

# Trade unions and the industrial revolution

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



Trade Unions had struggled to achieve the freedom to exist in the early stages of the industrial revolution. Provide a critical account of their early developments, noting some of the major changes in their formation and character. A trade union can be described as an organization of workers who have banded together to achieve common goals in key areas and working conditions.

They were established around the early eighteenth century and membership was low and most were from within crafting industries but as the success of trade unions became apparent, workers in other industries began to see the benefits of unions to allow them to go from strength to strength and establish themselves in a wider variety of sectors. However, up until the late eighteenth century trade unions were mainly illegal, "unions were forbidden by special statutes, and they could be proceeded against at common law, for 'conspiracy in restraint of trade'." (Derry and Jarman, XXXX, p. 41). Since then, membership levels, mergers, formations, dissolutions and breakaways, have all had an impact resulting in changes in union formation and character, these can be seen largely through the parliamentary acts that have been passed in relation to it. By examining the various historic triumphs of workers over their employers such as the Match-girls and the London Dockers, it is possible to establish the changes in formation and character and how trade unions managed to pull through the industrial revolution to become such an influential part of society today.

One of the first notable changes was an increase in membership levels because as the employment sector grew with the industrial revolution, workers began to see the opportunities available to them, to improve the

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quality of their working life by joining trade unions and thus made the effort to form specialized organisations that would protect their interest against exploitive employers.

However, in 1799 and 1800 William Pitt, the Prime Minister, passed Combination Laws which made it illegal for workers to join together to pressure their employers for shorter hours and more pay or prevent employers from choosing whom they wish to employ selectively. This made it increasingly difficult for trade unions to even form and as a result they were effectively made illegal. One could say that towards the end of the eighteenth century, tat the journeymen's societies had developed into trade unions.

The Combinations Acts were used infrequently and combinations continued to spread across a variety of occupations and the Acts were repealed in 1824, however, this was followed by an outbreak of strikes and as a result the 1825 Combination Act was passed which again imposed limitations on the right to strike. As a result of this, trade unions were forced to use debate and other more cerebral methods to achieve their goals rather than immediately resorting to violent strikes.

Another notable change in formation amongst trade unions became apparent in 1834 when there was an attempt to establish a Grand National Consolidated Trades' Union bringing together all the unions but it never attracted general support. From 1830 onwards, attempts were made to set up national general unions to try and widen the movement and increase awareness and involvement, most notably Robert Owen's Grand National

Consolidated Trades Union (GNCTU) in 1834, which gained 250, 000 members.

Unfortunately it collapsed due to internal strife and lack of funds. Around the same time there was the case of the Tolpuddle Martyrs from one of the GNCTU's sub divisions, the Friendly Society of Agricultural Labourers who were sentenced to seven years transportation but a campaign launched for their release had their sentence remitted in 1836. This was the first of its kind and now people were beginning to see a real change and workers interests were being represented more in society and now a large majority of employees belonged to trade unions.

More permanent trade unions were established from the 1850s, based on “ new aims and a better organization for the new Unions of better-paid workers. ” (Derry and Jarman, XXXX, p. 146). In 1851 the Amalgamated Society of Engineers was formed after sever local and sectional engineering unions merged together (Blackboard, 2008). This society formed a new organisation of trade unionism which was followed by Carpenters and Joiners and other trade unions. These unions were “ respected by employers because they handmoneyin the bank and prudence as their first principle”.

They had a cautious industrial policy and used strikes as a last resort. (Derry and Jarman, XXXX, p. 146). The new Liberal government headed by William Gladstone saw The Trade Union Congress campaigning for the Minority Report, the campaign was successful and the 1871 Trade Union Act was based largely on the Minority Report. This act secured the legal status of trade unions. As a result of this legislation no trade union could be regarded

as criminal because "in restraint of trade"; trade union funds were protected.

Although trade unions were pleased with this act, they were less happy with the Criminal Law Amendment Act passed the same day that made picketing illegal. Trade unions also went through many amalgamations and legal changes, for example, until 1850, unions had been involved primarily in local affairs (with the exception of the miners) but from the middle of the century, the growth of railways meant that communications were easier and amalgamations began to take place.

The engineering industry was in the lead and the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE) was established in 1850. It modelled itself on the friendly society, providing unemployment, sickness and disablement benefits and a funeral allowance. Certain other merging unions - for example in woodworking and tailoring - followed the ASE's model but others kept their friendly society and trade sections separate. And many local societies remained; even the national unions still gave much autonomy to branches and districts and there was a constant danger of breakaways.

The model was still predominantly about the protection of craft status, with the aim of limiting entry and even when technological change took place, of preserving jobs for their members and although women were entering the labour market in increasing numbers, there was hostility to women penetrating new areas of work and unions were exclusively male. Alongside the growth of national unions came the development of trades councils from around 1858 in major towns and cities. Bringing together unions locally, their

aim was to co-ordinate support in disputes and to help create a climate of opinion more favourable to the unions.

In 1868, the Manchester and Salford Trades Council called what is usually taken as the first meeting of what was to become the Trades Union Congress (TUC), an annual meeting to encourage collaboration between unions and put pressure on the government. By the 1870s, the TUC had a full-time general secretary and by 1895 representation at the TUC was restricted to unions, and trades councils were excluded altogether to avoid dual representation. The TUC's Parliamentary Committee took a growing role in representing the union view to government.

Industrial disputes continued, unsurprising at a time of rapid change when new working practices and technologies were being introduced. The major strikes were almost always about how work should be carried out and who could be employed on particular tasks; entry and preservation of craft status (which implied having served an apprenticeship) remained predominant aims. Most strikes began as unofficial affairs, later ratified by a sometimes reluctant national leadership; this feature was still evident a century later.

But most union leaders had an interest in stability; apart from other considerations, strikes were a threat to their funds, and unions have never been well-funded. From the late eighteenth century, trade unions began to grow steadily, by the beginning of the 1880s, the number of trade unionists has been estimated at around three-quarters of a million, most in skilled trades although the majority of the workforce was unskilled. In the 1880s, led by seamen, dockers and gas workers who held notably successful strikes,

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serious organisation of the unskilled and semi-skilled began. Women too formed separate trade unions.

The predominant ideology behind the craft unions had been Non-Conformism and self-help. During the period of the growth of new unions, socialism began to play a part and many young activists were inspired by it. But the climate tended towards the anarchic: these so-called 'new unions' competed with each other, often with intense inter-union rivalry. This was not confined to the new unions: new processes were blurring traditional patterns of working, and in engineering and shipbuilding there were demarcation disputes between the craft unions, refusals to support semi-skilled workmates in disputes, and even industrial action against them.

There were growing demands for closed shops, in which only union members could be permitted to be employed, and blacklisting of employers not recognising unions increased. The result was a spate of legal actions in the 1890s, culminating in the Taff Vale Judgment of 1901 which held that trade unions could be held liable for wrongful acts committed by their officials. A further judgment, *Quinn v Leatham*, ruled that a strike could be regarded as a conspiracy to injure, and once again unions could be held liable for the damages.

These judgments had the further effect of making the leadership of unions realise that a voice in Parliament was needed to protect their funds, and by 1904 over half the unions affiliated to the TUC were also affiliated to the Labour Representation Committee, the forerunner of the Labour Party. Legal developments aside, from the 1880s and up to the First World War, unions

were increasingly recognised as having a legitimate place in society.

Governments generally wanted social stability, which meant seeking to reinforce moderate union leaders against more militant elements.

Many employers had concluded that seeking to exclude unions would be counter-productive, and employers' associations like the Engineering Employers' Federation developed to deal with unions and to provide assistance to their members in national and local bargaining. (Some employers, like those on the railways, did resist however and it is probably no coincidence that both the Taff Vale and Osborne Judgments involved railway companies. ) The terms " industrial relations" and " collective bargaining" entered the language, although it is difficult to say precisely when.

Amalgamations of unions continued and membership grew rapidly: there were 4. 1 million trade unionists in 1914, as against 1. 5 million in 1894. By the 1860s the main industrial towns and cities of Britain were establishing many small Trade Councils. In 1886 trade unionists in Sheffield were accused of using arson and murder to intimidate non-unionists and this spurred the 34 leaders of these Councils to meet together in Manchester to consider forming a single large organisation that would provide a united voice in the defence of all Trade Unions and hence the Trade Union Congress (TUC) came to be.

It was agreed an annual meeting would be held to discuss issues of importance to the labour movement. The legal status of trade unions in the United Kingdom was established by a Royal Commission in 1867, which



agreed that the establishment of the organizations was to the advantage of both employers and employees. Unions were legalized in 1871. In 1871 Trade Unions were no longer considered to be unlawful and full legal protection was given to union funds and the year when the Criminal Law Amendment Act was passed which prohibited picketing and placed restrictions on the right to strike.

Anybody who sought representation or felt they were subjected to poor working conditions, now knew where to go and who to go to. The Bryant & May dispute was the first strike by unorganized workers to gain national publicity with 1400 women at Bryant and May going on strike, gaining support from many significant people in society. It was also successful as it helped inspire the formation of unions all over the country. However it is important not to over exaggerate the success of trade unions as by 1888 only 5% of the labour force were members of trade unions.

Another turning point in history for trade unionism was the London Dockers Strike, where workers wanted better pay and shorter working hours and even gained financial support from trade unions in Australia which led them to a victory over their employers. Over the next few years a large number of unskilled workers joined trade unions. Between 1892 and 1899 membership of trade unions increased from 1, 500, 000 to over 2, 000, 000 as explained by McArthy (XXXX) Throughout the century, trade unionism went through many significant changes that widened its membership and allowed the movement to flourish.

It is because of these changes and development within individual movements that more and more of society's needs were being represented via trade unions. It was difficult though for unions to be largely representative at any one given point though due to big political movements that were also going on at the time and also because there still wasn't quite the feeling of collectiveness amongst workers and unions weren't largely representative of the majority of society until workers began to realise that grouping together against tyrannical employers could lead to change.

For the most part, people have belonged to trade unions because they offer protection - in the early days to provide help in the absence of a welfare state, and then to counteract the greater economic strength of employers, to provide legal and other support to members who believe they suffer injustices, and to campaign for reform. They are products of their times, and like other institutions reflect the political and social atmosphere of their day, as well as their own histories. No doubt this will continue to be so in the future.