

## Foreword

No one before has written a comprehensive history of the TGWU. There have been many special studies and some key biographies, making up many thousands of words, some in important works. But I believe that this double volume is the beginning of a major book because it starts out with a sort of pre-history, with the 1870s and the period running up to the great dock strike of 1889 – the ‘Dockers’ Tanner Strike’, as we have come to know it from history passed down through dockers’ families.

This background history had to be done, so that we can start to understand how the ‘One Big Union’ amalgamation of 1922 actually came into being. In looking back into our real origins, the authors have found a lot more, some of it controversial, some of it potentially of great value in helping the union chart its way through the final decade of the twentieth century, after bitter and difficult times in recent years for trade unionism right across the world. Their book shows how TGWU origins lie deep in Labour history and class development in our country. Indeed, part of the title of this work tries to capture the point that the emergence of the TGWU has been central to the whole character of the British Labour movement and its socialist aspirations.

The authors have tabled some clear challenges, in the best spirit of debate and searching for the truth. Our formal co-operation with their work has been ‘warts and all’, to coin a phrase that probably hasn’t been put like that in the minutes. It was given in the spirit that our movement deserves candour, straightforward argument and analysis. Have no doubt, we have got these from the authors. I have every confidence that they will carry on in the same way as they approach more recent times in further volumes.

Their narrative includes the familiar heroes, some new ones, and some villains against whom our predecessors struggled hard. In a sense, the TGWU was never born – it was made by hard labour, by incessant struggle, a monumental achievement that was at risk time and again. The

authors have argued strongly for the essential continuity of the movement for amalgamation from the 1870s, through the great dock strike and up until the Leamington Conference of 1921. They argue that the unskilled workers who built the general labourers' unions were people of invention and imagination, setting trends with new forms of organization and policy and strategy for the whole Labour movement. That is a different picture to the common one of the unskilled labourers somehow 'catching up' with the pre-existing craft-union traditions, and then taking their due place in an established Labour movement. What these workers did was revolutionize this very movement, not least in its political aspirations, seen in the creation of the ILP and the Labour Party and the turn away from dependence on the Liberals; and also in their willingness to join with pioneer socialist thinkers and agitators when others sought respectable incorporation.

The labourers fashioned the unique multi-industrial structure of the eventual TGWU, going beyond federation to organizational unity, but keeping the proper autonomy of trade-group interests against a divisive sectionalism. They consistently demanded recognition and institutionalized bargaining machinery from employers and the state, long before they were achieved, amidst competing pressures for immediate gains in wages and conditions, the heady temptations of utopian independence, and moderation and subordination to the employers. The distinct strategy of securing independent trade unionism through joint regulation remains a strength to this day, a feature of mainstream trade unionism that politicians too often ignore in their attacks on trade-union power.

The authors portray leaders who were quick in the field of building international trade unionism, especially in the transport industries, as a power-base for spreading their influence. Their 'new unionism' gave birth to the movement for independent labour representation, with the two dockers' unions and the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants jointly convening the first union conference for forming labour's own political party.

Above all, the authors show how the pioneers were people of vision, capable of setting big targets and sustaining them in bad times as well as good. So it is a story of big thinking, rooted in bread-and-butter organization, professional skills and political vision, in committed energy and incessant hard work.

It is a long time back, but it may be the case that some of the problems we face in the British trade-union movement today are not so far removed from those covered in this first part of our history, least of all in the battle between the new unionism of today's TGWU and the various types of new realism espoused by some other trade unions.

We have been looking to extend our base by organizing amongst the new army of part-time and temporary workers, the so called 'periphery' of the modern labour market, now totalling around a quarter of all

workers. We have carried this and other important messages into the Labour Party at a time when there is a strong current of opinion in favour of a historic loosening of those very ties which came into being in the period which this history covers. We are seeking major mergers and looking to new kinds of links with European unions, below the formal levels already in existence, so that trade-union solidarity can be developed, and common demands can be formulated, as close as possible to the factories and offices, as our economies become more deeply integrated. We have kept our focus wide, helping South Africa's oppressed workers to form their unions, and championing opposition to obscene militarism, when others have counselled a narrower focus on the immediate interests of employees, whatever they may be, and assuming that it is actually possible to separate the industrial and the political so neatly.

For organizations like ours, it has always made sense to examine where we have been, before asking where it is best to go now. I sense the end of a period and the opening of a new one. Not the end of working-class struggle and organization; not the end of broad socialist aspiration; not the end of opposition to market forces and social domination by powerful classes who control and own the core capital of our societies; not the end of struggling against injustice and privileges secured through daily control of our societies, often by subtle, but sometimes brutal means; not the end of independent trade unionism, rooted in workplace democracy, and its replacement by a carefully controlled system run by anonymous backroom committees and murmuring manipulators. No, I sense a renewal of emphasis on public interest, commonwealth and community, and on human decency undertaken as a social obligation. A new and clear sense of what democracy is for ordinary people now that the Cold War competition about freedom is behind us.

I sense that a new era of international Labour movement organization is near, most obviously in Europe and in what is fast becoming greater Europe. If there is to be a meaningful socialist political party for the Europe of the future, then it must surely find its power and democracy in partnership with an extended trade unionism. And I sense that the terrible burden of military expenditure in advanced and less-developed countries alike will be overturned – if future generations play their politics correctly – by forces committed to overcoming the vast problem of world poverty and the ecological threat.

As usual, there is much to be done. That is in the essential spirit of the TGWU, as friends and foes alike know. But I make a direct appeal, again in our best traditions, for time to be found by even the most active of our members to study this story closely. For, have no doubt, as you follow this first part of our common history – a leading history for the whole of working-class organization in Britain and internationally – I am confident that you will draw energy and commitment from reading about

the battles that were fought in the early days. In many respects things are overwhelmingly better today than then: that is what we have helped substantially to achieve. But in other respects we cannot relax our guard. Nor can we safely carry on fighting unless we know our place in history and look to take its lessons on board.

Someone else will write a Foreword to later sections of this history. For my part, I am pleased that the first full history of the whole of the TGWU was started during my period of office as General Secretary. I take comfort that the terms of reference have been wide and free, and that the first instalment has turned out as neither the authors nor the union originally expected. We looked forward to having our story told with the focus on the great amalgamation, but I think we already have a lot more than that in the challenges presented from this crucial foundation period in the history of our whole Labour movement. The implications for the subsequent periods could be large. But for the moment, let it suffice that our sort of history requires that we respond in future action, making new history as we read the old.

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