Introduction

When he returned from climbing Mount Everest, Sir Edmund Hillary was asked why he had done it. 'Because it was there,' he is said to have answered. It was perhaps in something of the same frame of mind that we embarked upon the project of preparing a history of the Transport and General Workers' Union. Unkind people will tell us, as indeed they told Sir Edmund, that this involved no small degree of folly. However, no one can deny that it also reveals a certain commitment.

We began our trek when the union was nearing its centenary, by most conventional reckoning. Towering over the industrial scene, for years it had been Britain's largest trade union. As it reached its ninetieth birthday, in 1979, it produced a colourful poster to commemorate itself. It said:

> There is a TGWU member in almost every family in Britain. They are the people who make our cars, drive the lorries, load and unload ships, keep the buses and taxis running, work in the power stations, build the motorways, operate vital oil, food processing, chemical, rubber and engineering plants. They are the lighthouse keepers, coachbuilders, tugboatmen, trawlermen, civil aviation workers, office workers, supervisors and managers, laundry and canteen staffs. They are the men and women whose skill and expertise keeps Britain going.

At that time, there were 2 million of these people.

A truly vast effort of human organization had brought them together, joining their individual powers into a real collective strength, and enabling them, together, to dominate the industrial and political landscapes. But while lesser mountain ranges of big unions had all been scaled, often in histories of great complexity and detail, and, indeed, while dozens of smaller hillocks had been extensively mapped and chronicled, this one major peak had inspired no comprehensive history. Its presence had become unavoidable. It represented an enduring and

yet innovative influence, and this fact was necessarily reflected in a vast literature. A library of monographs raked over this and that face of the great ascent, explored the screes of particular strikes and disputes, and charted their institutional effects. Here and there major biographies had left pitons to help us over formidable cliffs.

But although much good work existed when we began, we have no doubt that the hitherto neglected archives of the union will still provoke much more. There are many important lessons to be drawn from all the detail which remains in them. None the less, we think that the time was overripe for an effort to see the processes which created our union, as a whole, in their interrelationships. Even in the errors of such an attempt, others will learn things of value.

Neither of us has been a professional historian. Both of us regret this, for we have had to learn painfully what practised scholars could have achieved with much greater ease. Our experience was won as partisans of the trade-union movement, and although both of us have spent most of our working lives learning from trade unionists, as adult educationists, we come, initially, from different disciplines.

For this reason, when we began we thought that we should start our story in 1922, when the new Transport and General Workers' Union was finally born, and carry on through a series of phases which we thought we understood until we reached the recent past. Of course, we knew of a body of writings about what we saw as the 'prehistory' of the union, which we thought to subsume in a preliminary chapter. The more we discovered, however, the more questions we found to need exploration. Our focus moved inexorably further back. Soon we began to joke with one another about the fact that our book was going to resemble Laurence Sterne's immortal *Tristram Shandy*, whose hero takes a hundred pages to get himself born. In fact, Sterne was present at what we now know to have been a very easy parturition, because our own subject has involved us in one volume of two fat books of nearly a thousand pages before its umbilicus has at last been tied.

It is comforting to know that at least one very distinguished historian has acknowledged similar problems. John King Fairbank, the American authority on China, tells us candidly that

> I had two years by the tail, and both were pulling me back to earlier times. In my observation this regression in time is typical . . . would-be modernists have wound up as medievalists. The rule seems to be, if you want to study the mid-period of a century, begin at the end of it and let the problems lead you back. *Never* try to begin at the beginning. Historical research progresses backward, not forward.[1]

Our reverse progression took us to the London docks in 1889, and then beyond that, to the rudimentary organizations of the 1870s. The

reasoning behind this is not abstruse, and we think that it will be accepted when we come to unravel the events in the docks in the 1950s and 1970s. Books may start or finish wherever their authors take the whim, but the events which shape the choices which people feel it sensible to make, and which close those options into apparent inevitabilities, are subject to no such caprice.

Inevitably, this appreciation involves us in argument about the framework of periods into which we have been led. Starting back from the formation of the great general unions in the 1920s, we were led by a continuous thread directly to the impulses of 'new unionism', following the upheavals among allegedly unskilled workers in the late 1880s. Of course, this was not at all a new perception, although it has had distinguished challengers in recent years. We believe that our narrative will largely reinforce the case of an older generation of historians, although not without some important cavils. We also believe that the forgotten voices which have been reawoken in these pages will speak not only for a different past, but perhaps also for a different future.

The goals of trade-union democracy have never been simply external targets. Unions have always known that, for the dispossessed to change the world, they first must change themselves. Always their creative drive has involved the dynamism of self-reliance and, within whatever collective space they have been able to win, they have always asserted their commitment to self-development, self-realization and, quite literally, self-government. So, the idea of 'One Big Union', which was proclaimed with such fervour as all the potential constituents of the Transport and General Workers' Union began to ballot for amalgamation, may be traced back over all the setbacks and defeats not only to the high days of the great strikes of 1911, but on through to its germ of 'general' organization, back to 1889 and then further behind.

As a goal, One Big Union was a means of defence for those whose jobs were otherwise in jeopardy from the competition of unorganized labour. It was an agency for reform, in that it could bargain from strength. It was a school in which men and women could learn those skills and techniques which could offer them some rudiments of authority and control over their own toil. It was a university, in which they could generate new aspirations, political programmes, a new charter for the recovery of power over the machines and capital which were dominating their lives. Indeed, it was a way of life.

This way of life was once widely celebrated as the pursuit of industrial democracy. It was never confined to the ritual dimensions of Westminster. In the high years of Labour advance after the First World War, our narrative traces the developments of the transport workers' programme for a comprehensive Board of Communications, to administer publicly owned ports, road, rail, sea and air transport, postal and telephone services. But this conception was formed in the struggle for joint control,

with employers and the state, of the crisis-torn war-transport industries. And behind this shaping movement, tracing back the influences which made it possible, we find ourselves eavesdropping on the Royal Commissioners of 1892, reacting in a state of shock, bemused, to the claims of Ben Tillett for municipal ownership of the Port of London, and the plans of Tom Mann for the reconstruction of the whole port area. Moreover, we hear there a succession of dock workers extolling the merits of trade-union control over all these processes.

One Big Union was never far removed from the ideals of workers' control and self-management. It was also never narrowly confined. Its tributaries lead us to the Knights of Labour in the United States, to the anarcho-syndicalists of France, to Australia and New Zealand.

But if we have been led backwards in time and outwards in space, our narrative has to follow the calendar, and to register firmly the spirit of the places on which it depends. A great man once told us that the universal *is* the particular, and it is in the particular lives of these, our people, that we have been moved to search for whatever universal meanings can be found.

Maybe we are too close to our subjects fully to appreciate some current ideas about what constitutes history, and maybe this makes us over-empirical. The feel of poverty and oppression tends to render its victims prone to a certain pragmatism, and even we, as mere observers, cannot claim immunity from this process. Certainly we have tried to create a narrative which actually relates what happened, and which seeks to explain why people reacted as they did. But while our people lived by bread, they never lived by bread alone. Many of them went without, not because they must, but because they were proud and honest enough to hope that the world could be different. Today this is an unfashionable belief, but tomorrow, we think, it might be more widely shared. Objectivity asks us to consider indices of earnings, inflation and productivity. But it also compels us to seek to discover what kinds of people the subjugated workers had it in themselves to be, and what thoughts and aspirations they could nurture in pursuit of their freedom.

Where the modern systems-theorists do engage us is in the attempt to comprehend how far the real choices of living people are determined by the social inheritance in which they are locked.

Imperial Britain gave birth to a socialist rebellion, which directly fostered the young trade-union activists who began to organize the poor – hitherto unorganizable – masses of uneducated and relatively 'unskilled' labourers. Had we been drafting a brief synopsis of the story we have tried to tell, we would have sought to identify a point of juncture where this happened.

The late nineteenth century found the metropolis in a condition which fell a long way short of democracy, and not only in industry. Many working people lacked votes. Women were all disenfranchised. Plural

votes gave advantage to the business community and graduates. Access to the levers of power within most nation states was formally closed to many people who might be thinking of joining the new trade unions. At the same time, the world was rapidly shrinking, as innovations in shipping, together with the extension of railways, made communication between working people a much easier and more normal occurrence. Transport workers, in particular, might range freely across a very much wider world than that imagined by their grandparents. True, wherever they went, they would be liable to find some similarities in the conditions of life.

The battle for democracy has been widely represented as a unilinear process, because in one country after another Chartists and suffragettes demanded a widening of the franchise, popular upheavals insisted upon the vote, strikes and demonstrations mounted in great waves in protest against exclusion from the political process. But the aspiration for democracy during these turmoils might plausibly have been led in either of two directions. Yes, perhaps nation states might have been compelled to yield a general suffrage. But also, perhaps the growing identification of allegiances to class and occupation might have burst through national integuments, and created new institutions for democratic representation, on an international scale. Not only the socialists, but also the new unionists, including such conservative leaders as the seamen's Havelock Wilson, laboured with all their powers to achieve precisely this. Even in 1911 Wilson called the British seamen to strike under the banner of the Seamen's and Firemen's International Movement.[2] After the event, it is easy to efface from the mind the alternative choices, because it is quite evident that trade unionism, like socialism, was led into reconciliation with strictly national spaces. However, the notion of internationalist democracy died hard, if it ever died at all.

Today, the internationalization of capital has become so comprehensive that trade unions have been compelled to reassert priorities for transnational linkages. Nation states in Western Europe have been similarly compelled to seek new forms of association, culminating in a headlong rush towards a federal order. The extent of global problems, both economic and environmental, is encouraging a new globalism in radical thinking, including the thinking of trade unions. Accordingly, traditions which have been submerged over very many years of nationalist ascendancy suddenly seem to acquire a bright new relevance, even if they had previously been perceived as the rosy fingers of a false dawn.

Of course, the trade unionists of the late nineteenth century were reacting to a socialist message which had been spelt out almost half a century before. In the *Communist Manifesto*, Marx identified the modern bourgeoisie as the product of 'a series of revolutions in the modes of production and of exchange'. The bourgeoisie has 'put an end to all

feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations'. It has not severed feudal ties, but replaced them with 'callous "cash payment"'. . .

Yet this same bourgeoisie

> cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society . . . all fixed, fast frozen relations . . . are swept away . . . all that is privileged and established melts into air . . . the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must get a footing everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connections everywhere.

To have seen the cosmopolitan force of capitalism in 1848 was no mean achievement. It might have been thought an audacious perception in 1889, and it is not at all an accident that workers in communication saw it first. But to fail to see it today, in the era of gigantic multinational corporations, is to fall over one's own feet. Unfortunately, in some Labour movements there is a propensity to do just that. The unexpected longevity of capitalism has left its revolutionary propensities undiminished, and the advent of the transnational corporation has radically impacted on the nation state itself. In the 1990s all but the most powerful states feel themselves to be mere contenders for influence in a world of major forces, in which great companies commonly outweigh governments and united nations.

Addressing himself to the working class, Marx gave us the immortal phrase, 'The working men have no country. We cannot take from them what they have not got.' He followed this with a prescription which has often been seen as containing a contradiction: 'Since the proletariat must first of all acquire political supremacy, must rise to be the leading class of the nation, must constitute itself *the* nation, it is, so far, itself national though not in the bourgeois sense of the word.'

Had the workers refused the advice of Marx, it is conceivable that it might have remained true that 'national differences and antagonisms between peoples are daily more and more vanishing' because of the growth of commerce and the corrosive solvent of the world market. But in fact, the struggle of the proletariat to 'acquire political supremacy' was precisely, as Marx himself said, the struggle to win 'the battle for democracy'. When that battle confined its scope within the nation, then, to the extent that it succeeded, its partial victors gained a stake in the nation. They won representation in its Parliament, and even designated some of the ministers in its governments. More fundamentally, closer to their daily experience, they won important powers over local administrations. And, more important still, influencing all their perceptions of their rightful status in society, they won recognition and representation in institutional frameworks for collective bargaining.

Work-people in one country might run in front of their opposite

numbers in another. The struggle for democracy, like economic growth, has always been uneven. Its gains have always been particular. By slow degrees, these gains led to a general presumption that social democracies might be established separately, in one country after another. The nation had become an aspiration for the subject class within it.

This book may be seen as a detailed study of how this happened. Other volumes will be needed to trace the story of this one trade union down to our own times, when the ideal of One Big Union is already beginning to reappear, with some urgency, as an international aspiration.

Notes

1 J. K. Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast* (Stanford University Press, 1969), pp. vii–xii; cited in A. G. Frank, 'A Theoretical Introduction to Five Thousand Years of World System History', *Review*, vol. XIII, no. 2 (Fernand Braudel Center, Binghamton, New York, spring 1990), pp. 162–3.

2 In Hull, Southampton, the Bristol Channel and on the Mersey, the strike banners all carried the same inscription: 'War is Declared: Strike Hard for Home and Liberty!' (A. P. Lloyd, 'The Influence of Syndicalism on the Hull and Manchester Dock Strikes of 1911', unpublished MA thesis, Warwick University, 1973, pp. 25–6).