

# The Enemies of Trade Unionism

*Abe Moffat*

SINCE the early days of capitalism and the growth of organisation among the workers the employers and their governments have had two methods of dealing with this threat to unlimited exploitation and unlimited profits. The first and most natural thing for the employers was to try to crush the workers' organisations by legislation and the use of the courts against them—as for example in the days of the Combination Acts and even after their repeal, as in the case of the Tolpuddle martyrs. When they have not succeeded in stamping out trade unionism, they have tried to bridle it by a whole series of Trade Union Acts which, while recognising the trade unions, also aimed to hamper their operations. And when even this has failed to prevent the growth and activity of the trade unions, the employing class has resorted to its second principal method—to tame the trade unions and turn them into legal and “respectable” bodies whose leaders hobnob with royalty and the big employers and are won for the economic theories and outlook of capitalism.

So today there is much talk of the “status” and “responsibilities” of the trade unions; but the big stick is always in reserve, as was shown by the Trade Union Act of 1927 and the long fight before it was repealed. As long as capitalism is getting on all right, the kid glove method is preferred; but when things are changing there are always those who, however timidly, advise as heavy doses of the big stick as they think are politically possible.

The latest example is provided by *The Economist*, which with a flourish of trumpets announced in January: “Estate of the Realm or Vested Interest? Early in February *The Economist* will start a series of articles on the status and problems of British trade unions.” Three articles duly appeared, in the issues of February 8, 15 and 22, with the titles: “The Trade Unions: How Powerful Are They?”; “The Trade Unions: Where the Danger Lies”; and finally “A Code for Trade Unions.”

It is not at all clear why “Estate of the Realm” or “Vested Interest” are regarded as alternatives; as a matter of fact, “Estates of the Realm” used

to be the title for the three Estates of Vested Interests—the nobility, the clergy, and the commoners. But what the nameless author evidently has in mind by “Estate of the Realm” is something like “Her Majesty’s Opposition”—something eminently respectable and constitutional, as distinct from a body that puts the “vested interests” of its members first.

However, in these days no writer, even in *The Economist*, dare make an open attack on the trade unions. Therefore the first question put is: “How powerful are they?” The answer given is, briefly, that they *seem* powerful, with their great membership and influence including “informal discussions between the Trades Union Congress and cabinets”, but—they are not so powerful after all. For:

“the main factor that has increased the bargaining power of the unions is, quite obviously, the establishment of full employment and the disappearance of any significant reserve of unemployed labour in the post-war period of rapid economic expansion.”

## Thinking of a “showdown”

It is to exaggerate the real strength of the trade unions, we are told, to think that they were “the prime movers of inflation”; which is at least an admission that inflation was not primarily due to wage increases. In fact, the article says, there are “some elements of deep weakness” in the position of the trade unions; the main increase in numbers in recent years has been “of white-collar people and of women”, and moreover, trade union finances are weak, because they have not raised their dues enough. So the conclusion is reached that the financial weakness of the unions is now:

“a source of strength for the employer, the government, the international standing of sterling, and for the British consumer in this winter’s wage bargaining.”

And in case the meaning of this is not sufficiently clear, we are told: the power of trade unionism “in a showdown” has been eroded;

“its real strength in a tussle, when employment may be becoming less full, may turn out to be surprisingly weak.”

Having thus whistled to keep up the courage of the government and the employers, the writer complains of “the privilege of trade unions to restrain trade (and production) unpenalised” and calls for legislation “not to check trade unionism itself, but to put a stop to abuses by it, unrestrained by the law, of personal liberty and personal choice.” No trade unionist will be deceived by this approach on production when the biggest criminal in this country is the Tory Government and the employing class who are cutting back production and deliberately creating unemployment as a means of attacking conditions and in an attempt to weaken the trade unions.

Proposals for this legislation are made in the two following articles, which will be examined later. For the present, let us look at what the writer of the first article is driving at.

The series of articles was announced as dealing with “the status and problems of British trade unions”. All we are told about their status is that they are influential and even discuss things with cabinets. In fact, trade union status has been won as a result of two completely different things. On the one hand there is the organised strength of the trade unions, which has compelled recognition from the employing class in the pits and factories and in the institutions of capitalist power, including the cabinet. On the other hand, the employing class has been acute enough to try and blunt the edge of trade union pressure by inviting trade union representatives to “share responsibility” for running capitalism efficiently. Hence the two-sided nature of the “status” won by trade unionism—it may mean in practice either the winning of better positions for carrying on the class struggle, or pure and simple class collaboration.

That is the real problem before British trade unionism today, especially with the approach of slump conditions. Are the trade unions to fight for the “vested interests” of their members, or for the very real “vested interests” of the employing class?

The fear in the heart of the writer in *The Economist* is that the unions will fight for their members, instead of taking pride in their “status” and showing “responsibility”—to the employers.

The same note is echoed in the Cohen Report.

The “Three Wise Men” note that the wage advances since the war have been “secured by workpeople organised in powerful trade unions”, and that the fact that such unions exist “may

have great importance for the near future.” It may have importance because “the habit of demanding large and frequent increases in monetary rewards grows by what it feeds on, and may be found to persist after any technical justification for it in the state of the labour market has passed away.”

Therefore they hope that the decline in demand “must certainly be expected to stiffen the resistance of employers to claims for increased wage rates”; and as for the Unions—“it will tend to convince the members of the Trade Unions concerned that a successful attempt to continue the spectacular rise of wage rates in recent years” (which has only kept them more or less abreast of the rise in the cost of living) “would not only involve real hardship for large sections of their fellow citizens but would also ultimately endanger their own future employment and standard of living.”

### **Employers’ propaganda**

In other words, everything depends (for the employers) on being able to persuade the trade unions that they must accept the employers’ economic theories and abandon any desire for higher wages in spite of the rise in the cost of living.

The fact is that British capitalism is having less and less room for manoeuvre. In spite of the long period of prosperity since the war, its position has steadily weakened, both through the rising power of the colonial liberation movement and through the power of its rivals—United States and now West German monopoly capitalism. In order to maintain itself, British monopoly capitalism is compelled to force down the conditions of the working class. The Tory Government is the instrument for this—with its measures to create unemployment in the hope of weakening the trade unions, its high prices and increased rents to press down the real wages of the workers. Success in carrying out this policy depended on being able to win the support of the trade union leaders. The Cohen Committee was to do the trick.

But unfortunately for the Tory Government, the measures it had already been operating against the workers had resulted in such pressure from the trade union membership that the General Council of the Trades Union Congress did not bow down before the “Three Wise Men”. Even when, after long discussions, a delegation was sent to the Cohen Committee, important trade union leaders did not attend. And when the report came out, it was condemned throughout the trade union movement. The Government’s trick had failed. And *The Economist* knows it. So it says the trade

unions after all aren't as strong as they seem; the employers and the Government can face a "show-down" with confidence.

It is true, of course, that union contributions have not been raised in proportion to the general rise in prices, and that some trade unions are not in a strong financial position. But it would be highly unwise for the Government and the employers to take any comfort from that. The whole situation is bringing out more and more clearly the class feeling of the organised workers, their recognition of the employers' attack, and their determination to fight. Any attempt at a "show-down", whether with one union or with the lot, will teach the Government and the employers a badly-needed lesson. It should be clearly understood that the purpose behind all this propaganda is to condone the policy of the Tory Government, including support to the policy of wage freeze and unemployment, and to solve the crisis at the expense of the working class, whilst profits are to remain sacred and must be protected even in the time of economic crisis.

### Trade Union "Problems"

However, to come back to the "problems of the trade unions" as seen by *The Economist*. The second article is called "Where the danger lies." And here it turns out that "the problems of British trade unions" are alleged injustices to individual members carried out by dictatorial "virtually self-perpetuating bodies" which are said to be found "in some workplaces, especially in some large factories and other assembly points". *The Economist*, moved by pity for individual trade unionists whose "liberty" is threatened by trade union discipline, waxes indignant against these terrible "dictators" who enforce union rules.

It appears that there are some trade union officers who undertake their trade union work as a result of "a sincere social service itch". But *The Economist* hints darkly that that type is more or less dying out. Their place is being taken by spare-time union officials who "not only make a good thing for themselves in terms of power over their fellows," but also "have occasionally begun to make a good thing in terms of creature comforts, if not of hard cash."

This is described as "the descent from a partly politically inspired movement into a plain and powerful racket", which a Royal Commission into trade unionism should deal with.

Anyway, that doesn't seem to matter so much to *The Economist*, perhaps because enquiries into rackets might lead too far in this capitalist country. What really shocks the paper is that these groups (virtually self-perpetuating bodies as it

calls them) "develop the most undesirable proclivities".

"It is almost always when overmighty local groups of this sort have sprung up . . . that the worst trade union offences against individual liberty occur."

And what are the worst trade union offences? "The principle of the closed shop" seems to be the worst of all, and secondly, "It is also usually after these local groups have become most powerful that communism moves into a position of predominant influence."

Of course, it is an absolute travesty of the facts to suggest that "communism moves into a position of predominant influence" where "rackets" are conducted. It is quite clear that the writer in *The Economist* does not understand elementary trade union principles. Communists and non-Communists are only elected to positions of influence in the trade unions on the basis of service and winning the confidence of their fellow trade unionists in fighting for better wages and conditions, which is the real function of the trade union movement.

Even on the question of trade union benefits and cultural activities the writer exposes his complete ignorance as to what is actually taking place in Trade Union Branches, including his remarks about mining villages. For example, in the Scottish Miners' Union there is a development of cultural activities unprecedented in the history of the miners, and never at any time were such benefits paid from trade union funds, including substantial gratuities for old members which were only a dream in the past.

But why was it necessary for the writer to bring in communism at all in an article of this kind?

Because just as the real fear of the employers is militant trade unionism, so they see communists as builders up and defenders of militant trade unionism, concerned to strengthen their trade union as a fighting organisation that can defend the interests of its members, and not taken in by capitalist economic theories or propaganda for class collaboration.

The writer has evidently studied the material issued by the League of Individualists. So the third article in the series sets about considering what to do about all these horrors in the trade union world.

An editorial introducing the third article is headed: "Legislation for Freedom". What is it to be? A Royal Commission? It wouldn't produce anything. A statutory ban on the closed shop? Very desirable, but "it would cause the bitterest sort of fight", and therefore "it would be better to try other things first".

And finally what is proposed is:

1. Checks to ensure that the election of union officials (at every level) is above suspicion;
2. Checks on procedure when union head offices expel members;
3. Opening the door to greater competition between unions, so that workers can join any union they like.

The election of union officials at every level is in fact governed by the rules of the organisation, which have been adopted democratically by the membership. So is the procedure in connection with the expulsion of members. The essence of the proposals made by *The Economist* is that the trade unions should be put under the control of some Government official—the Chief Registrar of Friendly Societies is suggested. It is, however, quite certain that the trade unions will have nothing whatever to do with such proposals, which would substitute State control for control by the membership.

*The Economist's* proposals represent simply one more pious wish on the part of the capitalist class that trade unions should not be independent class bodies, acting in the interest of their members and controlled by their members. They want workers to have “freedom” from union discipline, even from having to join a union; they want, in a word, to weaken trade unionism.

But the trade union movement has not the slightest intention of allowing anything of the kind. On the contrary, it will strengthen itself against all the so-called “individualists”, and it

will look after its own affairs, without help from the employers and their scribes.

It is significant that the writer in *The Economist*, along with other supporters of the Tory Government, came out with this attack on the trade union movement. They fear and dread the power of this powerful working class organisation which was built to fight the boss and to defend living standards. They know full well that if the power and strength of this movement is used in the right direction their policy of wage freeze and unemployment can be defeated. The first battle is beginning to develop around the Busmen's claim for increased wages and the whole trade union movement should rally behind the Busmen or any other section of the trade union movement which is engaged in the struggle to defend and improve living standards. Never was it more necessary for the Trade Union movement to stand united, and if the forces are mobilised in this situation the Tory Government can be compelled to change its policy, and failing that it can be driven out of office as demonstrated in the by-elections taking place in the country.

The enemies of Trade Unionism are using the Press and the political machine to influence the industrial field, and in this situation the trade union movement should not hesitate to use its industrial strength to influence the political situation so as to secure higher wages, full employment and a general higher standard of living for the millions of Trade Unionists who are the real producers of wealth in this country.

## History and 'The Dark Satanic Mills'

*Eric Hobsbawm*

FOR most of the past hundred and fifty years the debate on what social conditions were like under early industrial capitalism has been pretty one-sided. The majority of the British people in the first half of the 19th century was convinced that the coming of industrial capitalism had brought them appalling hardships, that they had entered a bleak and iron age. So was the majority of the skilled and educated observers. The economists assumed that the condition of the labouring poor must be rather miserable: much of their theory was designed to show why this was inevitable. (After all, consider the notorious

population theory of Robert Malthus, to the effect that population must grow faster than the means of subsistence, so that the poor must in practice be on the verge of subsistence or famine. Nobody applies this theory to Britain in 1958, for the simple reason that the British working class is obviously not on the verge of famine. On the other hand such theories *are* applied, even today, to countries like India, where the bulk of the population is desperately poor. Theories explaining, rightly or wrongly, why semi-starvation is inevitable only look plausible, even to those who construct them, when there