I

The Earliest Forerunners

I
Introduction

Fourteen trade unions came together in the amalgamation of 1 January 1922 to form the Transport and General Workers' Union. Waterfront workers had taken the initiative and provided the drive to integration: to the new union's estimated total membership of 350,000, they contributed a core component.[1]

The 1889 London dock strike has commonly been regarded as the starting-point of the TGWU story, and no one can doubt its impact. The courage of those who took part, the sheer verve of their leaders, the widespread support that was aroused all insist that it is entirely proper to celebrate it. But recent historical research has documented substantial organization amongst dock workers long before that great event. Nearly two decades of struggle against overwhelming difficulties left permanent influences behind them to colour and influence the new unionism. The breakthrough of 1889 was real enough, but it was not a total break with what had gone before.

Although there are scattered records of spasmodic local stoppages by dockers in earlier times, historians have found little or no trace of stable trade-union organization amongst waterfront workers before the 1870s, with the notable exception of the guild-inspired Society of London Watermen and Lightermen, which had pre-industrial origins. In the conditions of that time 'stability' was difficult to achieve, but the idea of trade-union organization commonly took root and survived, even when particular organizations were unable to keep going. People remembered. Children listened to their parents. Once lit, the torch was passed from hand to hand, and from one generation to the next. It is therefore necessary to begin our account of the origins of the TGWU with the rise

of waterfront unionism from the 1870s. What kind of world was it in which these long unorganized people began to try to join forces with one another?

Boom and Slump

In the years after 1870, powerful though it remained, Britain was losing its dominant position in the world economy. German and American rivals pressed harder and harder, and Britain's industrial lead was coming to an end. The global economy of these decades was uneven, and the British economy was less buoyant than in the past. Growth continued, but at a slower pace. The Russian economist N. D. Kondratieff[2] later identified a series of 'long waves' in the world's capitalist economy going back to the French Revolution, in addition to the generally recognized ups and downs of the business cycle. From 1789 to 1814, he suggested, there was an upswing of twenty-five years, followed by a decline to 1849, a period of thirty-five years. The first cycle therefore lasted for sixty years. The second wave 'begins in 1848 and ends in 1873, lasting twenty-four years . . . the decline of the second wave begins in 1873 and ends in 1896, a period of twenty-three years. The length of the second wave is forty-seven years'.[3] The third wave (1896–1945) will occupy us throughout most of this volume and for a good part of the next. The down-wave of Kondratieff's second major period was widely recognized by British historians, and was frequently referred to as 'the Great Depression'. This term has recently been questioned, but in spite of innovations the period was certainly a difficult one, even in Britain with all its earlier advantages as the frontrunner. Productivity began to lag. Within the global long waves, the curve of activity bumped up and down in a succession of lesser cyclical slumps. These appear to differ, depending on how one looks at them: the movement of industrial output gives one picture, and that of foreign trade another. Michael Barratt Brown has tabulated the relevant figures for the period, using these two variables, and juxtaposing them against the pattern of innovation (see table 1.1).[4]

During the slump years, unemployment rose, output commonly fell, and times were hard. For the poorest people they brought not only relative distress, but real hunger. In between there were recurrent recoveries and upturns, which were periods of more optimistic activity. Throughout the nineteenth century unemployment relief was unknown, so that each of the downturns spelt privation for many and widespread social tumult.[5] But the upturns were times in which labour could often answer back.

Not very far into the downturn, in 1876, Queen Victoria assumed the title of Empress of India. Before her death, she was to add 5 million more

Table 1.1 *Boom and Slump, 1848–1921*

Boom or Slump	*Years*	*Industrial Output Index (1880=100)*	*Foreign Trade Volume Index*	*Industrial Changes and Foreign-Trade Developments*
Boom	1848–53	39–52	25–37	Electric telegraph and
Slump	1854–5	52–51	36–34	railway building in Europe
Boom	1856–60	51–63	41–49	and USA. New machine
Slump	1861–2	60–58	48	tools make the UK the 'workshop of the world'.
Boom	1863–74	61–92	49–81	US Civil War and European
Slump	1875–9	91–85	84–91	war. Iron and steel development and US railway boom.
Boom	1880–3	100–110	100–111	Shipbuilding boom, iron
Slump	1884–6	104–101	108–109	ships and agricultural
Boom	1887–91	106–122	114–180	machinery and markets in
Slump	1892–3	116–113	128–125	Canada, Australia and South America.
Boom	1894–9	120–142	134–160	UK development of electric
Slump	1900–4	142–141	160–175	power. Tramways and house-building boom. Russian, Japanese and African markets grow.
Boom	1905–7	151–160	182–198	Internal combustion engine.
Slump	1908–9	152–154	187–193	Naval and arms race. Oil and
Boom	1910–13	159–184	203–232	the Near East market. Rapid growth of US industry.
War	1914–18	173–149	200–127	US and Japanese arms
Boom	1919–20	163–168	169–187	booms – iron, steel,
Slump	1921	105	153	chemicals, motors – challenging UK trade.

Note: In both indices the first figure gives the proportion of 1880 levels in the first year of boom or slump, the second figure the proportion for the last year.
Sources: B. R. Mitchell and P. Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge University Press, 1962), pp. 271–2 and 282–3; Ernest Mandel, *Marxist Economic Theory* (Merlin Press, 1968), pp. 359–60.

square miles and 90 million additional souls to her domains. Thus she died as sovereign of 13 million square miles and 370 million people, most of whom were Indians. Stamps bearing her portrait franked the mails in Shanghai and Vancouver, in Lagos and Calcutta, all across Africa and Asia. Missionaries flocked around the globe to spread Victorian morality, and where they were not prudently broiled or

otherwise seen off by the indigenous populations, they were commonly followed by trade, the flag and the imperial armies. Rows and rows of streets in England's burgeoning towns took on the names of distant, exotic places, commemorating the victories of Birmingham technology over the courage of a hundred resistance movements. The riches of the new dominions were not spread about among the English poor, however, and London's East End, like many northern slums, festered and sweltered in squalor, vice and distress. Domestic poverty was widespread and growing, and civil turbulence was not far beneath the ordered surface. In Ireland trouble brewed and stewed.

Just as Britain was losing its industrial pre-eminence, so too the end of the age when Britannia ruled the waves was approaching. Europeans and North Americans entered into hot competition for territories in Africa and Asia. Excluding the unlimited Sahara, the French gathered 3.5 million African square miles and a population of 40 million to their own empire. Belgium and Germany grabbed 1 million square miles apiece, with 30 and 17 million Africans, respectively, resident in their new colonies. Portugal joined the plunder. The Americans seized a chain of former Spanish outposts across the Pacific and dominated the Caribbean. Everyone chipped away at China, in the last throes of the decline of her classic empire. The Russians joined in this process, spreading to the ocean boundary and pushing down to Manchuria. This was the age of imperialism, and it was to culminate in global collision, mayhem and catastrophe. Before that, it was savagely to distort the politics of Europe, and colour the attitudes of even the poorest wage-slaves in the great imperial centres.

The Glamour of Trade . . .

British ports, which handled the trade of the largest empire and stowed and unloaded the new vessels which carried that trade, were the first point of contact with this rapidly changing world.

Henry Mayhew had published his *London Labour and the London Poor* two decades earlier, in 1851. It was crisp reading, and even today provides an inexhaustible mine for historians in search of a graphic vignette or sweeping phrase. Here is his description of the London docks, then spread across 90 acres of St George, Shadwell and Wapping.

> As you enter the dock the sight of the forest of masts in the distance, and the tall chimneys vomiting clouds of black smoke, and the many coloured flags flying in the air, has a most peculiar effect . . . Along the quay you see, now men with their faces blue with indigo, and now gaugers, with their long brass-tipped rule dripping with spirit from the cask they have been probing. Then will come a group of flaxen-haired sailors chattering

> German; and next a black sailor, with a cotton handkerchief twisted turban-like round his head. Presently a blue-smocked butcher, with fresh meat, and a bunch of cabbages in the tray on his shoulder; and shortly afterwards a mate, with green paroquets in a wooden cage. Here you will see sitting on a bench a sorrowful woman, with new bright cooking tins at her feet, telling you she is an emigrant preparing for her voyage. As you pass along this quay the air is pungent with tobacco; on that it overpowers you with the fumes of rum; then you are nearly sickened with the stench of hides, and huge bins of horns; and shortly afterwards the atmosphere is fragrant with coffee and spice. Nearly everywhere you meet stacks of cork, or else yellow bins of sulphur, or lead-coloured copper-ore. As you enter this warehouse, the flooring is sticky, as if it had been newly tarred, with the sugar that has leaked through the casks . . . Here you sniff the fumes of the wine, and there the peculiar fungus-smell of dry rot; then the jumble of sounds as you pass along the dock blends in anything but sweet concord.[6]

It is not surprising that Mayhew was so powerfully impressed by the sensuous images of the import trade. But, of course, it all had to balance with the outflow of manufactures, textiles, coal and machines. These export trades were more the business of the Mersey and the Humber than that of the capital. All this merchandise had to be carried to the quays, and from the time of Mayhew's description down to the years after the great London dock strike, all the long-haul work was done by railway. Once goods had arrived in depots, they would then enter the short-haul system: they would be put in carts and drawn through crowded thoroughfares by horses. Otherwise, railways and ships were the Victorian means of transport. But, needless to say, carterage was the most labour-intensive of these operations. At the same time, it was a greater problem for would-be labour organizers. For prospective trade unionists, the closer co-operative division of labour between railwaymen and seamen made it much easier for them to associate than it was for the carters, who were living in an older world, altogether more fragmented.

Speed of transit meant that all Mayhew's exotic products could be funnelled out to customers with little delay. Storage costs were cut, as ease of access to regular supplies meant that provincial traders could coast along on very meagre stocks. Money circulated faster as trade increased its tempo. The railways, with trade, promoted the growth of towns and the migration of peoples. The scale of expansion was phenomenal, but understandable in modern terms if we compare it with that of twentieth-century urbanization in South America. Between 1801 and 1901, London's population multiplied five times, from 957,000 to 4,536,000. Liverpool's increased ninefold, from 82,000 to 704,000. Hull's went up eight times, from 30,000 to 240,000. Scotland's largest port, Glasgow, exceeded all these: it registered a tenfold growth, from 77,000 to 776,000. The principal Welsh port, Cardiff, however, grew by

eighty times, from 2,000 to 164,000. Concentration called and pushed the rural population to move. At the same time, ocean transport was stimulated and its technologies improved. By 1838 the first purely steam crossing of the Atlantic had been made in nineteen days. As engines developed, so new screw propulsions came to displace the paddle wheel. A gigantic growth of port capacity followed. In 1820, London handled 777,858 tons of imports. The figure rose to 4,089,366 in 1870, and to 10,000,000 in 1901. The Mersey took 4,500,000 tons of shipping in 1848; by 1908, it received 16,000,000 tons. Glasgow doubled its harbour area in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, and the dock area of Hull almost trebled between 1863 and 1885.[7]

While Mayhew wrote, 3 per cent of cargoes were mechanically propelled. By 1861 the figure had become 10 per cent. It was to pass the halfway mark in 1883, and before the First World War it reached 91 per cent. The growth of empire locked these advances into place. Sail could not pass the Suez Canal, so that after 1869 steam ruled the Eastern trade.

. . . *and the Reality of Toil*

All these developments were the spectacular evidence of progress. But what of the people who earned their living in this upheaval and turmoil? Once again, let us start with Mayhew:

> He who wishes to behold one of the most extraordinary and least-known scenes of this metropolis, should wend his way to the London Dock gates at half-past seven in the morning. There he will see congregated within the principal entrance masses of men of all grades, looks and kinds . . .
>
> Presently you know, by the stream pouring through the gates and the rush towards particular spots, that the 'calling foremen' have made their appearance. Then begins the scuffling and scrambling forth of countless hands high in the air, to catch the eye of him whose voice may give them work. As the foreman calls from a book of names, some men jump up on the backs of the others, so as to lift themselves high above the rest, and attract the notice of him who hires them. All are shouting. Some cry aloud his surname, some his christian name, others call out their own names, to remind him that they are there. Now the appeal is made in Irish blarney – now in broken English. Indeed, it is a sight to sadden the most callous, to see thousands of men struggling for only one day's hire; the scuffle being made the fiercer by the knowledge that hundreds out of the number there assembled must be left to idle the day out in want. To look in the faces of that hungry crowd is to see a sight that must be ever remembered. Some are smiling to the foreman to coax him into remembrance of them; others, with their protruding eyes, eager to snatch at the hoped-for pass. For weeks many have gone there, and gone through the same struggle – the

same cries; and have gone away, after all, without the work they had screamed for.[8]

This description of the savage ritual of the call-on was to lose none of its force in succeeding years. The social scientists of the 1880s and 1890s registered the same shock. The press of casual labourers demanding work simply grew and grew, as the railways brought more and more people to the port cities, and successive immigrations either were added to the crowds or ousted existing workers from other trades to join the scramble for work in their place. It was a scene that would have been recognized by port workers right up to the 1960s.

For Mayhew, the scrimmage was made even more dreadful by an understanding of its object, which was employment in conditions of utter inhumanity:

The work may be divided into three classes.
1. Wheel-work, or that which is moved by the muscles of the legs and weight of the body; 2. jigger, or winch-work, or that which is moved by the muscles of the arm. In each of these the labourer is stationary; but in the truck work, which forms the third class, the labourer has to travel over a space of ground greater or less in proportion to the distance which the goods have to be removed.

The wheel-work is performed somewhat on the system of the treadwheel, with the exception that the force is applied inside instead of outside the wheel. From six to eight men enter a wooden cylinder or drum, upon which are nailed battens, and the men laying hold of the ropes commence treading the wheel round . . . The wheel is generally about sixteen feet in diameter and eight to nine feet broad; and the six or eight men treading within it, will lift from sixteen to eighteen hundred weight, and often a ton, forty times in an hour, an average of twenty-seven feet high. Other men will get out a cargo of from 800 to 900 casks of wine, each cask averaging about five hundred weight, and being lifted about eighteen feet, in a day and a half. At trucking each man is said to go on an average thirty miles a-day, and two-thirds of that time he is moving one and a half hundredweight at six miles and a-half per hour.[9]

The pay for such a day's work, Mayhew tells us, would be 2*s.* 6*d.*; and for those men not hired until the afternoon, the hourly rate would be 4*d.*

These conditions were a continuing affliction, impeding port workers in their efforts to organize, not only during the movements of the trade cycle in the 1870s but on through to the great strike of 1889 and beyond it well into the twentieth century.

As a young man, Ben Tillett, who figures very largely in the chapters which follow, felt real shame about working on the docks. 'So real was the stigma', he wrote 'that [we] concealed the nature of our occupation from our family as well as our friends.'[10] A contractor would describe his employees as 'dock rats'. In his memoirs, Tillett claimed to have

originated the term 'docker'; if this be true, we can count it as the first of many steps he took towards affirming the human status and dignity of his members. The brutal indignity of the call-on goes far to explain these attitudes. 'Coats, flesh and even ears were torn off. The strong literally threw themselves over the heads of their fellows and battled . . . through the kicking, punching, cursing crowds to the rails of the "cage" which held them like rats – mad human rats who saw food in the ticket.'[11]

An Observant Participant

Tillett saw the life of the dockers from inside. During the 1880s, more and more witnesses followed in Mayhew's footsteps to see it from outside.

In 1886 Beatrice Potter (the future Beatrice Webb) took up work as a researcher in Charles Booth's team at the Charity Organization Society, which had begun a sustained investigation of London poverty. Early the next year she was assigned to the study of the docks. Bare statistics were not enough for her: 'I want local colouring; a clear description of the various methods of employing men, of types of character of men employed, and where they live. Must realise the "waiting at the gates", and find out for myself'.[12]

This was a classic definition of the role of 'participant observer', to which Beatrice applied herself with great zeal. Morning after morning she reported at the dock gates and watched the often brutal struggle for work. She also observed 'the leisurely unloading of sailing vessels, compared to the swift discharge of steamers.'[13] Day after day the entries in her diary record an undiminished sense of shock. Her experiences were digested into an essay on dock life in East London, which was immediately published in *Nineteenth Century*. Beatrice was dissatisfied with this essay, but it was to prove more than capable of extending her own sense of outrage to a much wider circle. At the same time, her prescriptions for reform were also strongly canvassed.

Writing about the behaviour of 'the lowest class of casual labourers', she expressed a mixture of fascination and distress in her contribution to Booth's final research:

> These men hang about for the 'odd hour' work, or one day in the seven. They live on stimulants and tobacco, varied with bread and tea and salt fish. Their passion is gambling. Sections of them are hereditary casuals; a larger portion drift from other trades. They have a constitutional hatred to regularity and forethought, and a need for paltry excitement. They are late risers, sharp-witted talkers, and, above all, they have that agreeable tolerance for their own and each other's vices which seems characteristic of a purely leisure class, whether it lies at the top or the bottom of society.

> But if we compare them with their brothers and sisters in the London Club and West-end drawing-room we must admit that in one respect they are strikingly superior. The stern reality of ever-pressing starvation draws all together. Communism is a necessity of their life: they share all with one another, and as a class they are quixotically generous. It is this virtue and the courage with which they face privation that lend a charm to life among them.[14]

The shock of dockland, red in tooth and claw, of course registered more than a disapproval of poverty and deprivation. The conditions of the dockers went along with radically different attitudes. Dock work was different. Subject to irregular movements of trade, as well as to the other variables we have already discussed, it was strangely pre-industrial in the challenges it posed to normal notions of factory discipline, the rule of the clock and the ordered regularity of work which had become ingrained in Victorian social organization.

Accidents Were Not an Accident

Dock life in London in the declining years of the nineteenth century was hell, and getting worse. In January 1888 the *East London Observer* carried a report of the death of a dock worker, who was discovered in his last minutes at the kerbside. James Butler, who was forty-five, was found by a carman who had seen him sitting by the road, 'apparently very ill'. He was wheeled on a barrow to the London Hospital, where he was found to have died of heart failure. 'At one time deceased was a very strong man, but lately he had become weak', testified his brother at the inquest.[15] True, the weather at the time was bad. That same January, during a fog, numbers of dockers were drowned. Had they 'belonged to a better class of society', reported the *East End News*, 'the clamour . . . would have changed the insouciance of the dock authorities into active measures for the prevention of a similar recurrence but –

> "rattle his bones over the stones
> He's only a docky whom nobody owns".'[16]

Casualties, fatal and otherwise, were by no means confined to the Port of London. The man who was to lead Liverpool's dockers, James Sexton, recorded the story of the accident which disfigured him for life. He got the chance to work over Christmas, on 24 and 25 December, and he was overjoyed, because double-time payments would ensure that his family could celebrate, albeit a day late.

> In the early hours of the morning an incompetent man at the winch and a defective hook on the end of the rope-fall caused me to be struck in the face with a whole sling of bags of grain which broke loose, and I was hurled into the hold of the barge to which the cargo was being transferred

> . . . my face struck the keelson of the barge. My right cheekbone was smashed, my right eye forced out of the socket, and my skull was slightly fractured. But such happenings were too common to be allowed to interfere with work, especially when a rush job like this was being tackled, so I was just hoisted out of the hold and laid in the shed whilst my mates carried on.
>
> I was left there for two hours whilst somebody hunted up a cab – no ambulances were stationed at the docks in those days – and this exposure on a bitter winter's night caused such serious complications that I was detained in hospital for nearly two months, with my head packed in ice for most of the time.
>
> This happened in 1881, immediately after the passing of the Employers' Liability Act, of which I knew nothing – not even of its existence – until I heard about it from one of my workmates . . . who visited me in hospital seven weeks after my admission. He . . . imparted to me something of his belief that I was entitled to compensation under [the Act]. The resident surgeon, who happened to be near, asked my mate for particulars of what had happened. Two days later he told me he thought I was well enough to risk a visit to my employers. He played the part of the good Samaritan so far as to hire a cab and go with me for an interview which did not seem so alluring now.
>
> The boss met the statement of my case with a blunt denial of any liability on his part and raised a second line of defence by pointing out that even if he were liable, I had no claim, as he ought to have had notice of the accident within six weeks of its occurrence. The best he could be induced to do was to say that when I was physically fit he would see what possibility there was of finding some light work for me.
>
> The consequence was that when I got back I was offered a lad's job – driving a winch, with one and six-pence a day less than I had been accustomed to as a 'casual labourer' (when I could get any casual labouring to do!). However, total starvation was the only alternative, so, propelled by the devil of dire necessity, and with the thought of my wife before me, I took it on. I had a broken week, and at the end of it, on reckoning up my time, I found I had earned fifteen shillings. When I crawled round to the pay table to draw that magnificent sum, all that my wife and I would have to live on until another pay day came round, I was 'docked' half a crown for the fare for the cab that had taken me to hospital.[17]

II

Trade Unions in the 1870s

How could men endure such things without resistance? The answer is that they did resist, at every moment when the possibility presented itself. Between 1863 and 1874, industrial output grew by 50 per cent and export volume by 65 per cent (see table 1.1). Here was opportunity.

The three principal ports, London, Liverpool and Hull, all experienced strikes and attempts at trade-union organization on the docks in the

1870s. All of these were of local or at best regional dimensions, although all were influenced by national economic conditions and by national trade-union responses to them. That is why, in order to understand what was happening in our sector, we need also to understand the main features of trade unionism as a whole during these formative years of dockers' organization.

In 1871 the population of England and Wales was 22.7 million, and of Scotland and Ireland 3.4 and 5.4 million respectively. Of these people taken together, 8.2 million men and 3.2 million women were employed. The proportion of people in trade unions was very small, and figures are in any case inaccurate, since no attempt at official counts was made until 1886; but the Webbs calculated a total membership of under 143,000. By 1881 the population had grown to about 35 million for the entire British Isles, and employment had reached 12.7 million. During the decade, trade unionism had expanded to 266,000. What kinds of organizations were involved?

The great 'amalgamated' societies of craftsmen, categorized as the 'New Model' unions in the Webbs' classic *History of Trade Unionism*, had dominated the scene in the 1850s and 1860s: in 1868 they had, along with miners and cotton workers, made up the bulk of membership in the affiliates which formed the Trades Union Congress in 1868. Their leaders had also been the grouping with whom Karl Marx had built the International Working Men's Association, the First International, in 1864. This was the trade unionism which, through the agency of the TUC's Parliamentary Committee, was to campaign successfully for an acceptable legal status, which Parliament finally granted in the Acts of 1871 and 1875. In that year the TUC's secretary, George Howell, declared that 'the legislation with respect to Trade Unions was then so perfect that the natural time had run for the existence of Trade Union Congresses so far as Parliamentary action was concerned'.[18]

Yet the rather complacent craft societies began to lose their dominance over the movement as trade unionism experienced a substantial phase of growth in the early 1870s. Stable non-craft organization already existed in cotton, where, however, it remained localized; and in mining, where it took on national proportions in the 1860s. Two miners' unions could, after spectacular growth in 1873, claim 100,000 members each. Both of them organized all grades of workers. More akin to the cotton unions, where organization was not only local but mainly confined to the skilled operatives, were the unions in iron and steel.

New sections of the working population, however, participated in the sharp increase of union membership in the prosperous years of the early 1870s. They included gasworkers, who formed an East End Union in 1872; London's builders' labourers, who formed their General Amalgamated Labourers' Union in the same year; agricultural labourers, led

by Joseph Arch, whose National Union of 1872 reached a turbulent peak with membership of 100,000 in only eighteen months; and railwaymen, whose Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants dates from 1871. In their efforts to engage hitherto unorganized occupations and industries, all these bodies anticipated the 'new unionism' of the 1880s. In addition, some, such as the agricultural and railway workers, aspired to *national* organization. They were also frequently touched and inspired by the national movement for the nine-hour day, which was accompanied by large and successful strike actions.

In structure and general aspirations, however, they made no dramatic break with the older unions of the skilled workers, and sometimes, as in the case of the railway servants, they depended for encouragement, strategies, and even finance, on middle-class sympathizers. Nevertheless, the union upsurge of these years was substantial, even on the Webbs' calculation quoted above. Others claim a much greater representation at the beginning of the decade, and a sharp rise immediately afterwards, from a total membership of 199,000 in 1866, to 735,000 in 1873.[19] Some of the new organizations were destroyed and most were seriously squeezed in the acute depression of the later 1870s; or again, after partial recovery in 1881–3, by the severe slump of 1887. But vestigial organizations often survived, to reach into and to qualify the 'newness' of the new unionism of the 1880s. Perhaps more important, their members survived, having learned from hurtful experience which only reinforced their efforts when the time became ripe.

Activist farmworkers were victimized and driven for survival to seek work in the towns, where many of them became carters, since their skill with horses was the most saleable asset they could bring to the urban labour market. How many of these displaced people were later involved in the recruitment of carters, cab-drivers and other transport workers to the experimental new organizations which began to develop?

None of the standard trade-union histories which describe this period pays any sustained attention to dock workers' organization or strikes in the 1870s.[20] It has been left to a later generation of labour historians to remedy this omission, and to show that, in London, Liverpool and Hull, at least, the dockers participated fully in the ferment of the 1870s.[21]

Dock Unions: Sectionalism and Casualism

Out of a total employed population of 11.4 million in 1871, 600,000 worked in transport. Their numbers had risen to 900,000 by 1881.

For much of the nineteenth century the London docks were characterized by the fragmented organization of cargo-handling. Small-scale capital dominated many branches of the industry. Different firms specialized in particular operations. Thus there were separate entities in

lighterage, in stevedoring (which was originally the separately organized function of loading ships, as distinct from unloading, but which later came to include all shipboard work, as distinct from work on the quayside and in warehousing). Separate trades, such as tea, timber, coal- and corn-handling, were also owned or operated by distinct enterprises. These subdivisions had to be reflected in the labour force engaged in them. Far from 'dockers' being an undifferentiated mass of interchangeable labour-atoms acting according to textbook notions of individualism, the regular core of port workers formed discrete, highly specialized groups. These developed strong bonds of loyalty and local pride, which in turn could lead to intimate relationships with individual specialist employers.

Nor was this the end of the complicated process, since the division of functions took different forms in the enclosed docks and on the riverside wharves, whilst still other traditions prevailed on the river in the lighterage and watermen's trades. This fragmentation was common to all the main ports of the country, although it was more marked in London than elsewhere. The distinction between shipboard and quayside work, giving rise to the sectionalism of the stevedores, was particularly marked in the capital. There, craft exclusiveness, reaching back to memories of the guild status of the Thames lightermen, and bolstered by the high proportion of 'over-side' transhipment to and from lighters and barges, was also most marked. This is not to say that sectionalism was confined to London: as we shall see, it created problems in the other ports too; but it was most deep-seated in London.

Moreover, the older view of Victorian dock work as an occupation dominated by its casual nature remains broadly true, even after recent historical research has emphasized the complex reality summarized here. There were two elements to the dockers' poverty and insecurity. One was that, even amongst the core of workers who pursued the work regularly, there was a permanent over-supply. This arose partly to suit the port employers' widely fluctuating demands for labour. Their operations were dependent upon tides, weather, seasons and the state of trade. The problem was reinforced by the specialisms we have described, which were rendered even more inflexible by the tendency of dockers, even when short of work, to look for employment only in their immediate neighbourhood. Geographical immobility was thus added to occupational specialization. In the 1870s, the waterfront workers overcame many of these divisions in their early drive for unionization, but as the upturn of trade receded, old sectionalism reasserted itself in the ensuing depression.

At the same time, what stability there had been in the division of labour became more liable to disruption by new types of employers and the growth of capital concentration in the ports. The shipping companies themselves, swollen in size by the need to finance larger steamships and transcontinental refrigeration[22] moved into handling their own cargoes,

as did bulk-handling flour-milling and cement companies. The ship- and port-owners developed new docks to take the larger, deeper draft ships down the estuary at Tilbury, 26 miles from the port of London. These developments destabilized the sectional unions which emerged from the growth of the 1870s, and drove them either to attempt more open methods of association or, working against such adaptation, to turn in on themselves in self-defence.

The other element in the casual nature of port employment was the fact that non-regular workers surrounded the docks, and at certain seasons, or when a general depression closed other jobs and laid them off, would present themselves at the dock gates for hire. This happened, for example, with the gasworkers of the East End during the summer months, when employment in the gasworks was slack, and with agricultural labourers during the winter. Without the protection of all-inclusive unionism, and with casual hiring occurring several times a day, the dock workers' vulnerability from all these causes was of course extreme. This was a longstanding problem. We have evidence of its extent as far back as 1844, when Henry Mayhew estimated the London docks' maximum employment figures at 3,012, while its minimum need for labour was 1,189. At St Katharine's Dock, the jobs available varied between 1,713 and 515, while there was a fluctuation between 4,000 and 1,300 at the East and West India Docks.[23]

London Forerunners

The first record of modern trade unionism in the Port of London is in 1871, a year in which the port employers chose to impose wage cuts. The dockers responded: clergymen conducted their first protest meetings and urged an appeal to public conscience. ('The poor cannot strike,' they advised.) But the dockers won the support of Patrick Hennessey, an Irish tailor and trade unionist, and of Charles Keen, an activist in the First International. Both men were involved in the Land and Labour League, which had been formed in 1869 following a decision of the Basle Congress of the First International in favour of land nationalization. George Eccarius, a friend of Karl Marx, and Martin Boon, a follower of the Chartist Bronterre O'Brien, were the first joint secretaries of this League, and the founding treasurer was John Weston, the Owenite.[24] If the Land and Labour League thus looked back to the Chartist preoccupation with access to the land, which was becoming less and less appropriate to a fully industrial society, it none the less offered a link to a developed organizational experience.[25]

In December 1871 Hennessey and Keen helped the dockers to form the Labour Protection League (LPL). At first, there was only poor support from the general dockers, the biggest stimulus being to the

stevedores, who had set up five branches and recruited 3,000 members by 1872. Enrolment followed on the wharves, involving corn-porters and then general labourers. Building and engineering labourers, dustmen, slopmen and scavengers also joined its ranks, which added up to 30,000 by October 1872.

Sectional strikes in different parts of the port won wage increases – mostly to 5*d.* an hour. The objective of the 'tanner' was canvassed – seventeen years before its realization in the great strike. Mass unionism had arrived, and its day was celebrated in an East End demonstration of 20,000 people, complete with bands and banners.

But problems arose in the government of the LPL. Its leaders were not subject to membership control, for its growth had been too rapid to allow for the careful creation of any adequate central representative machinery; there was no co-ordination between the fifty branches. Later in the 1870s its leaders evolved into a rather conservative clique, and were ousted from office. Even in the upsurge, some groups preferred to form sectional unions of their own, such as the lightermen and the coal-whippers. Separatism was also evident within the LPL as corn-porters and others formed occupational, rather than local branches. Their aim was the preservation of job control; port-level solidarity was secondary to that purpose. The bulk of the union's funds remained in the branches, which were largely self-governing.[26] The Executive Committee had a very weak constitutional position. Efforts were made to overcome this by the appointment of district delegates with powers to visit and inspect branches, but with no powers to sanction strikes.

The recession of the later 1870s wore away the LPL. Such an experience was not uncommon for trade unions at that time. The leaders attempted an early form of federation, and at a conference of the LPL, the Carmen's Union, the Lightermen and Watermen, and the Railway Servants, a loose alliance with a joint Executive Committee was formed to co-ordinate industrial action. Entitled the Amalgamated Labour Union, there is no evidence of its having been effective.

A lock-out at the Millwall Docks in 1876 drained the LPL's funds and reduced its membership to about 2,000. By the 1880s it was further reduced to just six branches, five of which were of stevedores on the North Bank, the other of corn-porters on the South.

These two sectional survivals from the London dockers' struggles of the 1870s made significant contributions later on – the corn-porters in London, and the stevedores ultimately in three major ports. It is reasonable to say that 'mass unionism on the London waterfront began in 1872',[27] and that the LPL was more than ephemeral. But when the Labour Protection League changed its name to the Amalgamated Stevedores' Labour Protection League, the corn-porters' branch opted for secession and revived as the South Side Labour Protection League in the great movement of 1889. It was ultimately absorbed into the TGWU

in 1922. The stevedores, on the other hand, kept up a sectional organization down to very recent times. This was strong enough to frustrate the objective of dockers' unity. Moreover, London dockers' unionism in the 1870s was local in its ambitions, and this distinguishes it sharply from the new unions which were to come at the end of the next decade. Many years later those local and sectional bodies were to try to recruit further afield. But we shall consider this change in their style, after the Second World War, in volume II.

Stevedores: a Sectional Model

The stevedores' now separate organization was the most lasting result of the movement of the 1870s. As export shipboard workers, they had a measure of mobility throughout the docks of the north side. Most worked for small master-stevedoring companies, in whose ambit the very smallness of scale fostered a marked occupational identity. Such employers were relatively weak in any dispute, and wages of 6*s*. a day (of nine hours) were possible, with 1*s*. an hour overtime. More, the masters recognized the union, something which the big shipping companies resisted until the First World War. Union stevedores, whilst not enforcing a closed shop, obtained preference of employment, and calling-on rules were elaborated and accepted by the masters. Union cards were inspected at the call-on, providing a sanction against arrears and ensuring membership stability. In return, the employer derived real benefits, as the union promoted order and maintained a high quality of work. This is therefore an example of closed, craft-like unionism which consciously restricted entry – so much so that the death-rate amongst members regulated the rate of entry, with stevedores' sons having preference. No one under the age of eighteen was admitted unless he was a stevedore's son, in which case he would join at one-quarter of the standard entrance fee. Adult entrants had to have a background of shipwork, and many were ex-sailors. Even so, the union sometimes closed its book to all except sons of members. Ben Tillett, although a former seaman, was refused admission when he arrived in the Port of London from Bristol. The stevedores also had a large Irish membership, which helped to cement group solidarity at a time when the Irish question was becoming an urgent issue.

The stevedores' closed society suffered from inflexibility in the face of technical and structural change, a defect inherent in this kind of unionism. Coming into existence in the last days of the sailing ship, it failed to adapt as the new oceangoing steamers, owned and run by large-

scale companies, took over. The change brought with it the building of new docks, including that at Tilbury, remote from the stevedores' established controls. The big shipping companies defied the union's rules and controls, hiring non-unionists in the docks which they operated with their own stevedoring businesses. The union faced the classic choice of closed unions in this situation: either to amend and dilute its restrictions on entry in order to recruit the workers in the new companies and locations, or to preserve its working rules by accepting a reduced sphere of influence confined to its existing territory. It chose the latter, more cautious, defensive option with consequences which were to mark port unionism deep into the twentieth century. These go a long way towards explaining the problematic management of dockers' unionism at key moments in the TGWU's history. But the immediate consequence was that non-unionism emerged during the 1880s in the new docks and in the employ of the big shipping companies, and a new, less rigid United Stevedores' Union was formed to cater for them. The original five-branch union stayed within its limited horizons, remaining isolated also from the labour movement on general questions of trade unionism and politics, preferring to foster a tight, status-conscious social life within its fraternity and community.

The Workmen's Elite: Lightermen

The organization of lightermen in the Port of London dates back to Elizabethan times, when it took the form of a liveried company. (They were originally 'watermen', but usage of this term declined as passenger trade on the river dwindled.) They were the elite of all labour in the port, with a formal apprenticeship system. The guild system, in which journeymen could expect to make the transition to become masters in their turn, gave way to wage-earning capitalist employment relations with increased scales of operation, and the masters broke with the apprenticeship system in the mid-nineteenth century. The result was that the wage-workers formed the Amalgamated Society of Watermen and Lightermen in 1872, thus joining the general wave of unionization of the period. Although its formation was stimulated by a wage dispute, for a long time it remained heavily preoccupied with the defence of the apprenticeship system in order to perpetuate the elite status of its members.

Some picture of the ancient traditions of the watermen is recorded in the memoirs of Harry Gosling, who was to become the founding president of the TGWU. Gosling was the great-grandson of a Thames waterman who owned several barges, in addition to his 'dumb craft', the chief of which was a clipper called the *Effort*, moored in the Surrey docks to receive merchandise which was bound for Ramsgate, Margate, Herne Bay, 'and sometimes to Chatham and Sheerness'.[28]

At the age of fourteen, Gosling himself was bound apprentice for

seven years at a ceremony in the hall of the Watermen's Company, St Mary-at-Hill, in a room 'practically unaltered since 1785'.

> My father and I arrived at the court on the day I was to be bound, and were ushered in by a uniformed beadle who used to act as a kind of river policeman, a modernised type of those who in earlier days impressed men for service in the Navy . . . Under the flags of the Watermen's Company, in a high-backed state chair, sat the Master of the court, wearing a heavy chain of office . . . on the wall hung a great oil painting of the Judgement of Solomon . . .[29]

The beadle solemnly proclaimed that William Gosling wished to bind his son apprentice for seven years. Then the master of the court asked the boy whether he was willing to be bound, and after he and his father had made the appropriate avowals, indentures were signed, 'and copies handed to us both'. The terms were tough. Each apprentice swore

> to learn his Art, and with him (after the manner of an Apprentice) to dwell and serve upon the river of Thames from the Day of the Date hereof until the full End and Term of seven years from thence next following, to be fully complete and ended; during which Term the said Apprentice his said Master faithfully shall serve as aforesaid, his Secrets keep, his lawful Commandments everywhere gladly do; He shall not waste the Goods of the said Master, nor lend them unlawfully to any; He shall not commit Fornication, nor contract Matrimony within the said Term; He shall not play at Cards, Dice, Tables nor any other unlawful games whereby his said Master may have any loss. With his own Goods or others during the said Term, without License of his said Master he shall not buy nor sell; He shall not haunt Taverns nor Play Houses, nor absent himself from his Master's service Day nor Night, unlawfully, but in all things as a faithful Apprentice he shall behave himself towards his said Master and all his during the said Term.[30]

In return for all this the master also undertook certain responsibilities: 'He his said Apprentice in the Same Art, which he useth, by the best means that he can, shall teach and instruct, or cause to be taught and instructed, feeding unto the said Apprentice Meat, Drink, Apparel, Lodging, and all other necessaries according to the custom of the City of London.[31]

The whole induction ceremony was dauntingly conducted and, at the end, young Gosling was issued with a tract entitled *The Honest Waterman*, an inspirational account of the life of Thomas Mann, a saint among Thames watermen. The virtues of Thomas Mann were abundant, but deferent to a fault:

> He (the Honest Waterman) was a very early riser, and would often do nearly a day's work before the other people were up in the morning; and then he was so very honest in never asking more than his fare, and so very

> civil, and his boat and his person always so clean and neat and comfortable, that I suppose he had generally more fares than other watermen . . . His constitution being excellent, his attention unceasing, and his deportment invariably correct, business of course increased, and he never by intemperance abused the good health by which he had been blessed . . . Not only in his youth, but when far advanced in years, it was commonly his custom to row as if matched against time, and after rowing twenty or thirty miles he would row in to the Irongate Stairs by the Tower in the lively spirited manner in which he set out. He made a point, however of never rowing for a wager, and was never known to lay a bet of any kind . . . When discussions on the subject of parliamentary reform were so generally held as often to come under the notice of our watermen, he would calmly endeavour to inculcate just and moderate sentiments or change the discourse, by showing the much greater importance of self-reformation . . . His charity was so universal, so constantly and daily practised that the detail of it would be as monotonous as it was unceasing, and he died worth something under three thousand pounds.[32]

'It was', wrote the future leader of the transport workers, somewhat wryly, 'with this bright beacon shining ahead that I emerged into the everyday life of the river on June 13th, 1875'.[33]

As evidence of the attitudes of Gosling's workmates, we should note that they excluded from membership of their organization a new labour force, the bargemen, which arose as the enclosed docks and the canal system were developed. These workers did not have a licence to work on the Thames tidal waters and were, for this reason, ostracized by the Lightermen's Union.

> The lightermen's clannishness [and] isolation . . . were common to all waterside groupings, although perhaps not to the same exaggerated extent. Waterside unionism was essentially defensive and restrictive in character. This was so whatever the trade, the port or even the country. In a casual, overstocked labour market such a form of organisation followed inevitably from the uncertainty of employment. The 'new unionists' of 1889 were to find that this was the framework within which they had to work. Expansive gospels of general unionism carried little weight on the waterfront.[34]

This thesis is overstated: the new unionism strove against sectionalism for good pragmatic reasons. But it was a long, hard struggle, in which sectional unions often played a retarding role but sometimes provided checks and balances against over-powerful bureaucracy in the more inclusive organization.

Liverpool Dockers

The history of trade unionism on the Liverpool docks has been overshadowed by the focus upon London and the great strike of 1889.

Since the 1970s, however, Liverpool has found its historian, Eric Taplin, who has provided accounts to parallel the local studies of London produced by John Lovell.[35] Taplin is able to demonstrate that important activity, including unionism and major strikes, were features of Liverpool's history as they were of London's. These reached climactic proportions in the 1870s.

The economics and labour relations of the Liverpool docks had much in common with those of London. The same picture emerges of a core workforce of experienced, specialized and relatively immobile dockers, employed by a variety of bosses: master-stevedores, master-porters, some owned by shipowners and some engaged under contracts, the shipowners themselves who did their own stevedoring and porterage, and the Mersey Docks and Harbour Board, owner of the port, which had its own (smaller) labour force. As in all the ports of the major trading nations, an upheaval in scale and modes of operation was surging through the last quarter of the nineteenth century, as steam replaced sail and big capitalist shipping companies in consequence began displacing the small capital of the 'master' cargo-handling firm.

Taplin is as concerned as Lovell to dispel the legend of the dockworker as uncouth and unskilled. He also rejects the idea that port employment was wholly casual.

> most dock workers looked to the docks as their sole source of employment, frequently within a narrow range of docks. Thus the majority were known by their employers and would receive preference in employment over those less well known . . . The genuine floating labourer who drifted into the docks in search of work would be taken on only if the supply of experienced, known dockers was fully employed . . . the inexperienced worker was slow, inefficient, and a danger, for the job required considerable physical stamina allied to a knack of handling and moving heavy weights. Such expertise could not be picked up in a matter of days but was the result of many years' experience.[36]

Strikes in the port have been traced back to the 1850s, and occurred also in 1866. In the early 1870s Liverpool shared in both the general trade boom and in the wave of unionization. A minor strike in one dock in 1870 led to the brief appearance of a 'rudimentary' trade union, the Steamboat Labourers' Friendly Burial Society. In 1872 the nine-hours' movement swept through the city, involving carters, omnibus workers, shop assistants, rag-pickers and many others. Two middle-class sympathizers, William Simpson and James Samuelson, businessmen active in Liverpool's Liberal politics, emerged as spokesmen for the unskilled, one advocating 'moral force' and mediation, the other encouraging 'New Model' unionism, friendly-society methods, conciliation and arbitration.[37]

On the docks, pay claims, strikes and deputations from the men led by

Simpson and Samuelson rained down on the employers throughout 1872. Many of them were successful. Another ephemeral union was formed – the Liverpool North End Steamship Dock Labourers' Friendly Burial Society. Its innocuous name misled, for in addition to friendly benefits it submitted claims to the employers that only society members be engaged as foremen and that society men would not work with non-members. These views were wholly unacceptable to the employers and remained so for forty years. A strike called in support of the claims failed and the society is not heard of again. Within a year the wave of disputes petered out, as the boom was succeeded by a trade recession in 1873–4. Defensive strikes on a local scale did occur in 1876 and 1877, showing that the will to resist worsening conditions was present.

The general character of all the dockers' activity of this decade was, here as well, its persistent sectionalism. Cotton-porters, provision- and grain-warehouse porters, in seeking parity of wages with general dock labourers, acted in isolation from each other. The spread of improved wages from dock to dock was haphazard and uneven. This reflected the immobility of the workforce, which, as in London, was accustomed to seek employment only at a dock, or a group of docks, where the men were known. The prevalent sectionalism also accounts for the failure of the 1870s movement to produce a stable and lasting trade union.

Rivalries and jealousies were reflected in the small and transient societies which appeared, confined to either the North End or the South End Docks. Eric Taplin comments that

> A further divisive factor resulted from religious differences among the dock workers. A large proportion of Liverpool dockers were Irish Catholics. The recruitment of Irish labour was not a peculiarity of Merseyside but it took an acute form in that no other large urban area in nineteenth century England was so divided between Catholics and Protestants. It entered into most aspects of Liverpool's business, political and social life and the docks were no exception. Broadly the Protestant dockers were to be found at the south end docks, the Catholics at the north end. It is, however, no more than a rough generalisation as there were substantial enclaves of Protestants at the Bootle end of the docks and Catholic groups at the Toxteth end. Although the line of docks from south to north was unbroken, in practice there was a sharp labour division between the two. South end labourers rarely sought work at the Bootle end or vice versa . . . The walking time from the north end to the south end, different types of job specialism, smaller docks at the south end, different types of vessels, different types of employers all played their part, but the division between Catholics and Protestants may have been one feature . . . an undercurrent of petty argument and recrimination . . . weakened unified action but in the event of a major conflict the labourers acted together and religious differences were subsumed for the more important immediate issue at stake.[38]

Taplin also finds that the absence of strong local trade unionism outside the docks – a reflection of the frail manufacturing sector in the city, which rendered the Liverpool Trades Council a weak reed – were factors helping to explain why the dockers' organizations were so ephemeral. Further, and related to this, was their dependence upon their patron Simpson, a philanthropic middle-class extrovert who rigidly discouraged self-help through unionization. In London the dockers freed themselves from similar tutelage at an early stage, and had the benefit of leadership from Hennessey and Keen, who although not dockers were trade unionists and political radicals.

Sectionalism in Liverpool, however, did not give rise to the permanent division between stevedore and docker which rooted itself in London. The explanation seems to be that Liverpool was, at an earlier date than London, dominated by the major shipping companies to which both stevedores and dockers looked for employment. Quayside and shipboard workers thus had more mutual affinities than in the capital. The same was true, as we shall see, of Hull. When trade unionism became permanently established in the northern ports, the fragmentation of the workers into groups and specialisms, although it created obstacles to unity, was less deeply entrenched than the institutionalized segregations in London. After the formation of the TGWU, of course, the London stevedores found themselves the magnet for all subsequent dissaffections, including the provincial ones, which plagued the general union for generations.

The Mersey Struck

After the recession of the mid-1870s, Liverpool docks exploded in mass strike action in 1879. The whole docks complex came to a standstill in a dispute that lasted three weeks and involved the seamen as well as the dockers. The spark was a planned and announced wage cut, concerted by all the port employers. It was enforced at first at the North End, where the dockers struck, to be followed in sympathy by the South End – an act of solidarity without precedent in the port. The seamen joined the stoppage with their own grievances, and by that stage no fewer than 35,000 were on strike. The leaders, though still including Simpson and Samuelson, now counted rank-and-file dockers in their numbers. The strike occasioned some violence, and the artisan-dominated Trades Council withheld its support. The numbers out of work because of the stoppage reached 60,000. Blacklegs were imported from Hull and elsewhere, but they refused to work when they understood the situation. There was large-scale police mobilization and troops were also drafted into the port. After three weeks the dockers capitulated.

Yet, amazingly, the dockers regrouped their forces, formed unions in

both Liverpool and Birkenhead,[39] and renewed their effort to advance wage claims. The two unions formed a joint committee and presented a single claim for the restoration of previous wages. At arbitration the union case prevailed, following which triumph the dockers' union sought vainly to persuade the employers to establish a Board of Conciliation. The wage settlements of the 1880s in Liverpool remained unchanged until 1915, when a war bonus was added.

But three unions emerged from this conflict: the two dockers' organizations and one of the seamen. Their success followed recourse to arbitration in 1879–80, a move reflecting their defeat in the previous year's strike, and the continuing influence of Samuelson and Simpson. The unions created at that time were modelled on artisans' methods, and they did not survive the later depression of the 1880s. But the movement was not a purely local event, for Hull too saw a serious dock strike in 1879.

During the depression years of the 1880s, the American Knights of Labour carried on some clandestine work on the Liverpool docks, in which the young James Sexton was involved. The Knights of Labour had been founded in the United States in 1869 by a group of garment workers led by Uriah Stevens. Because they were convinced that trade unions were handicapped in a prejudiced environment, they 'imitated capital' by organizing in secret. The society was not referred to by name, but was usually called 'the Five Stars'. The result was slow growth: eighty assemblies by 1875 and 52,000 members in 1883. But by 1886, secrecy set aside, membership rocketed to more than 700,000. By then the union had already crossed the Atlantic to Liverpool; later it was also to appear elsewhere. The Knights' organization harked back to Robert Owen and the Grand National Consolidated Union of the 1830s in Britain. 'An injury to one is an injury to all,' they proclaimed. The union was open to all races, to men and women equally, and to skilled and unskilled workers. Only bankers, lawyers, traders in alcoholic liquors, and stockbrokers were excluded. Terence V. Powderly, Stevens's successor, was a pioneer of the concept of 'One Big Union', including all who laboured. This idea later found room enough to grow in Liverpool.

Meantime the Liverpool Union of Stevedores, Labourers and Quay Porters played a large part in relief work for destitute port workers. Neither this organization nor the Knights survived for long, and the Birkenhead union also failed, leaving the Mersey with no dockers' unions at all. The seamen's union formed in 1879 disappeared from the records after 1880.[40]

The Third Port: Hull's Dockers

The third great estuarial port of the industrial revolution was Hull, whose merchant class had already between the sixteenth and eighteenth

centuries built a thriving network of trade with northern Europe, to which was added, in the nineteenth century, intercontinental trade, including imperial raw-material imports and the vast exports of the new industries of West Yorkshire and the Midlands. This growth sparked a huge population explosion – from 28,000 in 1801 to 122,000 in 1871. In the last quarter of the century the population again more than doubled, reaching 240,000 in 1901. By the mid-century the transport trades engaged 23 per cent of the male working population, and the complex of docks, largely augmented by investment from the railway companies – eager to create trade and cargo movements from the industrial heartlands – grew until it eventually extended over 7 miles of the north bank of the Humber, completely dwarfing the pre-industrial harbour at the mouth of the river Hull.

Alongside the docks grew up a range of industries for handling and processing the raw materials which formed a large proportion of Hull's trade: cement, flour-milling, seed-crushing, animal feedstuffs, chemicals, timber storage and processing, warehousing, and paint and dyestuffs. All were characterized by the same heavy manual-labour needs as were required on the docks. To this extent Hull was typical of other ports. Its relative isolation from other urban and industrial centres also left it surrounded by a hinterland of arable, and therefore labour-intensive, agriculture. The Hull employers drew on these sources of casual and seasonal labour, which rose to an immigrant flood during the agricultural depression of the 1870s and onwards. This workforce added to the sizeable migration from Ireland, which became as large, proportionately, as that into London and Liverpool. The Irish often arrived as 'navvies', to dig out the new docks, and stayed on to become dockers.

Although, therefore, Hull provides another classic case of a pool of casual, 'unskilled' labour for the tasks of cargo-handling, the student of the period, Raymond Brown, is as concerned as Lovell in London and Taplin in Liverpool to dispel the stereotypical picture.

> There has usually been a tendency to think of the dockers as a homogeneous group of men with common aims and ideals shaped by their environment of mean living conditions, low and irregular pay, casual employment, and unskilled work which they or anyone else with reasonable strength could do . . . This is much too simplified, and dockers have very properly always regarded themselves as in some measure specialists . . . There was a tendency to emphasise the social rank of, say, a deal carrier as opposed to a lumper or a raff-yard labourer although all were involved in the same sort of work, namely carrying timber. This insistence upon the slightest difference in skill and experience of one group of dock workers as against any other was, of course, to add to the more obvious problems of union organisation.[41]

Hull's skilled workers, who dominated the Trades Council, took their full part in the national nine-hours' movement in the early 1870s. Their

example was quickly followed by raff-yard labourers (timber-porters) on the Hull docks, and by dockers in Grimsby, on the south bank of the Humber. Several new unions appeared: Grocers' Assistants, Chemists' Assistants, and Hairdressers, calling for reduced shop hours. The following year, marine firemen on both banks struck for improved pay and conditions, and in the important adjacent agricultural districts trade unionism was spreading rapidly in rhythm with Joseph Arch's national movement. The Hull Labourers' Union and the Hull Dockside Labourers' Union were formed at this time. The Dockside Union drew up rules to limit working hours, which it submitted to the employers along with a wage claim.

A port-wide strike was staged in support of these demands, and during it the quays were 'almost at a standstill'. The strike collapsed at the end of three weeks, after an influx of blacklegs: seamen and farm workers from Lincolnshire. Some of these rural immigrants were subsequently enrolled by the Lincolnshire Labourers' League, which claimed to have 700 members in Hull in 1873.

There were further dock strikes in 1872 and 1877, and again in 1879. Throughout this period, and also through the 1880s, a local Dock Labourers' Union continued in existence. Local unions of seamen and ships' firemen also came and went, and conducted a series of strikes. The year 1881 was climactic in Hull's trade-union history, as wave after wave of strikes swept through both skilled and unskilled trades, and a reconstituted Trades Council now included dockers' and seamen's representatives. Amongst the major strikes was one by the dockers, who demanded that the basic wage of 5*d.* an hour be raised to 6*d.* – another move anticipating the cause of the men of 1889 in London. Despite the records of previous unionism on the docks, this strike threw up an evident need for concerted leadership, and a Hull Labour League was formed, which, as well as assuming responsibility for the conduct of the strike, intended to work for the amalgamation of dockers, seamen and firemen. Although all three groups were on strike together, in the midst of the dispute the seamen announced the formation of their own Hull Seamen's Union. Fighting between dockers, blacklegs and police was followed by serious arson on the dock estates, but after three weeks the dockers returned to work at the old rates, as did the seamen. (A section of the firemen gained a rise of 1*s.*) 'But the real significance of the strike is that the three unions which took part did not break up at its conclusion and they were all existing strongly in 1889.'[42]

The end of the period before the 1889 explosion in Hull was marked by a symbolic occasion when the trade and friendly societies clubbed together in 1886 to provide a farewell dinner to honour the local Tory leader A. K. Rollitt, who had played a role in the labour disputes of the preceding years similar to that of the 'outside' sympathizers in London and Liverpool. The next generation of leaders acknowledged by Hull's

labourers were to be quite different. They were no longer outside philanthropists, but national, working-class representatives.

Political Action: Samuel Plimsoll

We have seen how, during the 1870s and early 1880s, port unions in key areas rose and fell with the state of trade. Echoing G. D. H. Cole, we would claim that checks on the industrial plane tended to stimulate political campaigning and vice versa. This process can be clearly seen at work in the movement to defend seamen from unsafe ships and mercenary shipowners.

Samuel Plimsoll was elected as Liberal MP for Derby in 1868, and from the moment of his adoption he styled himself 'the sailors' friend'. For certain, seamen needed friends in the 1870s. The most elementary safety provisions were not simply neglected, but commonly deliberately flouted in order to profit from insurance claims on lost ships and cargoes. Between 1867 and 1882 more than 1,600 sailors perished in collisions; 519 passengers went down with them. But 31,768 crewmen and 5,468 passengers were drowned from other causes. Between 1874 and 1885, 251 steamers foundered, as did 1,657 sailing ships, with a total death-roll of 12,494. Nearly 40,000 deaths in sixteen years, a large proportion of which were due to negligence, and far too many to criminal exploitation of insurances: here was a classic example of Victorian values, fully operational.

The statistics by themselves are too cruel to be understood. George Howell, the TUC's secretary, illuminates them with a single illustration. Visiting Plimsoll at home one day, he found his host was distraught, collapsed on a couch. He rallied himself, and read aloud to Howell a letter he had just received from a new widow. Her husband's ship had gone down with all hands. The man had expected that this would happen: the ship, he knew, was a 'coffin ship'. His wife had begged him not to go, but he had asked, 'What am I to do? If I refuse, there is no other berth.' He hoped against hope that the hulk might struggle through. But on the night he sailed, he sent home his best clothes, his watch and everything of value that he had been carrying. 'His wife knew it,' wrote Howell. 'It was his farewell . . . She, with her two young children, never saw him again.' Howell was shattered. Silent, he blinked back the tears from his eyes. Thinking that his visitor was wanting in feeling, Plimsoll looked up impatiently and saw the distress written plainly all over him. From that moment, the two men shared a bond of commitment which never wavered.[43]

Plimsoll collected a massive dossier about the deployment of unseaworthy ships; about undermanning, overloading, misloading and over-insurance. In spite of every possible litigation, his charges held

water. Plimsoll demanded – and, after making a great fuss, got – a Royal Commission to consider his heartbreaking allegations.

At the Leeds TUC in 1873 copies of Plimsoll's book *Our Seamen* were distributed, and George Howell was invited to organize a 'workmen's committee' to lobby for the establishment of an appopriate inquiry.[44] Howell secured the support of Lord Shaftesbury and other peers, and that of his fellow trade unionist George Odger. Behind this team, say the Webbs, he enlisted 'practically the whole force of the trade union movement'.[45] Throughout 1873 a sustained campaign of mass meetings spread throughout the country, from Newcastle-upon-Tyne down to Plymouth, and from Cardiff to Greenock. All major ports were covered, as well as dozens of lesser centres. A great meeting took place in Whitby. The main cities held large rallies. A pamphlet, *Ship Ahoy!*, was distributed in huge numbers. In 1873 the Royal Commission was set up, and it reported in August the following year. Meanwhile, Plimsoll introduced Bills for a Merchant Shipping Survey in 1873, and again in 1874. Both were defeated. After the General Election of 1874, a third Bill was brought in in 1875, only to be abandoned in a great parliamentary scene. At last, in 1876, the Merchant Shipping Act made it through to the statute book. Without doubt, that agitation had its influence on waterfront trade unions. The Webbs record that 'the powerful Shipping Trades Council of Liverpool . . . which played an important part in Samuel Plimsoll's agitation . . . was broken up in 1880 by [a] quarrel' between constituent unions.[46]

Soon, however, trade-union political campaigning was to take on new, direct forms, which would ultimately transform the relationships between philanthropists and their intended beneficiaries. This began during the upsurge of waterfront unions but unlike them political action on behalf of waterfront workers could not be restrained by downturns in the economy, or by the retreat or even collapse of trade-union organizations. Indeed, it came to a head during the middle years of the decade, while such unions as survived along the docks were in greater trouble.

The Quarries Also Stir

Distanced from the ports, but connected with them by their trade, was another rugged group of workers in the great slate mines of Wales. Events during the 1870s and 1880s led them eventually to become the core of the Transport and General Workers' Union in North Wales in 1923. How did they embark on such a road?

The North Wales Quarrymen's Union was founded in 1874. The industry had enjoyed a boom until 1879, and membership reached 8,000 out of a possible 14,000.[47] Powerful bonds united the communities of this region, who maintained the Welsh language and had no use for

English either in their work or in their union meetings.[48] Immigration was negligible in statistical terms, with the result that social organization was close and homogeneous. (Few Irish had settled in North Wales, despite its nearness; some English professionals joined the town populations, but usually these were people apart, maintaining their own culture and identity.)

The quarries belonged to the super-rich landowners. Lord Penrhyn ensconced himself in a massive castle, as if he were a feudal baron. He employed 2,500 men in Bethesda, and as late as 1899 the Penrhyn quarries earned him a profit of £133,000, which he added to his rental income of between £60,000 and £70,000. In 1869 George William Duff Assheton-Smith inherited 36,000 acres and the Dinorwic quarries, which brought him more than his annual rental income of £42,000.[49]

The intermediaries who managed the quarries, however, were often English. The men distrusted them, the more so because many could not speak Welsh, and lacked all practical skills.

> Slate-quarrying was a Welsh-speaking industry . . . consequently the whole terminology of the craft was Welsh[50] and it seemed impossible to the men that it could be practised in English. John Williams, a quarryman, recalled in 1942 how an English manager visiting his quarry saw a man smoking, and asked, 'Do you allow this idleness?' The accompanying agent explained that the man was, in fact, studying the rock as well as smoking. This episode, concluded Williams, proved that 'a quarry cannot be worked in English'.[51] A hundred years earlier, in the 1840s, a David Jones had sung:
>
> In workplaces here in Wales
> See Englishmen interfering;
> But you must get Welshmen to break the stone,
> For the rock does not understand English.[52]
>
> 'The English element', explained Robert Parry to the annual conference of the union in May 1882, 'was . . . very damaging to the success of the quarrymen.'[53] Few present would not have nodded in agreement.[54, 55]

In 1874 the mock-baronial owners and their imported managers confronted an untried trade union which, however, could rely on two advantages – the temporary boom in trade, and the resources of a close community culture as well as the bonds of class. Assheton-Smith's managers at Dinorwic tried to crush the new organization in April by refusing work to those of its members who refused to resign. Only eleven men chose this option; 2,200 loyal unionists were locked out. Within five weeks they had won their point. The contagion spread next to the workers in the Bethesda quarries of Lord Penrhyn who, having already given support to their brethren in Dinorwic, went on to call for

higher wages themselves, together with revisions in their contracts. The dispute was a bitter one, but most of the union's programme was conceded in September. However, the local managers (those Englishmen) flouted the new terms, provoking a fresh strike. Three managers were dismissed and replaced. This was an astonishing demonstration of the union's power. It was in the aftermath of the drama that the union's membership rose to more than 8,000 in 1878.

The gains were shortlived. The boom gave way to a slump in the following year: it lasted until the late 1890s, and 'the union came perilously close to extinction.'[56] Membership slid to under 3,500. But it survived, and the triumph of 1874 had created an indelible trade-union tradition on which to draw in the turbulent years which lay ahead.

III

Out Into the Open

The sum of these experiences seems perfectly clear. Port labour was not easy to organize, but it operated under conditions which made trade unionism seem necessary to increasing numbers of workers. Other groups of allegedly 'unskilled' people shared this dilemma. As the first unions formed ranks, they commonly encountered fierce opposition from employers. That opposition led the dockers, and many other groups in the 1870s, into much more frequent strikes, which were used as a means of developing organization. The 1870s witnessed the first of a series of 'strike waves' which accompanied – indeed promoted – the spread of trade unionism to wider and wider sections of the working class right through to the 1920s. An early statistician of strikes wrote in 1880 of strikes as 'a disease, and a very grave disease [which] shows no sign of having run its course', whilst George Howell, reviewing the 1870s, spoke of 'a period of strike epidemics'.[57]

Trade upturns made association a practical option, increasingly inevitable. Downturns sometimes smashed, and always greatly enfeebled, the new associations, just as they commonly eroded union support in other industries and trades. Employers had not yet learned to live with organized labour. But as the idea took hold, trade unionism became a continuing commitment, more and more rooted among workers even when it was difficult, if not impossible, to proclaim it openly. This is why the semi-clandestine Knights of Labour put out its links in the Liverpool docks, having traversed the Atlantic to do so. By the late 1880s the Knights had discarded secrecy in America and were leading mass struggles. And at that point in Britain, the hour of new unionism, out in the open and defiant, had finally come.