**The Tolpuddle Martyrs, 1834
PRO HO 44/27, no. 193**

The Political Drama. No. 32.

Most Gracious King, Most Sacred Monarch, Most Sovereign Lord and Divine Master, gifted with grace from GOD, to rule with Paternal Love over millions of Human Beings, your *Slaves and Subjects* - have Mercy upon us as you hope for Mercy hereafter. - Remember Sire, your Coronation *Oath* strictly enjoins you to *Temper Justice with Mercy*. We have committed no moral sin against GOD or Man. Forget not, Sire, that millions of your Sacred Majesty's Loyal subjects are bound by *Oaths* in their different Societies to protect themselves from unjust encroachments on their Rights. Are not these, Royal Sir, as culpable as ourselves? The *Conservatives, Freemasons, Orange Lodges, and Government Spies*, GRACIOUS Sire, are all bound by Oaths to protect their *Orders*, however *unlawful* they may be; are not these also as culpable as us? O! King! We only bound ourselves for the just protection of our Miserable Earnings - THEY for *Oppression, Monopoly, and Plunder*. - Oh! Sire! have *Mercy* on poor *Humanity*.

Humanity! - Who the hell's he? Come cut your sticks - I'm damn'd if you dont smell of *Rebellion, Poverty, and Parish Soup*, as strong as Stink pots in a sea fight. - Mercy indeed - dont you wish you may get it - here, take it - *over the left*. (Aside) - Blast me, they talking about *Oaths* makes me recollect well when I was in Sarvice (for they always send the greatest *Fool* in a family to sea), I used to Swear worse than a Ship Parson, - Shiver me; I never Ate, Drank, or had a Woman without prefacing it with a gallus good Oath - that was something like "FLARE UP!"

Pilly, turn your *Donkey* to 'em, de horrid *Paupers*, if you give 'em de smallest hopes you shall have no peace for vun month.

Guards, turn the *Slaves* out they must be *Transported*, my duty to the Capitalists, Landholders, the Tories and my nine hundred & ninety nine Cousins demand it

THE DORCHESTER UNIONISTS IMPLORING MERCY !!! OF THEIR KING,

"He who trusts in PRINCES shall be thus rewarded".

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