Consolidation and the Lib-Lab Alliance, 1868-94

I. ESTABLISHING THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The first Trades Union Congress had undoubtedly been a considerable success, but George Howell, who was to become Secretary, stated over twenty years later, 'it was hardly expected even by the most sanguine of the promoters of the gathering that the one then being held would really constitute the first of a continuous series, though that was the dream and the hope of the originators of the movement.'

Before the next Congress was held the eagerly awaited general election on the new register had taken place. Scant attention was given to the election by the Conference of Amalgamated Trades, but the London Working Men's Association under Potter's leadership worked hard to ensure that the newly enfranchised workers were on the electoral roll, and did what it could to help trade union candidates obtain nomination as Liberals. However, only two trade unionists and a well known co-operator eventually fought the election and all of them were defeated.

Some weeks prior to the election Peter Shorrocks, who had acted as secretary to the first Trades Union Congress, had called upon the trades societies that had supported the Congress to do everything in their power to put up trade unionists for election. Unfortunately the organisation to make this possible was completely lacking. The plain fact was that the trade unions had not yet realised the opportunity which the enfranchisement of the urban workers had provided. One of the few to realise the significance of the Reform Act was George Potter, whose newspaper, The Beehive, drew the moral from the failure to elect a single working man to Parliament that they should take steps to be better prepared next time.

With the Liberal victory and Gladstone, who was looked upon as a friend of the trade unions, as the Prime Minister, union

leaders hoped for the early appearance of a Trade Union Bill. The Royal Commission had not yet reported, but it was soon expected to do so. Before the election the London Working Men’s Association had approached the Conference of Amalgamated Trades and the London Trades Council with the suggestion that a joint meeting should be held in support of a privately drafted Bill that would free the unions from the inimical effects of recent judicial decisions. The Conference of Amalgamated Trades, with hesitation and then reluctantly, finally agreed to the proposal. There was some difference of opinion between the sponsors of the Bill and a number of trade society delegates who felt that on the question of violence and intimidation the Bill conceded too much to the critics of trade unionism. However, it was finally agreed that the Bill should go forward as it had been drafted.

The Royal Commission’s Report eventually appeared in March 1869. The majority report was much less damaging to the trade unions than had been expected when the Commission was set up. This was a tribute to the work of the Conference of Amalgamated Trades. It was also due to the brilliant work of Lichfield, Hughes and Harrison. These three had had considerable influence on the majority, but could not persuade them to go as far as they themselves wished to go. They, therefore, produced their own minority report which was based upon a penetrating analysis of the role of the unions in a modern society. The minority report advanced a simple and persuasive thesis that urged the sweeping away of all discrimination against workpeople. They sought to keep the courts out of union affairs by advocating only a limited recognition of the legal status of unions. What they primarily wished to achieve was a situation where any act done by more than one person would not be a crime if the same act when done by a single person would not be a crime. Following up their minority report Frederic Harrison drafted a Bill which if carried would have put into practice all the ideas which he and his colleagues had advocated.

The Conference of Amalgamated Trades and Potter’s London Working Men’s Association, though retaining a certain degree of mutual suspicion, called a truce to organise a joint campaign in support of the urgently needed Trade Union Bill. But the Conference of Amalgamated Trades was not persuaded that it should be represented at the second Trades Union Congress, which was