

From a mob to a movement

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In June 1991, the TGWU Midlands Region and Nottingham University's Department of Adult Education convened a day school to mark the publication of The History of the Transport and General Workers' Union. It was addressed by Ken Coates and Tony Topham, authors of what became, in its paperback edition, The Making of the Labour Movement: The Foundation of the Transport and General Workers' Union 1870-1922 (Spokesman £11.99). We reprint Ken's remarks that day, which read as though they have been transcribed from a recording. Tony Topham's address, 'Unity in Diversity', can be found in One Big Union (Spokesman, £6).

Why bother with history? Why, above all, bother with one thousand pages of history, which stops seventy years ago? Perhaps the best way to approach that is to try to draw for you a picture of what the allegedly unskilled workers, who gave us our subject matter, were like. How did they live, in the forgotten corners of Victorian Britain?

The fact of the matter is that in all British industrial towns, and above all, in the port cities, life was hell for the poorest people. It was calculated by sociologists, at the end of the century, that approximately one-third of the population of London was living in poverty, and by poverty they did not mean what modern sociologists mean. They mean dire and suffocating squalor. Poverty meant tenements in which sometimes five or ten people lived in one room. It meant courtyards where the water supply, such as it was, was shared between many such households. It meant privies that had to be emptied by the night soil man. London, for instance, in the last days at the end of nineteenth century Britain, had a whole tract of housing in the East End which was, as William Blake and Cobbett used to say in earlier days, 'a wen'. I am reminded of modern China when I look at those discrepancies between wealth and poverty. The West End, home of the lords of the earth, the owners of empire, people of unparalleled riches and ostentation, lay on one side. On the other was the East End crawling with vice, terrified by Jack the Ripper, an horrendous stew.

And what happened in those straitened circumstances? People normally have a certain capacity for supporting one another. People can normally be kindly, friendly and

helpful, and there was, among these particular people, every need for all those resources of solidarity and decency, which the poorest of them could muster. But also, when one is competing for life, there are many instincts which pit people against each other. It can be a brutal struggle, each against all, for survival of those who are miscalled the fittest, which often means survival of the less conscientious and the least moral in the deprived population. All these things were mixed together; base and pure, mean and generous to a fault.

We do not try in *The History* to give you an idealised picture. Instead we try to recover the feel of those communities. The docks grew up in cities which had exploded in size, because the rail networks were decanting people in these vital areas at a rate far faster than the cities themselves could grow to assimilate them. Many or most of the people who were sucked into these growing urban areas were agricultural people. I have always thought it is a libel to say that such people were unskilled, but they had skills from a previous age. That is why so many of them became carters, because they knew about horses. Many others became dockers: many swapped roles, and many of the country people who did not actually migrate would find themselves drawn into the town after the harvest was in, which was when unemployment hit the agricultural labourers. Nearly always the docks had far more people wanting to work than could normally be given work. There were just rare moments when the weather was right, when the winds were right, when the demand was right, when the ships lined up to unload, that you could have something which fleetingly resembled full employment. Normally this was not so.

Work was organised quite differently in such places from the orderly rhythms we came to expect later in the car factories, which are so well understood and well remembered in the Midlands. The industrial discipline of this population that we are talking about hardly existed. People had come from the land, they had not become inured to the routine of the hooter and the clock, still less the drill of time study and careful managerial control. They queued up outside the dock gates and fought to get in. The foreman picked the fittest and set them on. The rest were sent away. They would go hungry.

So what are we talking about? Why have I gone into all this? I have gone into it because I want you to understand that everything that we take for granted today about trade unions was still unformed, unfixed: everything. We take for granted that there are and have always been working class people. Then, in the docks, there was a mob, when it all got together: and when it was not together there were tens of thousands of

miserable individuals normally ground down into isolation, loneliness and poverty. Yet somehow or other those same people became a collective which was not a mob, no longer a bunch of social atoms either. They became something which today everybody assumes has always been with us, an independent-minded working class, with a self-confident working class movement. Banding those previously forlorn people together was actually the major breakthrough which created modern British democracy.

I know in school we were told it all started with the Magna Carta, 1215 and I don't know what. But actually at the time we are speaking about, the very large majority of British people had no say whatever about who were to become the politicians who might lead them. All women lacked the vote, but very large numbers of men also lacked the vote. There had been a big electoral reform in 1884, and the working class electorate had been increased. But it depended on various complex qualifications, according to household tenure, and there was the additional problem that middle class people commonly had two votes, because they could vote where they lived, and they could also vote where they held business property. That meant that you could not just take the electorate and do the sums and work out what the entitlement to political involvement was. And that is why, in the words of the old song,

*'Every little Briton who's ever born alive,
is either a little Liberal or a little Conservative.'*

The prosperous classes monopolised the vote. When you shared a tenement room in East London with all those other families, you lived in a world where things like voting could hardly be imagined.

And then suddenly, something happens. We see the outcast people associating themselves. Ben Tillett is one of the great heroes in this story, and what Ben Tillett says he did is very revealing. When he started work on the docks, having been a seaman, he took upon himself a stigma which made it impossible to confess where he was actually employed. Outside his work, when he was mixing in 'society', he would try to conceal what his job was. People who were doing his job were universally described as 'dock rats'. Ben Tillett claimed that he himself was the man who invented the word 'docker', which description marked a new beginning. It gave both self-respect and, yes, status to the job. But why were they seen, and why did they see themselves, as 'dock rats'? Because in order to get work, in attending the call-on, which was the selection of the fittest men to work those ships that were available for working, the men had, quite normally,

to fight each other to be chosen. It was a raw, physical battle. There were innumerable descriptions of it, including lots by sociologists who began to visit and report at the time. It was a war. People's coats (and, said Tillet, sometimes even their ears) were torn off in the struggle to get to the gate and earn the pittance which was the difference between starvation – there was no welfare state – and a meagre livelihood. Sometimes men would be injured and maimed in the battle. All sorts of attempts were made to organise these people, and we have gone through those events in the book.

At the end of the 1880s, however, this whole submerged population exploded in a great rage of rebellion. It was started by the matchgirls who worked in Bryant and May's factory in Bow. They rebelled because they were levied a penny a week contribution, a compulsory tax put on them by the employer, an important Liberal, who demonstrated his party loyalty by building a statue of Gladstone, at the girls' expense, outside the factory. The girls were enraged by this, and in fact they mutinied when the statue was unveiled. There was a mob scene, when the girls threw themselves on the statue, and actually it got covered in blood where they had been beating it with their bare hands. So enraged were they all about the forced deduction of money to sustain a political cause which, they felt, had nothing to do with them. And yet it surely did have something to do with them, because they were the most exploited and suffocated group of people that you could ever meet. We have a picture of them in our book. Little waifs, they were, and they got all kinds of industrial diseases including the dreadful malady, 'phossy jaw', from the phosphorous used in the matches they made. This melts the bones. One of these children appeared in the House of Commons when the final strike broke out, and took her headscarf off, to the astonishment of the MPs, because all her hair had fallen out. Actually, that was the least of the problems, and many worse things than that happened. But that glimpse of Hell so shattered the MPs that they all declared themselves in support of the matchgirls. And when the East End of London was hit by this unlikely strike, it caused a tremendous amount of public concern. The truth about poverty and exploitation became momentarily visible to a more comfortable people. That lit a fire which spread out, so that there was a huge conflagration among first, the gasworkers, and then, the dockers. This was the movement which generated the great dock strike of 1889.

That dock strike was a fantastic event. It mobilised a hundred thousand people of East London, the poorest people not only on the docks, but all around them. They paraded through London day after day after day, and as they made their processions their grievances were paraded in the press. We

had, in 1889, just entered the beginning of the age of the modern popular press, so those grievances presented themselves all over the country. So, indeed, did their rebellion. Suddenly you could see the poorest of the nation marching together and insisting that their complaints should be heard. In his way, all over the country, the dock strike was seen as a flame of rage and indignation, and of protest and hope. And now what did that do?

In history there are many examples of similar outbreaks, in which oppressed people have risen up and asserted themselves: and there are many of these examples – I could cite the history of some of the great strikes of the American labour movement, when after a year had gone by you could go back to see where that rebellion had been and find not a trace left of it. Nothing. People had vented their anger and then sunk back into quiescence.

But what the London dockers did was more than to rebel. They set out to create a union and to demand negotiations between the dockers and the port employers. A variety of other material demands were concerned: they are all recorded in *The History*. But all of them involved a new and central demand for recognition.

Recognition is the magic word. Its achievement, over time, did not just bring about collective bargaining: it also brought with it modern democracy. And that is why we must ask, what does recognition mean? There you had among the dock employers the most disreputable bunch of old feudal magnates that ever there was. They really were money-grubbing, grasping, backward-looking monsters. Against this grouping, the dockers' union, with the help of the Catholic Church in the person of Cardinal Manning, with the help of parts of the Liberal establishment, and with the help of the liberal press, notably the evening paper in London, *The Star*, managed to create such a pressure that even these, the most backward employers in the land, were compelled to negotiate. They were compelled to recognise that these workmen were no longer individual 'dock rats'. Now they were the Dockers' Union. You see what that means: first of all, it means the dockers had won their claims; secondly, it means the dockers could build their organisation; thirdly, and this is the key question, it means that the dockers could recognise their own unity, their community of interest, through its reflection in the eyes of their enemy. He *recognised* them. Their basic wage and conditions, then, came to depend upon their adversary's recognition that they had been agreed with the union.

So the men were a unity. I think that is a core element in the creation of modern democracy, because it meant that the poor, once they got the idea

of union into their heads, even if the recognition was later taken away, had already experienced what was to become crucial to them: the knowledge that their individual strength would inevitably be the greater when they belonged to a collective in which they had confidence and trust. That is the basis upon which they began to organise, not only collective bargaining in industry, but also the long and difficult process which led to political representation.

Of course, political action became necessary because the people who were 'recognised' were a minority of the great population outside, clamouring for work. Although you could try to organise similar recognition for that wider population, and perhaps win many successes, it was a bit like baling out the ocean with a spoon. To make a substantial change, extending recognition to all who needed it, you had to get political representation and you had to get the vote. But to use that vote you also had to win a second recognition, expressing your own special political interests in distinction to those of the existing parties, representing the comfortable classes.

It wasn't an accident that the girls in Bryant and Mays rebelled about the statue of Gladstone. The Liberal employers were among the most persistent of all in exploiting the un-unionised labour forces and in driving down conditions. The same thing was the case in Brunner Mond, the forerunners of ICI; in one of our chapters we describe how Tom Mann became involved in a big effort to impose shorter hours and safe conditions in that enterprise. He had to adopt an alias, and smuggle himself into employment, so keen were these employers to keep out unions and all who might advance them.

Voting liberal, then, which was what such working class voters as there were were most commonly wont to do, was not going to advance their interests at work, because the same Liberals who stood on the hustings promising all kinds of benevolence were also the big employers who resisted unions. So there grew up a campaign for separate labour representation. Recognition, representation, these are all parts of the creation of an identity. It wasn't already there: it had to be made, it had to be built.

Of course, what happened was that the dock strike led directly to the election of the first really independent Labour MP, Keir Hardie, Member for West Ham, and also to the election of John Burns, who had played a key role in 1889, and of Havelock Wilson, the Seamen's leader. These political events arose directly from the organisation of the dockers and the surrounding transport and general workers, the gas workers, the people

involved as carters and all the rest of them.

In turn, organisation led directly into local government representation, with the winning of Labour voices on the new local councils, first of all in the London area and then further afield. When Keir Hardie was elected, although he was not a docker, he became the political representative of the dockers' new unionism, and he was directly supported by the leaders of that process. Keir Hardie was elected three years after the great dock strike.

The year after that, in 1893, there met the first conference of the Independent Labour Party. It was called in Bradford. Who was the Parliamentary candidate of the ILP in Bradford? Who but our old friend Ben Tillett! Very soon afterwards, Tom Mann was selected as the Independent Labour candidate in Halifax.

When you ask why, what you find is that in Bradford, too, they had an immense strike, the Manningham Mills dispute. It had been caused by contraction in the textile industry resulting from trade protection in the United States. That strike itself created an enormous popular unity and rebellion in Bradford, but the Bradford people, including their leaders, looked towards the dockers' leaders, because those dockers' leaders had been advertised all over the country as near miracle-workers. These, after all, were the people who had turned the people of the East End from a lethargic and dispersed mass of individuals into a united fighting force. So, send for Ben Tillett, send for Tom Mann! And up they came to Yorkshire. Who better to choose as parliamentary candidates? But we should notice that they, too, were the people who sharpened the argument so that the ILP was actually begun, and within one year, Tom Mann, who was the dockers' President, had also become the General Secretary of the ILP.

I want to make it very plain that it was the struggle of these same leaders of the transport workers, which persuaded the TUC itself to go for shorter working hours by law, in the campaign for the legal eight hour day. This we still have not won. But it was these leaders who prepared the ground for the formation of the political Labour Party, the party we know today, and a key issue in that argument was that of working time. Shorter hours by law were not what Liberal employers wanted. So, in Parliament, they voted against. Everyone could then see what limits there were to liberal philanthropy.

At the turn of the century, it was the Liverpool dockers' leader, James Sexton, and the London dockers' leader, Ben Tillett, who joined forces with the railwaymen's union, to put down proposals at the TUC in 1899, ten years after the story began, to convene the conference which founded

the Labour Party. Those three organisations met to composite their separate resolutions into a joint motion, under the chairmanship of Keir Hardie. This was then carried through the TUC, so that the conference that called the Labour Party into being was two-thirds the responsibility of the Transport and General Workers' forerunners, and one-third the responsibility of their allies in what later became the NUR.

Now why? The answer is that this political struggle was absolutely essential for the poorest people, because they lacked the monopoly position of skilled workers. They could not trade on their scarcity. Instead they had to secure some political intervention to make space for recognition.

Recognition was reinforced by government intervention, by the government holding the ring in industrial relations between the two sides. The government indeed made very tentative interventions in this process throughout the first part of this century. As time wore on, it made more and more strong appearances, culminating in a rush of government actions establishing a powerful presence during the First World War. But each intervention reinforced recognition, and therefore reinforced the sense of identity that workers got from seeing their unity reflected in the adversary's eyes. That is what made possible what happened after the First World War, the displacement of the Liberal Party by a Labour opposition led by Ramsay MacDonald.

None of that would have happened if there had been no successful move to organise the so-called unskilled workers. And all of it was a direct result of what? Of the inventive skills of these same dispossessed people.

The transport workers did not follow lamely behind the skilled workers, the aristocrats of labour. At the beginning of the trade union story, if you remember, there were some skilled workers' unions in which you would be fined for not going to the meeting. There were others in which you were not allowed into the meeting if you did not wear a tall silk hat, and a frock coat, and a bow tie. I am not exaggerating. The rules used to state you had to be 'properly dressed'. To be properly dressed, of course, cost an arm and a leg. When the first dockers' union delegates went to the TUC, there was a famous row because John Burns, that great spokesman of the dock strike who was elected as an MP in 1892, wrote an article in which he pointed out that the skilled workers were not only better turned out, but also all taller, stouter, better built, and smoother than these ragged individuals who now came in representing the dockers. Burns was accused of something close to racialism for saying this, but it was the sober truth.

As these people organised themselves, all their skills and all their

inventiveness found an outlet. They were making and shaping a political process. That process led to the formation of the Labour Party, and it also led to the extension of the franchise. This became unavoidable during the First World War, because millions of voteless men were mown down to save 'their country'.

After conscription came in, it could not even be said they were volunteers. Clearly it was indefensible to be herded into war and slaughter without the right to vote on whether to support the hostilities or not. The call for male suffrage led to the universal franchise in which women were able to vote, and in which general elections could begin to register the actual opinions of the British population. And the first time that that happened was in the period immediately after the First World War. That is the date of British modern democracy, and you can say really that the whole of that process is covered in *The History*, and that there was, in fact, at the beginning of the story, no political democracy in this country, there was a club of the oligarchs, and at the end of the story rudimentary popular democracy was beginning to assert itself, and the people were beginning to find a way to express themselves.

At the forefront of that popular movement were the so-called unskilled workers, the lesser breeds, the ones with dirty hands, the ones who could not dress in the proper attire, the ones who were outside the pale. That's an extraordinary story!

People should be very proud of the traditions of the Transport and General Workers' Union. It is really the uncelebrated story of everything that is good in Britain. The last thing I should say is that in the processes which led to all these developments, there was a very important juncture.

You see, when you began to organise against the indifference and hostility of an enfranchised minority, you had to look which way you could go in order to express the democratic will, and among the people who joined the dockers' union the day after the great dock strike were two branches in Sweden, another branch in Holland. What were they doing? Port workers everywhere had the same interests. Seamen everywhere had the same interests. From the beginning, they saw their interests as involving a linkage, like with like. The workers had no country. They really did not have a country, they could not vote where they lived, they had no power there: but they had a common interest with other workers doing the same jobs that they were doing in another country, in which they, too, could not vote. Furthermore, if they all stood together, they could prevail, because they could impose recognition on all the employers in all the ports around the globe. The dockers during the dock strike would have

been starved back to work if it had not been for the raising of tens of thousands of pounds by Australian trade unionists. This gave the impulse to an enormous movement of international support and solidarity.

What we tend not to see is that it also was a choice: were you going to organise nationally? In that case you had to organise a political party, and you had to win the vote. To cap that, you then had to win the electorate and you then had to go through all the political processes you understand. Or were you going to organise internationally? In that case you could create brand new institutions because there wasn't any international parliament. So you could 'do it yourself' by assembling an overwhelming force, which would mean that people would have to listen to the voices that you represented.

There was a long struggle between these two roads to democracy. It was finally resolved when the governments of Western Europe gave in to popular pressure and conceded the popular vote. To make this happen it took a world war in which millions of people were killed.

Our story has been completely different since then, because in every country, and above all in Britain, once we got the vote it meant that our main way forward was national, because we could organise, we could win elections, we could put people in the government, we could change the policy. Obviously common sense said that you combine collective bargaining and political mobilisation, and on the national plane that was your way forward. Of course, now we are coming round in a circle, because at the national plane we find we do all these things, and we win an election, and yet still we can't change anything, because all the industrial forces have now become international themselves, and they confront us with the kind of power that our unions never had, but that they were seeking to get, back at the end of the nineteenth century. They confront us with immense power, and we shan't win it back until we unite our forces at least as closely in order to be able to bargain for the people we represent, whether they live in Sicily or in Denmark or in Birmingham. That's a new agenda, a really powerful agenda, but it's an agenda which I think you get enormous help in meeting if you work through the experiences of our grandfathers and great-grandfathers in the story that we've been trying to tell. There is nothing new under the sun. Actually, this history is as much about tomorrow as it is about yesterday.