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*Labor Unrest in England, 1910-1914*

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I

DURING the last four years before the outbreak of war in 1914 the people of England experienced an unprecedented combination of political strife and labor unrest. The struggle over the budget of 1909 had led to a constitutional crisis over the powers of the House of Lords in 1910-1911; suffragettes were resorting to obstructive and exasperating tactics to win the vote for women; the question of home rule almost resulted in civil war in North Ireland and brought what amounted to a threat of dereliction of duty by high military officers, who could not contemplate the use of force against the opponents of home rule; while the restlessness of labor brought a series of massive strikes in which the rank and file of workers often broke from the discipline of their leaders. After the Taff Vale judgment of the House of Lords in 1901, organized labor had shown an increased faith in political action; now the emphasis was on direct pressure on the employers as a means of improving the position of labor—although it was necessary to work through Parliament to nullify the effect of the Osborne Judgment of 1909. It can never be known what solution might have been made of the threatening labor situation of the period had not hostilities begun in Europe in the summer of 1914.

Available statistics point to a significant increase in the incidence of strikes in the period under discussion. In 1911, 9 per cent of the total industrial population was involved in strikes of various length, as compared with 2.6 per cent for 1902, 1.4 per cent for 1907, and an average of 2.9 per cent for the period 1902-1911. The number of persons directly involved in strikes beginning in 1912 was 1,233,116 as compared with 67,653 in 1905 and 223,969 in 1908. Figures of the aggregate duration of strikes in working days show a significant increase in 1910-1914 over the average of the years 1902-1909. Comparable figures of the incidence of strikes may be found for the years 1893, 1894, 1919-1921, and 1926, the last being unusual because of the General Strike.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> "Report on Strikes and Lockouts and on Conciliation and Arbitration Boards in the United Kingdom in 1911. With Comparative Statistics for 1902-1910," *Parl. Pap.*, 1912-13, XLVII, cd. 6472, *passim*; *Parl. Pap.*, 1914-16, XXXVI, cd. 7658, xvi; "Settlement of Industrial Disputes in Great Britain," *Monthly Labor Review*, XLVII (July 1938), 39-51; John Hilton, "Strikes and Lockouts," *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1950), XXI, 467-72.

The most obvious explanation of the increased number of strikes during the period may be found in general business trends. In periods of declining business activity or depression there is relatively little use in striking for increased wages; it is in periods of rising prosperity that gains are to be had. From the beginning of the Liberal administration in 1905-1906 the peaks of business activity were 1907 and 1913 and the low points were 1908 and 1914. Money wages showed some correlation with these trends—falling in 1908-1909 from the levels of 1907 and rising in 1910. Unemployment was relatively high in 1908 and in most of 1909 but fell thereafter. It may be expected, therefore, that the number of strikes would have increased from 1910 without the necessary operation of other factors.<sup>2</sup> Once the strike movement got under way, labor leaders made much of the point that since the turn of the century wages had failed to rise proportionately with prices and the worker was therefore losing in purchasing power. These strictures eventually received definite support from official reports, one of which stated that retail prices in London had risen from an index of 100 in 1900 to 109.4 in 1909 and to 114.5 in 1912 and that the mean increase in the cost of fourteen essential items in eighty-eight towns from 1905 to 1912 was 13.7 per cent. In none of these towns did the wages of skilled workers in the building trades rise more than 8 per cent during the same period.<sup>3</sup>

While the increase in the number of strikes from 1910 onward may be explained as a response to economic conditions, other forces were operating. There is evidence that large numbers of workers were losing faith in the political method of making gains for labor. There was a feeling that members of the Parliamentary Labour party were losing their fervor and were being too successfully introduced to the refinements of the House of Commons. The legislation of the Liberal government seemed to produce little direct benefit to the mass of workers and was in any case restricted in scope before the end of the year 1910. The constitutional struggle of 1910-1911 aroused very little interest among laborers. The dissatisfaction with the political approach was related to impatience with established trade-union leaders, who had become preoccupied with Parliamentary matters and failed to give to the

<sup>2</sup> W. W. Rostow, *British Economy in the Nineteenth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1948), p. 33, Table II; *Parl. Pap.*, 1911, LXXXIX, cd. 5849, 3, 9, 30-31.

<sup>3</sup> *Parl. Pap.*, 1913, LXVI, cd. 6955, xxxix-lix, *passim*, and 110-11; W. Cunningham, *The Causes of the Labour Unrest and the Remedies for It* (London: John Murray, 1912), pp. 8-9; *Parl. Deb.*, 5th Ser., XXXIV, cols. 82-83, February 15, 1912; J. E. Barker, "The Labour Unrest and Its Meaning," *Nineteenth Century*, LXX (September 1911), 441-60; "The Claims of Labour," *Nation* (London), August 12, 1911, pp. 698-99.

workers the aggressive leadership that they were coming to desire.<sup>4</sup>

Some have seen in the plethora of strikes in England from 1910 onward the impact of syndicalist ideas coming from France and elsewhere and propagated by Tom Mann and other leaders.<sup>5</sup> There is no doubt that a considerable number of people were attracted to syndicalism as a means of escaping from what seemed to them the sterile leadership of trade-union officials, with their predilection for conservative tactics and for making gains through political action. The formation of the Manchester Syndicalist Education League and the Central Labour College, London, provided means for disseminating syndicalist ideas among intellectuals, trade-union leaders, and workers. The extent of the influence of syndicalism in England during the years 1910-1914 depends on the meaning that we give to the term. If we refer to the fully developed Continental doctrine—industrial unionism, sympathetic and national strikes characterized by violence and sabotage and leading to the destruction of capitalistic power, and the operation of industry by *syndicats* of workers—then syndicalism had little influence in England. If, on the other hand, syndicalism is taken to mean industrial unionism, vigorous sympathetic and national strikes, the attempt to make related union contracts terminate on the same day, and a general dislike of conservative trade-union leadership and political methods—then it may be said to have had considerable influence. But these methods and attitudes are not essentially theoretical and do not necessarily imply an organized view of industrial society and could be acceptable to men who were seeking more effective means of improving their condition. An approach that stressed vigorous methods would have more appeal to the rank and file of English workers than one based on theoretical considerations. We may properly accept the view of an editorial writer in the *Nation*: “. . . it would be a mistake to suppose that any serious proportion of the methods and motives which entered into the [French] railway strike of last autumn are in the heads of [English labor] leaders today.”<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> “Unrest and Its Cure,” *Nation* (London), August 19, 1911, pp. 729-31; “The Claims of Labour,” *Ibid.*, August 12, 1911, pp. 698-99; George R. Askwith, *Industrial Problems and Disputes* (London: John Murray, 1920), p. 177; Fred Henderson, *The Labour Unrest—What It Is and What It Portends* (London: Jarrold and Sons [1912]), pp. 119-48; Snowden of Ickornshaw, Philip Snowden, 1st Viscount, *Autobiography* (2 vols.; London: Ivor Nicholson, 1937), I, 124-25, 127-28.

<sup>5</sup> Élie Halévy, *A History of the English People in the Nineteenth Century* (6 vols.; London: Benn, 1952), VI, 450-59; G. D. H. Cole and Raymond Postgate, *The British Common People, 1746-1938* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1939), pp. 429-34.

<sup>6</sup> *Nation* (London), August 19, 1911, pp. 729-31.

Other explanations of the serious number of strikes were given by various writers: English education was defective in that it gave to future workers a false notion of what they might expect from life and, in addition, failed to teach a sense of duty to the state; the strikes were an evidence of a decline in morality among workmen; strikes were caused by agitators who led workers to do things they would not otherwise have done; the new laws on social security taught workers to believe that the state would take care of them; the liberality of the Trade Disputes Act of 1906 encouraged trade-unionists to be more reckless than they formerly had been. It was even suggested that workers were striking because they were convinced that wages would go down when the National Insurance Bill (1911) became law. There may be an element of truth in these statements, but they give little help in explaining the great increase in the number of strikes from 1910 to 1914.<sup>7</sup>

## II

Before proceeding to a discussion of the principal labor disputes in England in the period under consideration it will be necessary to describe the state of the law governing strikes and the available means of settling them. When the Liberal party came to power in 1905-1906 it was politically obligated to liberalize trade-union law to nullify the effect of the Taff Vale judgment of the House of Lords in 1901. In the Trade Disputes Act of 1906 the government (under heavy pressure from Labour members) gave to workers and the unions a greater freedom before the law than they had ever had before. An act committed by two or more persons in furtherance of a trade dispute was not to become the basis of a civil action unless an action could be brought if the act had been committed by one person. The right to picket was liberalized by a provision permitting persons engaging in a trade dispute to attend at or near a house or place of business to persuade other persons not to work, as well as merely to get or give information. An act in furtherance of a trade dispute could not become the basis of a civil action merely on the ground that it induced another person to break a contract of employment or that it was an interference with the trade or employ-

<sup>7</sup> W. H. Mallock, "Labour Unrest as a Subject of Official Investigation," *Nineteenth Century*, LXXI (June 1912), 1029-45; Sir Arthur Clay, "Public Opinion and Industrial Unrest," *Nineteenth Century*, LXX (December 1911), 1005-21; *Pall Mall Gazette*, August 15, 1911, p. 7; letter from "Employer," *Pall Mall Gazette*, August 14, 1911, p. 7.

ment of another person or with the right of a person to dispose of his labor or capital as he wished. Trade-unions were not to be sued for tortious acts that had been committed by them or on their behalf. Any form of violence in a trade dispute was still illegal and could be punished at law. The Trade Disputes Act of 1906 provided the general legal framework in which strikes could be conducted in future, but it could not directly cause an increase or decrease in the number of strikes and provided no means of settling them.<sup>8</sup>

A number of means were at hand for dealing with differences between employers and employees. Direct negotiations could be used either before or during a strike, a method that could be supplemented by the development of boards of conciliation and arbitration. In 1896 the Conservative government had passed an act to encourage the creation and registration of voluntary boards of conciliation and arbitration and to enable the government to intervene in a variety of disputes with a view to settlement. The Board of Trade developed a conciliation system by which it could answer the request of either or both parties for a trained conciliator to aid in the settlement of disputes. Finding that the use of a single arbitrator had not proved to be satisfactory, the Board of Trade in 1908 supplemented the system by creating three panels of persons qualified for membership in courts of arbitration. From these panels the parties to a dispute (or the Board of Trade) could choose an *ad hoc* court of three or five members representing employers and employees and presided over by an independent chairman. The emphasis in this system of conciliation and arbitration was on voluntary action rather than on compulsion.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these moves of the government to set up machinery for the settlement of disputes, most strikes were settled by direct negotiation between the parties concerned. Between 1896 and 1913 direct negotiation was used more than conciliation and arbitration, and conciliation was used more than arbitration. Of the 949 disputes settled by the latter methods, 739 were dealt with by voluntary boards or similar agencies and only 210 directly under the Conciliation Act of 1896. This was quite in harmony with the spirit of the act, which was intended to encourage the creation of voluntary means of settling disputes. Government was

<sup>8</sup> H. R. Seager, "Legal Status of Trade Unionism in the United Kingdom . . .," *Political Science Quarterly*, XXII (December 1907), 611-29.

<sup>9</sup> Harry A. Millis and Royal E. Montgomery, *The Economics of Labor* (3 vols.; New York and London: McGraw-Hill, 1938-45), III, 776-77; Ducksoo Chang, *British Methods of Industrial Peace; a Study of Democracy in Relation to Labor Disputes* (*Studies in History, Economics and Public Law*, No. 425) (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), pp. 47-52; *Parl. Pap.*, 1910, XXI, No. 5, 6.

not to be considered the primary agency in the prevention of industrial strife. If a strike of unusual proportions developed and seemed to endanger the whole national life, cabinet ministers could make attempts at settlement or recourse could be had to Parliament for a settlement by legislation.<sup>10</sup>

### III

The new spirit in English labor was illustrated in July 1910, when the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union issued a circular to shipowners suggesting the desirability of forming a national conciliation board for settling outstanding differences about wages, hours, and conditions of labor. The Shipping Federation, representing the owners, refused to discuss these questions with the union, which then made plans for a stoppage of work. In 1910 the National Transport Workers' Federation had been formed by existing unions, and its first conference was held on June 1, 1911, at Liverpool, with Ben Tillett as secretary. The beginning of the seamen's strike in June 1911 thus set up a reaction in which dock workers of various types joined to present their demands and to give support to the seamen as well.<sup>11</sup> The two groups of strikes thus became inextricably associated, but it was the latter that caused the most trouble and gained the most publicity, largely because of the greater numbers of men involved and the obvious connection between dock work and the provision of food, fuel, and power for the large urban centers.

The group of strikes usually referred to as the London Dockers' Strike of 1911 was of unusual complexity. Since the famous dockers' strike of 1889 the basic wage had been 6*d.* an hour, with 8*d.* for overtime, but no increases had been granted despite changes in the level of retail prices during this period. Workers were hired within the premises of each employer, and there was usually a large number of casual workers for whom employment was very irregular. The union leaders were convinced that mechanization of dock work since 1889 had reduced the number of available jobs. The Port of London Authority had been created in 1909 and had become the principal though not the sole employer of dock labor. On the north side of the Thames River dock

<sup>10</sup> Millis and Montgomery, *Economics of Labor*, III, 778; Chang, *British Methods of Industrial Peace*, pp. 57-59; *Parl. Pap.*, 1914, XLVIII, cd. 7089, xli-xlii.

<sup>11</sup> *Parl. Pap.*, 1912-13, XLVI, cd. 6472, 21; Ben Tillett, *History of the London Transport Workers' Strike, 1911* (London: National Transport Workers' Federation [1912]), pp. 1-3.

area the workers had been divided into three classes: the "permanent laborers," with pension rights and sick pay; the "registered laborers," with the same pay and hours but with no pension rights; and the "preference laborers," who were actually casual workers who had the first chance to work after the first two classes had been cared for. This system had not been introduced on the south (Surrey) side of the river. The three principal unions catering to the various kinds of workers had formed the National Transport Workers' Federation and in June 1911 presented a program for increases in wages and improvement in hours and conditions of labor, including the request that workers be hired "at recognized places outside, and free from dock, wharf, quay, or warehouse premises." It was hoped that under such an arrangement only union men would be hired. The Port of London Authority agreed to discuss the program, and a settlement was made on July 27 that is commonly known as the Devonport Agreement.<sup>12</sup>

Under the agreement the basic pay of dock workers was increased from 6*d.* to 7*d.* per hour; overtime rates were increased by 1*d.* per hour; double pay was to be given for Sundays and legal holidays; no man was to be paid off with less than four hours of work; and the "times of call" for ordinary cargoes were fixed. The question of whether men working for shipowners or contractors for 7*d.* per hour should receive similar increases in basic pay was to be submitted to arbitration. Under the Rollit Award of August 5 it was decided that they should.<sup>13</sup>

When the Devonport Agreement was presented to a mass meeting in the East End of London (before the Rollit Award had been made), the union executives were amazed to find that it was not satisfactory to the rank and file of workers, who believed that they could get more by striking and did not seem to realize the significance of the imminent submission of certain questions to arbitration. The spirit of the mass of port workers was much more aggressive than that of their leaders and brought about a repudiation of the agreement. The strike of workers employed by the Port Authority spread and became, in effect, a strike of practically all workers in the London dock area. When the Rollit Award was announced at a mass meeting at Trafalgar Square on August 7, Ben Tillett reminded the men that by the constitution of the Transport Workers' Federation no group was to go back to work until

<sup>12</sup> Viscount Devonport, *The Traveled Road—Some Memories of a Busy Life* (Rochester, [England]: Privately printed, 1935), pp. 165-68; Tillett, *London Transport Workers' Strike, 1911*, pp. 1-3, 7-13. Hudson Eubanke Kearly had become Viscount Devonport in June 1911.

<sup>13</sup> *Parl. Pap.*, 1912-13, XLVII, cd. 6472, 151-52.

all groups were satisfied, and the strike thus continued. Considering the large number of men involved, the amount of violence was small. On August 8 a number of strikers stopped vans that were being driven by nonstrikers and in some cases forced the drivers to take their horses out of harness. When the workers who transported meat from cold storage depots to the Smithfield Market went out on strike, some of the salesmen at the market decided to do the work themselves. The strikers became enraged and overturned a number of vans, and it became necessary for the police to interfere and escort some of the vans to Smithfield. A number of men were arrested, and the conduct of the police became a subject of debate in the House of Commons.<sup>14</sup>

The seriousness of the combined strikes, threatening as they did the food and fuel supplies of the metropolis, posed the inevitable question of the use of the military forces. There were demands that troops should be used to unload ships at the docks to prevent the spoiling of perishable goods. Orders were given to the military forces at Aldershot, Woolwich, and other places to be ready for a call to London, but the order for their actual dispatch was not given. Calmer counsels prevailed, and the processes of conciliation were allowed to continue, in which George R. Askwith of the Board of Trade and certain cabinet ministers were able to bring about settlements of the various disputes. The Devonport Agreement was reaffirmed with modifications in favor of the workers, including a provision that labor should be hired outside the premises of docks and other places of work. Union recognition was not granted. Some unions were induced to forgo an immediate settlement because of the complexity of the problems involved.<sup>15</sup> By the end of August work had been fully resumed at the Port of London. The men had not only won an important victory in the various agreements but had learned that they were capable of united action by means that led them beyond the traditional standards of conservative union leadership. Similar gains were made in the dock strikes at other ports in the summer of 1911.

The Transport Workers' Federation and its component unions needed time to consolidate their gains and to strengthen their organiza-

<sup>14</sup> Tillett, *London Transport Workers' Strike, 1911*, pp. 13-18; Devonport, *The Traveled Road*, pp. 169-70; Askwith, *Industrial Problems and Disputes*, pp. 154-55; *Daily Graphic*, August 9, 1911, p. 1; *Daily Express*, August 10, 1911, pp. 1, 5; *Parl. Deb.*, 5th Ser., XXIX, cols. 1972-74, August 16, 1911.

<sup>15</sup> Copies of the various agreements may be found in *Parl. Pap.*, 1912-13, XLVII, cd. 6472, 153-68.



tion generally. But the failure to win formal union recognition rankled, and a strike began in 1912 when a lighterage company hired a nonunion man. The strike spread by sympathetic action until the whole London dock area was affected. The Liberal government tried a number of expedients to settle the strike, but none was effective: an inquiry by a neutral person; a proposal for a more closely knit federation of employers with power to make agreement with workers and then one for a board representing employers and employees to act as an industrial board of appeals to lay penalties for breach of agreements; and meetings between Lord Devonport and the leaders of the strike. But all proved in vain before the stern refusal of Devonport to listen to grievances unless the men first returned to work. On July 27 the Transport Workers' Federation issued a statement that the strike was over and requested that the men return to work. The union leaders had evidently entered a trial of strength with the employers without considering whether they had sufficient strength and solidarity to win.<sup>16</sup> It is not surprising that "a sense of defeat and weariness hung over [the men] for many weeks and months after the summer of 1912. . . ." <sup>17</sup>

Trade- or industrial unionism had developed more slowly among railway workers than among those in most other kinds of employment. Railway transport was semimonopolistic in nature, and there existed among executives a determined opposition to any form of collective bargaining. Toward the end of the nineteenth century there were only some 48,000 union members in a total of 200,000 traffic men employed by the railways of the United Kingdom, and they were divided among a number of "societies." From the point of view of effective unionism, what was needed was an increase in total membership and a means of co-operation among existing unions. In 1903 a federation was adopted by the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants (A.S.R.S.) and the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (A.S.L.E.F.) providing for a joint committee to promote unionization of locomotive men and of the lower grades as well. When the federation broke up in 1906 the A.S.R.S. launched the "all-grades movement" to enroll

<sup>16</sup> *Parl. Pap.*, 1913, XXVIII, cd. 6953, Ques. 366-73, 387, 2024-43; *Parl. Pap.*, 1912-13, LXXXIX, No. 201; *The Times* (London), May-July, 1912, *passim*; Harry Gosling, *Up and Down Stream* (London: Methuen, 1927), pp. 157-59, 163-64, 171-73; Devonport, *The Traveled Road*, pp. 172, 176-84; Askwith, *Industrial Problems and Disputes*, pp. 221-22, 224-30; J. Carter, "The Transport Workers' Strike in London," *Economic Review*, XXII (October 1912), pp. 436-41.

<sup>17</sup> Gosling, *Up and Down Stream*, p. 164.

traffic workers generally and to improve wages and conditions of labor.<sup>18</sup>

The program of the A.S.R.S. was presented to the railway companies in January 1907 with a request that the directors arrange to meet with a deputation of workers. After the request had been twice denied by the companies, the union announced that if the third request were refused the matter would be put into the hands of the executive committee for further action. When the railway executives proved to be adamant the members of the union voted overwhelmingly for a strike to force the adoption of their program (September 1907). Realizing the seriousness of a national railway strike, David Lloyd George succeeded in bringing representatives of both sides to conferences at the Board of Trade, and a system of conciliation and arbitration boards was worked out. Union recognition was not granted and grievances brought before the boards were to be considered as coming from individual employees as such and not from union members. The system was to be in force for six years, after which each side could give twelve months' notice of termination.<sup>19</sup>

Railway workers showed a continuing dissatisfaction with the system of conciliation and arbitration while it was in operation. Union recognition was not granted and workers felt that they were at a disadvantage when appearing before the boards without the aid of a seasoned trade-union man. The points at issue were very technical, and there was no chance to raise general issues. Workers believed that the companies used every opportunity to slow down the proceedings and that they gave improper interpretations to the decisions of the boards. A feeling of frustration developed among railway workers because there was no chance to bring about a change without a breach of the agreement before the end of the six-year period. Dissatisfaction among the rank and file of traffic workers led to the railway strike of 1911.<sup>20</sup>

In early August 1911, the employees of the Lancashire and Yorkshire

<sup>18</sup> Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *Industrial Democracy* (2 vols. in one; London, New York: Longmans, 1902), pp. 46, n. 2, and 353-54; S. and B. Webb, *The History of Trade Unionism* (London, New York: Longmans, 1902), pp. 393, 426, 429; G. D. H. Cole and R. Page Arnot, *Trade Unionism on the Railways* . . . ("Trade Union Series," No. 2) (Westminster: Fabian Research Department, and London: George Allen and Unwin, 1917), p. 39.

<sup>19</sup> *Parl. Pap.*, 1910, XXXI, No. 5, 34-38; Charles Watney and James A. Little, *Industrial Warfare—the Aims and Claims of Capital and Labour* (London: John Murray, 1912), pp. 55-58.

<sup>20</sup> Watney and Little, *Industrial Warfare*, pp. 58-59; G. D. H. Cole, *Short History of the British Working Class Movement, 1787-1947* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1948), pp. 332-33; speech of J. Ramsay MacDonald, *Parl. Deb.*, 5th Ser., XXIX, col. 1953, August 16, 1911.

Railway quit work, alleging that they could not get their grievances dealt with by their conciliation boards. Railway strikes took place in other cities and on August 15 the executive committee of the railway unions gave official support to them with a resolution giving the railway companies twenty-four hours to decide whether they would meet to negotiate a settlement of grievances. If the request were refused there would be "no alternative but to respond to the demand now being made for a stoppage."<sup>21</sup> On the next day Sydney Buxton, along with his most experienced conciliators, met with representatives of the companies and later with the secretaries of the unions. At certain of these sessions the Prime Minister said that the government could not permit a nationwide strike on the railways and was prepared to name a royal commission to investigate the working of the agreement of 1907 and to report on needed changes. The offer of a royal commission was made in a manner that seemed to imply a threat to the union representatives, who, after private discussions, decided not to accept. "Matters were not improved when the prime minister muttered, 'Then your blood be upon your head,' as he left the room, the members at once going off to call out the railwaymen all over the country."<sup>22</sup>

Some 145,000 men took part in the strike and violence was reported at a number of places. On August 18 and 19 the government carried on further negotiations and the trade-union representatives kept in close contact with Labour members of the House of Commons. On August 19 both parties to the dispute agreed to the government's proposal of a royal commission. Work was resumed generally by the twenty-first of August, except on the London and Northeastern Railway, which had a separate system of conciliation, and here there was a brief delay before differences could be ironed out.<sup>23</sup>

The recommendations of the royal commission (October 28) were unsatisfactory to labor and the union executives demanded a renewal of negotiations. The railways refused, and the House of Commons, faced with the prospect of another strike, passed a resolution for fresh negotiations. This time the railways agreed, and a conference was held at the Board of Trade. A new agreement was worked out that gave concessions under which workers' grievances would not only be more

<sup>21</sup> *Parl. Pap.*, 1912-13, XVII, No. 87, 5.

<sup>22</sup> Askwith, *Industrial Problems and Disputes*, pp. 163-64.

<sup>23</sup> *The Railway Times—a Journal of Finance, Construction and Operation*, August 18 and 19, 1911; *Parl. Pap.*, 1912-13, XVII, No. 87, 6.

effectively presented to the conciliation boards but would be dealt with more promptly. Union recognition was again denied.<sup>24</sup>

The new conciliation agreement failed to bring about the kind of satisfaction among workers that had been expected from it. The power of unionism among railway workers was strengthened in 1912-1913 by the formation of the National Union of Railwaymen by the A.S.R.S., the General Railway Workers' Union, and the United Signalmen and Pointsmen—the A.S.L.E.F. and the Railway Clerks' Association preferring not to join the amalgamation. In November 1913 notice was given to bring to an end the conciliation system of 1911, and early in 1914 a program was worked out for trade-union recognition and wage increases for all grades of workers. These forward moves by railway workers, along with the formation of the "Triple Alliance" of the National Union of Railwaymen, the Transport Workers' Federation, and the Miners' Federation of Great Britain presented a potential threat to industrial peace in Great Britain just before the outbreak of the First World War.<sup>25</sup>

## V

We turn now to a consideration of the strike in a part of the South Wales coal field in 1911 and the national coal strike of 1912.

In the fall of 1910 a part of the South Wales coal field was rent by a violent strike of workers at certain mines who refused to accept a wage adjudication that had been made by a conciliation board in the industry. The recent introduction of eight-hour shifts under the Coal Mines Regulation Act of 1908 had resulted in lower production and wages per man. Difficulty also arose over the fixing of wage rates in veins with coal that was difficult to handle. Most of the disputes that developed early in 1910 had been settled by the end of March, but disputes arose at various mines of the Cambrian Coal Combine. By November a large number of men were on strike, and there seemed to be no possibility of settlement. The situation was complicated by the fact that the rank and file of workers were more aggressive than their leaders and had to some extent been influenced by syndicalist doctrines. Further difficulty

<sup>24</sup> Cole, *British Working Class Movement, 1787-1947*, p. 335; Mary Brown Sumner, "Railroad Men and the English Conciliation Boards," *Survey*, XXVII (January 20, 1912), 1618-21; *Parl. Pap.*, 1912-13, XVII, No. 87, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Cole and Arnot, *Trade Unionism on the Railways*, pp. 12-13, 26-30; Cole and Postgate, *The British Common People, 1746-1938*, pp. 440-43.

was created when the mine operators imported nonunion men. This combination of dissatisfaction over wages, the belief in syndicalist ideas by some of the workers, and the importation of strikebreakers resulted in violence. As the situation became more serious, local authorities brought policemen from other places in Wales, and the strikers were further angered because of their belief that the policemen were on the scene to protect the interests of the employers.<sup>26</sup>

In the excitement and anger attendant on the strike, the distinction between peaceful picketing and violent action was forgotten. The men used both persuasion and intimidation on men who wanted to continue work or had been brought in as strikebreakers, forced the gates of certain collieries to stop the engines and mine pumps, and broke the windows of various company properties as well as of private business premises. Since the situation was obviously beyond the control of the local authorities and their limited police forces, a request was made for assistance from the national government.<sup>27</sup>

The violence of the strike in South Wales received ample coverage in the press, and Winston Churchill as Home Secretary was placed in a very difficult situation. Any move that he made would be closely scrutinized by political groups, by representatives of capital and labor, and by the press as well. It was first decided to send detachments of infantry and cavalry to the affected area, but on further consideration orders were sent to stop the infantry at Swindon and the cavalry at Cardiff to await further developments. The local police authorities were informed of the danger involved in the presence of troops, and detachments of Metropolitan Police were sent instead. When it was clear that the situation at the mines was not improving, the soldiers were sent to the strike area but were billeted at points where they would not constitute an incitement to violence. The Metropolitan Police were posted where they could be of the most value to the local authorities in keeping order. At the time of sending the police and military forces, Churchill dispatched a telegram informing the strikers that the government would do its best to see that they received fair treatment and insisting that violence cease at once. He pointed out that troops were being withheld from the actual scene of the strike. All the persons concerned—local authorities, military officers, owners and managers of mines, and trade-union

<sup>26</sup> *Annual Register*, 1909, pp. 154–55; *Annual Register*, 1910, pp. 68, 223–24; *Parl. Pap.*, 1911, XII, No. 96, 3; H. Stanley Jevons, *The British Coal Trade* (London: Kegan Paul, 1915), pp. 489–519.

<sup>27</sup> *Parl. Deb.*, 5th Ser., XX, cols. 10–17, November 15, 1910 and cols. 406–11, November 24, 1910; *Reynold's Newspaper* (London), November 13, 1910, p. 3.

leaders—were informed of the proper function of police and the military in industrial disputes where there was violence or the threat of violence. It was the duty of government to maintain a strict impartiality between employer and employee, and the police and military forces were to be used for the protection of life and property and for the maintenance of public order. Trade-union leaders were instructed in their rights and duties under the Trade Disputes Act of 1906, particularly in regard to picketing.<sup>28</sup> There is no doubt that these explanations were necessary. Frustrated and angry men had obviously committed violence, and policemen had not always distinguished between persons when dealing with crowds or mobs. On the other hand, there were employers who acted on the assumption that police were at their disposal for the protection of company property without regard to other considerations.<sup>29</sup>

Winston Churchill was subjected to close questioning and strong criticism in the House of Commons and elsewhere for his actions in connection with the strike. J. Keir Hardie pointed to a number of cases in which the police had presumably gone too far in dealing with strikers who were engaged in peaceful picketing. In answer, Churchill further explained the process by which local authorities were able to request aid in maintaining order and insisted that the military would be used directly only when the police could not control the situation. Every effort was being made to guarantee the right of peaceful picketing, but that term did not include window-breaking, violent invasion of railway premises, or attacking men on their way to work. If the men had been allowed to have their way, the mines would have been rendered useless for many months to come.<sup>30</sup> *The Times* charged Churchill with failing to understand the need for decisive handling of the situation, adding the caustic comment, "The rosewater of conciliation is all very well in its place, but its place is not in the face of a wild mob drunk with the desire of destruction. . . . It is time for politicians in high place to wake up and understand what is going on. . . . Trade unionism has

<sup>28</sup> *Parl. Pap.*, 1911, LXIV, cd. 5568, gives the day-by-day communications of Churchill, the military officers, and the police authorities in the crisis.

<sup>29</sup> This attitude is illustrated in a statement by the manager of a colliery. In a heated conversation with a Metropolitan police officer he said that the police from London were now sworn constables; that he had made a requisition for their services; and that they were his employees as long as he wished. Local police officers had in the past looked on mine managers as having a kind of authority over them. During the strike, a local police officer informed a military officer that "by the kind permission of Mr. ——— (a mine manager) a certain number of police had been drawn from the mine to the town."—*Parl. Pap.*, 1911, LXIV, cd. 5568, 25-26, 48-49.

<sup>30</sup> *Parl. Deb.*, 5th Ser., XX, cols. 3-30, 262-63, 313-17, 406-16, November 15, 22, and 24, 1910.

undergone a partial breakdown, and its whole future is at stake.”<sup>31</sup> *The Times* disliked what it called Churchill’s “feeble and deprecating” attitude in answering Keir Hardie’s questions in the House of Commons and suggested that his answers had “probably failed to secure him any of the popularity in Labour circles for which he has angled with such obvious assiduity.”<sup>32</sup>

Churchill could hardly have escaped criticism in the South Wales coal strike. If he had precipitantly sent troops to intervene he would have been charged with being an enemy of labor; if he had withheld police or military forces he would have been criticized for indifference to public peace and the protection of property. He steered a middle course between intimidation and laxity and caused each side to be instructed as to its rights and duties. His actions may have avoided a deadly clash between military forces and the disaffected miners. He consistently held to his standards of government action in a violent industrial dispute—the police should protect life, property, and the public peace, and the military should be used only when the police could not cope with the situation. He cannot properly be blamed for violent acts by either strikers or policemen.

Neither violence nor the use of the police could be expected to settle the strike in South Wales. During the protracted negotiations over the dispute, the company directors gave an assurance that the employers would supplement existing wages when an individual worker could not earn a basic wage in the “abnormal places” in the mines. After the offer had been decisively rejected by the men, the owners and the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain agreed (May 15, 1911) that the wage scales of October 1910 should be given a year’s trial, with the assurance of the employers that the men would be given a fair wage when they were working in the “abnormal places.” The miners themselves were obliged under the circumstances to accept these terms, and the dispute was thus terminated at the end of August 1911.<sup>33</sup>

While the coal strike of 1910 was limited to a relatively small area, that of 1912 was national in scope and involved some 850,000 men. The question of the wage to be paid for working in the “abnormal places” concerned miners in all districts and had to be dealt with on a national basis. The demand arose that miners, whether working in the “abnormal places” or not, should receive a minimum that might vary from one

<sup>31</sup> *The Times* (London), November 9, 1910, p. 11, cols. d, e.

<sup>32</sup> *The Times* (London), November 16, 1910, p. 11, cols. e, f.

<sup>33</sup> *Parl. Pap.*, 1912-13, XVII, No. 87, 123-24.

district to another. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain wanted negotiations on a national basis but agreed to district negotiations as a concession to the owners, with the proviso that "national action" would follow unless a satisfactory settlement were reached in every district. After the various negotiations had broken down, a vote of the miners registered an overwhelming approval of the principle of the minimum wage, and a conference of the unions decided on a national strike to begin at the end of February 1912. A definite program of settlement was presented to the employers, including a minimum wage of 5s. a day for men and 2s. for boys. The mine owners said they were willing to pay a fair day's pay for a fair day's work in the "abnormal places" but feared that a general minimum wage would force them to pay an uneconomic wage to old and disabled men and to inefficient workers generally. No direct negotiations on a national scale were begun, and there seemed to be no further means of settlement without government intervention of some sort. Neither employers nor employees were interested in meeting with the recently formed industrial council for a discussion of the issues.<sup>84</sup>

Under these circumstances, and with the day of the strike fast approaching, the Prime Minister invited the representatives of both sides to meet at the Foreign Office on February 22. Discussions were held on various days from then until March 15, the strike having begun meanwhile in the various districts. George R. Askwith had a low opinion of the quality of these discussions, the owners at times showing an inadequate knowledge of the technical wage problems involved and the cabinet ministers lacking constructive ideas to meet the situation. By March 15 it was evident that no solution could be reached, and the Prime Minister announced that a bill would be introduced into Parliament to bring about a statutory basis for settling the strike.<sup>85</sup>

The solution proposed in the bill introduced on March 19 was a statutory minimum wage to be determined in the various districts not by existing conciliation boards but by new boards to be created for the purpose. After an unsuccessful attempt by Labour members to incorporate the minimum of 5s. for men and 2s. for boys, the bill was passed by a comfortable majority. After the passage of the act a majority of the miners voted against returning to work, but the executives of the Miners'

<sup>84</sup> Askwith, *Industrial Problems and Disputes*, pp. 201-9; Cole, *British Working Class Movement, 1787-1947*, pp. 338-40. For a discussion of the Industrial Council, see below, pp. 264-65.

<sup>85</sup> Askwith, *Industrial Problems and Disputes*, pp. 204, 210-14; *Parl. Deb.*, 5th Ser., XXXIV, February-March 1912, *passim*.



Federation of Great Britain on April 6, 1912, ordered a resumption on the technical point that a two-thirds majority against resumption was required.<sup>36</sup>

The act provided for the creation of joint district boards to determine minimum wages that should bear a logical relationship to the general wages being paid in the district concerned. For the protection of the mine owners it was provided that certain workers would not be entitled to the minimum: old, disabled, and infirm persons and workers who failed to comply with accepted rules of efficiency and regularity of attendance. Joint boards were permitted to make distinctions among the various mines in the district so that the agreed minimum would not have to be paid by mines to which it was clearly inapplicable. If changes in the wage structure were made in future by the existing joint conciliation boards, the minimum rates would rise or fall accordingly. When the various district boards under the act had fixed minimum rates, it was found that some workers received more and some less than the 5s. a day that had been demanded by the unions. A careful student of the problems of coal mining in Great Britain later concluded that the act had "proved a great benefit to the miners without putting a heavy burden on the mining industry"—which is more than might have been expected from a law that had been written under the shadow of a great strike.<sup>37</sup>

In the South Wales coal strike of 1910 the attention of the public and the government had been drawn to the violence of the miners and to the means of dealing with it, and the settlement came months after the crisis of November 1910. In 1912 the government had to deal not with violence but with the issues of a national rather than a local strike. After the normal processes of negotiation and conciliation had failed, the government met the situation by passing legislation that provided the means for settlement but not the settlement itself.

## VI

It is not surprising to find that the large number of major strikes, such as those described above, led to demands for amendment of the Trade Disputes Act of 1906. The Liverpool magistrates adopted a report recommending that picketing be rigorously suppressed or that pickets in a strike be limited to two in number and be required to wear a dis-

<sup>36</sup> Askwith, *Industrial Problems and Disputes*, pp. 215-17.

<sup>37</sup> Jevons, *The British Coal Trade*, pp. 571-600.

tinctive badge; trade-unions should be subjected to the "ordinary law of the land" and be made legally responsible for their acts. When a number of trade-unions paralyzed industry and the food supply, they "should be suppressed as unlawful combinations and immediately so proclaimed." These recommendations were embodied in a memorial by the Employers' Parliamentary Council and forwarded to the Prime Minister. The employers evidently feared that a continuation of labor unrest would eventually result in a general strike: ". . . the federation of the labour unions of the United Kingdom into one gigantic body having for its object the organisation of strikes on a national scale is a conspiracy against private freedom, industrial peace, and national well-being, with which no country governed by just laws should be menaced." The Prime Minister was not sufficiently impressed with the memorial to name a commission to study the problems involved.<sup>38</sup> Conservative members of Parliament, however, took up the cudgels on behalf of the employers. Lord Robert Cecil introduced a bill that would have taken from labor some of the rights and privileges gained in the Trade Disputes Act of 1906—freedom of trade-unions from civil actions, freedom to induce others to break contracts of employment, and the right of peaceful picketing. One clause of the bill limited the number of pickets to two at any one place of employment and required them to wear a distinctive badge. Other Conservative members offered similar amendments to the current bill to free trade-unions from the effects of the Osborne Judgment of 1909. The bill and the amendments had no chance of passage in a Parliament controlled by the Liberal party and its allies. It would require a still more serious labor situation to make possible a successful move to amend the Trade Disputes Act of 1906.<sup>39</sup>

## VII

To what extent did the Liberal government of the years under consideration feel that it was responsible for the number and magnitude of strikes? Did it have a formal policy to prevent strikes and generally to improve the relations between capital and labor? Most of the members of the cabinet were men of middle or upper class origin, endowed with a high sense of honor and justice. They had reason to expect a moderate number of trade disputes but were not prepared to face the un-

<sup>38</sup> Trades Union Congress, *Forty-fifth Annual Report, 1912* (hereafter *T.U.C.*), pp. 90-93.

<sup>39</sup> *T.U.C.*, 1913, pp. 149-50, 152-53.

precedented outbreak of strikes in the years before the First World War. While convinced that government should assume a more protective role in economic and social matters than had formerly been the case, their actions showed a belief that the function of government in industrial relations was that of "holding the ring." Disputes should be settled if possible by negotiation between employers and employees, failing which recourse should be had to some form of conciliation or arbitration. If a strike broke out, it should be conducted within the provisions of existing trade-union law. If there were violence or the threat of violence in a trade dispute, local authorities should deal with the situation as long as they could with the aid of police; if matters got out of hand they could request aid from the national government, in which case the police and military forces should be used with the greatest discretion and tact. If a strike became so serious as to paralyze the whole nation or an important part of the economy, cabinet ministers might aid in the process of negotiation or conciliation; if these methods failed, a bill might be introduced in Parliament to deal with the situation.

These policies of the Liberal government were not specifically directed toward the prevention of strikes or the regularization of relations between employers and employees. After the settlement of the London dock strike of 1911, however, the government created the Industrial Council to supplement existing means of preventing and settling disputes. Composed of twenty-six persons equally divided between representatives of industry and labor, it was to deal with industrial disputes referred to it either by the government or the parties concerned. The parties to a dispute could agree to accept the decision of the Council or merely to receive it and act according to their interests. The government or the Board of Trade could submit other matters apart from particular disputes merely to get the opinion of the Council. It was hoped that the new body would eventually develop into a "parliament of industry" for the prevention and settlement of disputes and the improvement of labor relations generally.<sup>40</sup>

In 1913 the Industrial Council published a full report of a plan to regularize labor relations by means of formal agreements between organized groups of employers and employees. When an industrial agreement had been made and accepted the parties could submit it to the Board of Trade, which would advertise it and hold an inquiry. When the Board of Trade found that the agreement had been accepted by a "substantial

<sup>40</sup> *Parl. Pap.*, 1912-13, XVII, No. 87, pp. 114-20; *T.U.C.*, 1912, pp. 128-32; Chang, *British Methods of Industrial Peace*, pp. 54-56.

body" of employers and employees in a given industry or district, it could declare the agreement in force. A satisfactory agreement was to contain provisions for a waiting period for announced changes in wages or conditions of labor by the employer and for stoppage of work by the employees. The Industrial Council was opposed to the use of monetary guarantees or sanctions for the enforcement of industrial agreements, preferring instead to depend on moral influence and the disciplinary powers of employers' organizations and trade unions.<sup>41</sup>

The labor members of the Industrial Council favored the proposal for industrial agreements and were even willing to make them legally enforceable. Resolutions in this sense were presented to the Trades Union Congress in 1912 and 1913, but each time they were overwhelmingly defeated. A majority of the members wanted to continue with existing methods of industrial relations, including the unfettered right to strike. There was a fear that employers might break the spirit of the agreements while holding to the letter and might even set up "scab" unions and then make agreements with them, and the thought of bringing trade-union agreements and problems to magistrates' courts was distasteful.<sup>42</sup>

If the success of the Industrial Council was to be dependent on general trade-union support of agreements by industry or by district—whether enforceable by legal means or not—then the outlook was not bright. The Council was too large and the individual members lacked the necessary experience and impartiality to serve effectively in the settlement of specific disputes. Without offering further explanation, the government shelved the report and allowed the Industrial Council to die by quietly omitting to make new appointments or to provide money for future operations. The attempt of the Liberal government to provide machinery for the prevention and settlement of industrial disputes had failed for lack of support. The report of the Industrial Council was postponed for future consideration.

## VIII

While the number of workers on strike in 1913 and 1914 was less than in 1912 the general labor situation was one of restlessness. In 1913 and 1914 a series of violent strikes in Ireland, led by James Larkin and James Connolly, served to point up the differences between Irish and

<sup>41</sup> *Parl. Pap.*, 1913, XXVIII, cd. 6952.

<sup>42</sup> *T.U.C.*, 1912, pp. 97-98 and 239-42; *T.U.C.*, 1913, pp. 223-24, 239-44.

English labor leadership. In England, meanwhile, considerable interest had been shown in the amalgamation of existing unions and in making related labor contracts terminate on the same day, so that the pressure of a number of unions could force the employers to terms—resolutions in this sense being passed by the Trades Union Congress in 1910.<sup>43</sup> In 1912 and 1913 there developed a movement to amalgamate the unions in the building industry in which the craft principle was unusually strong. A constitution was prepared and provisions made for the administration of benefit funds. When the two proposals were submitted to the various unions, it was found that support for them was inadequate.<sup>44</sup> Greater success came in 1912 in a similar move when three unions of railway workers combined to form the National Union of Railwaymen. From the point of view of the employers a more ominous development was the creation of the so-called Triple Alliance of the National Union of Railwaymen, the Transport Workers' Federation, and the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, with an advisory committee empowered to hold over the employers the threat of a combined strike if the demands of the three unions were not met. Since the current program of the railwaymen carried an effective date of December 1, 1914, the creation of the Triple Alliance was a fact of the greatest potential importance. A conjunction of such a labor situation and an outbreak of civil war in Ireland over home rule would have been one of the gravest crises ever faced by the government of the United Kingdom. Both government and industry were saved from such a turn of events by the even less pleasant facts of war in 1914. The period of labor history under discussion thus ended on a note of uncertainty. While demands for amendment of the Trade Disputes Act of 1906 had been shelved, the labor situation was ominous and the government had not developed a program to deal with it in a fundamental way. After the close of the war, government, employers, and trade-unions would have to face the same problems under conditions equally if not more complex.

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<sup>43</sup> One resolution (moved by Ben Tillett) called on the Parliamentary Committee of the T.U.C. to circularize the unions to get opinions on forming a national federation or confederation of trades. A similar resolution favored corresponding action by unions within specific industries. The discussion of it led to unpleasant remarks about the numerous competing unions in the Sheffield cutlery trades.—*T.U.C.*, 1910, pp. 122, 124-25.

<sup>44</sup> *T.U.C.*, 1912, pp. 70-74; *T.U.C.*, 1913, pp. 110-14. Five unions voted in favor of both parts of the proposal, six were against both, and one voted for the first part and against the second (the benefit provisions). Only 25,762 ballots were cast in a total of 112,235 distributed.