3 Trade Unions and Revolutionary Politics

For much of the nineteenth-century, trade union organization in Britain was dominated by craft workers in exclusive craft associations. Unions in the craft industries were built on apprenticeship and on customs which had persisted from before the Industrial Revolution.\textsuperscript{1} Craft societies built on custom to delimit a preserve of craftsmen’s work, defined sometimes by the material, sometimes by the tools and machinery and sometimes by the product. This preserve was defended against the unqualified, against changes in the organization of production or techniques and against encroachment by other crafts.\textsuperscript{2} Craft rules occasionally led to conflict but widespread conflict and bargaining with employers were untypical of craft unionism. It was craft unions’ contention that craftsmen should regulate ‘what we alone have a right to regulate, the value of our labour.’\textsuperscript{3}

Every craft union provided friendly benefits. Firstly, there were advantages in disguising a trade society as a friendly society when the latter was accepted by employers and protected by the law. Secondly, they were a vital element in craftworkers’ control of working conditions. Benefits made union members a cohesive force and ‘any member who had been paying in for some years was likely to feel he had an investment not likely to be sacrificed.’\textsuperscript{4}

The strike was used to prevent infringements of the rules in particular shops and to extend a society’s control of shops not previously organized. The technique of withdrawing small groups of men or individuals known as the ‘strike in detail’ was used to enforce craft rules without large-scale conflict with employers. Strikers were supported by unemployment benefit, not strike pay.\textsuperscript{5}

Throughout the nineteenth century, however, craft unions were increasingly threatened by technical change and the social conflict which this engendered. In industries created by the industrial revolution, such as the railways, there were no hallowed customs and no traditional basis for apprenticeship. Other industries, particularly coal, iron and cotton, were so profoundly altered that protective customs, where they existed, were swept away. New skills were acquired by experience and by promotion from less skilled to more skilled without formal apprenticeship.\textsuperscript{6}
Workers in these industries earned more than labourers but these industries were subject to trade fluctuations. Craft unions' resistance to the assault on their exclusiveness and workers' relative weakness in these industries gave rise to the formation of separate and comparatively open trade unions (industrial-type unions) which were more dependent on the strike and collective bargaining. They were vertically open in that they organized workers with varying degrees of skill, but horizontally closed in that they did not attempt to organize outside the boundaries of their own industries and they excluded labourers.

Early organizations of labourers tended to be transient, both because of their insecure position in the labour market and because of craft opposition. As the previous chapter has shown, the year 1889 marked an enormous burst of trade union growth and industrial conflict, especially in industries and occupations which had previously been poorly organized or unorganized. These were the 'new unions', commonly understood as socialist-led unions of unskilled labourers who revolted against the exclusive and selfish trade unionism of the crafts.

However, not all of the new unions were composed of the unskilled and low-paid, or were against friendly benefits and had low subscriptions. New unionism was not based on a single principle of organization but aimed at filling in the gaps left by existing forms of trade unionism by organizing unions for the general run of workers in one or more industries. This was not a new departure and had been pioneered long before by the weavers, the boot and shoe operatives, the railway servants and to some extent, the miners.

The new unions, however, recruited on a wider scale among seamen, dockers, gasworkers, chemical workers and transport workers. They recruited less skilled workers in industries where only the skilled were organized. The new unions adopted this general form unintentionally. As they set out to organize particular groups of workers, they found other workers keen to join and their industrial coverage expanded. These unions therefore became general, not as a result of any coherent policy or tactics but because union officials welcomed the subscriptions of those 'clamouring to join.' There is much evidence of ruthless behaviour by union bureaucrats to maximize membership numbers. Dockers' and seamen's unions set about crushing and eliminating rival unions and poaching their members.

Not all new unions were socialist and/or militant. Nevertheless, most analysts, including Clegg, Fox and Thompson, believe that most of the new unions used militant and coercive tactics and the new unions have been typically viewed as being committed to a 'fighting policy