

ABSTRACT.

WORKING CLASS ORGANISATION, INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND THE LABOUR UNREST

1914-1921.

ANTHONY JOHN ADAMS.

This study assesses the impact of the years 1914 to 1921 on British labour organisation and industrial relations. By combining local studies with national sources the thesis provides a measure of corrective to the 'view from the centre' approach to twentieth-century labour history and a new perspective from which to view the period. In Section I comparative studies of Sheffield, Pontypridd and Liverpool offer explanations for regional differences in the development of labour organisation. These local studies focus upon the consolidation of labour forces and the dimensions, timing and explanation of Labour's fluctuating electoral fortunes. A second Section considers the changing power relationships between officers, activists and membership in the Co-operative Union, National Union of Railwaymen, Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers & Firemen and the South Wales Miners' Federation. A re-evaluation of the role of labour leadership contributes to a critical appraisal of 'rank and filist' interpretations of labour history. In studies of the railway and mining industries it is argued that the centralisation of industrial relations was not simply imposed upon labour by employers and the state. Trade unions played a larger and more positive role in the development of a centralised industrial relations system in these industries than is generally acknowledged. The thesis concludes with a contribution to the current debate between the 'revolutionary' or 'rank and filist' school and its critics in the following areas: the causation of labour unrest; the nature of state intervention; the character of labour leadership and the causes and timing of the rise of labour.

WORKING CLASS ORGANISATION, INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS AND THE LABOUR UNREST

1914-21.

Submitted for the Degree of Ph. D.

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SECTION I

THE LABOUR MOVEMENT AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

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INTRODUCTION

The period 1914-- to 1921 was one of profound change for the economic, social and political structures of Britain. The First World War affected in some way almost every aspect of life for both combatants and those on the 'Home Front'. For labour a sustained period of low unemployment from the opening months of the war until the Autumn of 1920 established favourable conditions for organisation. Trade union membership more than doubled from 4.1 million to 8.3 million between 1914 and 1920.¹ During the war trade unionism was further strengthened by the recruitment into the armed forces of over a third of the male workforce.² Those who remained experienced a substantial improvement in their bargaining position with employers, particularly in the war related sectors of industry. Despite initial fears of a return to high levels of unemployment with demobilisation in 1919, most unions retained much of their wartime strength during the first two years of peace.

A major stimulus for workers to use their enhanced bargaining power was the rapid increase in prices between 1914 and 1920. As the cost of living index rose from under 110 on the eve of war to 276 in November 1920, workers strove to keep pace with rising prices by exerting collective pressure for higher wages.³ But in the early years of the war strike levels remained low despite the failure of wages to keep pace

¹Department of Employment, BRITISH LABOUR STATISTICS: HISTORICAL ABSTRACT 1886-1968, 1971, Table 196, p. 395.

²H. Wolfe, LABOUR SUPPLY AND REGULATION, 1923, p. 2. See also P. E. Dewey, 'Military Recruiting and the British Labour Force during the First World War,' HISTORICAL JOURNAL, 27, 1984, pp. 199-223.

³Department of Employment, 1971, op. cit., Table 89, pp. 166-67.

with prices in many industries. During 1915 and 1916 a total of under 5.4 million working days were lost through strike action compared to over 9.8 million in 1914, the great majority of which occurred in only the first eight months of the year before the outbreak of war.⁴ The strength of patriotic feeling meant that strikers risked villification from all classes of society.

In 1917, however, signs of increased war weariness emerged as war losses continued to mount at an alarming rate and conditions on the 'Home Front' deteriorated. Strike levels increased sharply and labour protest meetings and demonstrations became more frequent and widespread, as well as significantly better attended. Although industrial conflict was prominent in the unrest of 1917, especially among the engineers, discontent exhibited itself over a wide range of issues. The most widespread causes of unrest appeared to be food supply and profiteering.⁵ The high prices and periodic acute shortages of food resulted in rioting in some parts of the country. Almost everywhere in working class communities there was profound anger over the perceived inequalities of sacrifice exemplified by the contrast between the long hours spent in food queues and the news of vastly inflated war profits made by many businessmen. Overcrowded housing and the reduced quantity and quality of beer also provoked protest during 1917.⁶ With the exception of the resurgence of patriotic feeling and a consequent hiatus

⁴ Calculated from C. J. Wrigley, (ed.), A HISTORY OF BRITISH INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS: Vol. II, 1914-1939, 1987, p. 15.

⁵ B. A. Waites, 'The Government of the Home Front and the "Moral Economy" of the Working Class', in P. H. Liddle, (ed), HOME FIRES AND FOREIGN FIELDS: BRITISH SOCIAL AND MILITARY EXPERIENCE IN THE FIRST WORLD WAR, 1985, pp. 175-93.

⁶ Commission of Enquiry Into Industrial Unrest, 1917. Summary of Reports of the Commission. Cd. 8662-8668.

in the unrest during the German 'Spring Offensive', discontent and militancy remained high during 1918.

The single most important change brought by war was the dramatic extension of state intervention in economic affairs. The organisation of production and the mobilisation of manpower for 'total war' forced government into ever greater regulation and control of increasingly scarce resources. By 1918 government controlled large areas of the economy notably in the coal, rail, shipping and munitions industries. The acute shortage of manpower also forced the government to regulate the supply of labour. As a result the role of government in industrial relations was transformed between 1914 and 1918.⁷ The state was inexorably drawn into industrial disputes either directly as employer or indirectly because of the need to maintain production. The combination of labour shortage and state intervention contributed to many trade unions winning recognition from employers for the first time. State control of industry also boosted demands for the replacement of private ownership with nationalisation particularly of mines and railways. Government intervention also resulted in greater control over labour. The 1915 Munitions of War Act, although falling short of direct industrial conscription, introduced a range of co-ercive powers including important restrictions on labour mobility, such as leaving certificates, and munitions tribunals which, from 1916, had the power to imprison workers for breaches on industrial discipline. These measures and pressure for the removal of pre-war union 'restrictive practices'

⁷See C. J. Wrigley, 'The First World War and State Intervention in Industrial Relations, 1914-1918', in C. J. Wrigley, 1987, op. cit., pp. 23-70.

contributed to substantial unrest particularly in the engineering industry.⁸

The first thirty months of post-war reconstruction were of great significance in shaping the character of inter-war Britain. Runciman has highlighted the "...sudden but shortlived explosion of aspiration..." which followed the war.⁹ Working people were apparently not prepared to allow a return to pre-war conditions. As well as demanding improved standards of life, labour sought "...a recognition of their heightened position in the hierarchy of power."¹⁰ The war, the Russian Revolution, and the opportunity to create a new world excited people's minds and expanded their horizons. For some trade unionists this meant the retention of wartime gains such as recognition and national collective bargaining. Others sought more fundamental change in the form of nationalisation. Support for the idea of workers' control also gained great currency both within and beyond the trade union movement.¹¹

The Labour Party with its new socialist constitution fought the 1918 general election with a blue-print for a 'New Social Order' whose "Four Pillars" were: "Universal Enforcement of the National Minimum"; "The Democratic Control of Industry"; "The Revolution in Finance"; and

⁸J. Hinton, THE FIRST SHOP STEWARDS' MOVEMENT, 1973, especially chapters 4 to 7. C. J. Wrigley, DAVID LLOYD-GEORGE AND THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT, 1976, chapters VI, IX & X.

⁹W. G. Runciman, RELATIVE DEPRIVATION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE, 1966, p. 55.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 58.

¹¹See, for example, the opinion of F. S. Button (Member of the Executive of the Amalgamated Society of Engineers) that "Yesterday strikes took place for the recognition of the trade union, tomorrow the demand will be for the control of industry." See also the assertion of Lord Leverhulme that "The tool-user must become joint owner of the tool he wields." Both in S. J. Chapman, LABOUR AND CAPITAL AFTER THE WAR, 1918, pp. 159; 39.

"The Surplus Wealth for the Common Good."¹² Labour's vote of over 2,400,000 represented a seven-fold increase over its 1910 total. While the impact of the extended franchise on the Labour vote remains disputed, it appeared, particularly after the party's strong showing in Municipal elections in 1919, that Labour had become a major political force.¹³ Co-operators similarly re-organised their political effort during the war. Having previously relied upon Parliamentary lobbying in 1917 the Co-operative Union decided to put forward its own candidates in Municipal and Parliamentary elections. After the war co-operators looked forward with greater optimism to the establishment of a Co-operative Commonwealth. One leading co-operator looking back upon the impact of war and the 1917 decision to enter politics observed:

...in less than three years of war, the Co-operative Movement fully learned what seventy years of peaceful trading had only partially taught - the lesson that between Co-operation and Capitalism there is a deep, abiding, and natural economic antagonism...¹⁴

As soon as the war was concluded, with workers released from the self-imposed constraints of patriotism, Britain experienced a previously unparalleled outbreak of industrial unrest. During 1919 the number of people directly involved in strikes peaked at over 2.4 million, almost double the previous high point registered in 1912. In 1920 the total

¹²The Labour Party, LABOUR AND THE NEW SOCIAL ORDER; 1918 Draft Report on Reconstruction.

¹³For the debate over the effects of the increased franchise, see: H.C.G. Matthew, et al., 'The Franchise Factor in the rise of the Labour Party', ENGLISH HISTORICAL REVIEW, Vol. 91, October, 1976, pp. 723-52; M. Hart, 'The Liberals, the War and the Franchise', ENGLISH HISTORICAL REVIEW, Vol. 97, October, 1982, pp. 820-32; D. Tanner, 'The Parliamentary Electoral System, the 'Fourth' Reform Act and the rise of Labour in England and Wales', BULLETIN OF THE INSTITUTE OF HISTORICAL RESEARCH, Vol. LVI, 1983, pp. 205-19.

¹⁴A. Barnes, THE POLITICAL ASPECT OF CO-OPERATION, 1926, p. 26.

number of strikes reached an unprecedented 1,600. In 1919 and 1920 union density exceeded 50% for the first time, and the last until 1946.¹⁵ While the continued high levels of inflation made a major contribution to the strike wave a number of other more or less tangible factors also contributed. One legacy of the war effort was a tired and overworked labour force, the result of exceptionally long working hours and the increased pace of production. Prominent in any catalogue of causes of the industrial unrest must also be the fear of post-war unemployment and the erosion of skilled workers' pay differentials. More generally, continued revelations of "excess" profits and poor housing continued to agitate the workers' minds in reconstruction Britain.¹⁶

Post-war Britain therefore appeared to be a society in turmoil. These years witnessed a major struggle between the forces of collectivism, headed by trade unions, Labour and co-operative societies, and individualism led by employers and the majority of the Conservative Party. Concurrent with this struggle, and sometimes overlapping it, the industrial wing of the labour movement was engaged in repeated confrontations with employers and the state which at times appeared to pose a challenge to the established social order. While there was no immediate threat of revolution there was considerable speculation that, against a background of the destruction of monarchies and empires across

¹⁵J. E. Cronin, *LABOUR AND SOCIETY IN BRITAIN, 1918-1979*, 1984, pp. 241-43; G. S. Bain & R. Price, *PROFILES OF UNION GROWTH*, 1980, pp. 37-38.

¹⁶For further consideration of the effect of profiteering on unrest particularly in wartime see, B. A. Waites, in Liddle, 1985, op. cit. On pay differentials see K.G.J.C. Knowles & D. J. Robertson, 'Differences Between the Wages of Skilled and Unskilled Workers, 1880-1950', *BULLETIN OF THE OXFORD INSTITUTE OF STATISTICS*, Vol. 13, 1951, pp. 109-27. On housing see M. Swenarton, *HOMES FIT FOR HEROES*, 1981.

Europe, Britain too was on the brink of some major social upheaval.¹⁷ The government was in little doubt that if a challenge to its authority was to emerge then it would come from organised labour. With the parliamentary Labour Party only some 59 strong there was little prospect that a parliamentary challenge would be effective. In labour circles an intense debate developed over the use of 'direct action' to enforce economic or social change. Indeed, there were a number of episodes during the post-war years of heightened tension between labour and the state where the advocates of confrontation appeared about to gain the upper hand. The opening skirmishes occurred in January and February 1919 with the outbreak of unofficial strikes in Belfast and Glasgow and on the London Tube. The greatest worry in government circles was that a challenge would emerge from the Triple Alliance of rail, mining and transport unions. In order to avert a crisis in the spring of 1919 the government granted major concessions to both the railwaymen and miners. Strikes and demonstrations among troops demanding speedy demobilisation and the spread of trade unionism among the police during 1918 led to some speculation within the Cabinet concerning the ability of the government to maintain order.¹⁸

The possibility of Triple Alliance strikes also emerged during September 1919, when the Railway unions eventually struck on their own; in the spring of 1920; and again in the late autumn when a national

¹⁷ On the European dimensions of the unrest see, D. Mitchell, 1919, RED MIRAGE, 1970; C. S. Maier, RECASTING BOURGEOIS EUROPE: STABILISATION IN FRANCE, GERMANY AND ITALY IN THE DECADE AFTER WORLD WAR I, 1975.

¹⁸ A. Rothstein, THE SOLDIERS STRIKES OF 1919, 1980; V. L. Allen, 'The National Union of Police Officers', ECONOMIC HISTORY REVIEW, Vol. XI, 1958, pp. 133-43; B. Thompson, QUEER PEOPLE, 1922, p. 276. For Cabinet assessments of the temper of the troops see, Cab 23/9, War Cabinet 514, 8.1.19.; Cab.23/9, War Cabinet 522, 30.1.19; Cab 21/146, Part 3, 6.11.19.

miners' strike developed over the 'datum line' proposals. During the summer of 1920 there appeared a possibility that a general strike might result from labour opposition to British intervention on the side of Poland in their war against Bolshhevik Russia. In August the Councils of Action created to co-ordinate labour's pressure on government seemed poised to embark on 'direct action' to prevent the outbreak of war and defend the world's first 'worker's republic'. The crisis quickly passed amid claims that the government had never intended to return to war against the Russian Bolsheviks.¹⁹ During the final months of 1920 economic conditions began to change with the onset of depression. During the first half of 1921 prices, industrial production and employment all fell rapidly. Unemployment rose from under 4% in November 1920 to 15.4% by March 1921.²⁰ The impact of the depression was also quickly felt in a downward pressure on wages. In the coal industry the national average price of coal per ton fell by over 15% between the last quarter of 1920 and the first quarter of 1921.²¹ Prices in the exporting districts such as South Wales fell even more precipitately. The government, confronted with the prospect of subsidising the coal industry by £5 million a month, moved swiftly to return the industry to private ownership. Left to face the market without government subsidy, coalowners swiftly moved to dismantle the national wages system notifying swingeing pay reductions on a District basis. In South Wales where export prices had fallen the most, wage reductions of over 45% were proposed.²²

¹⁹S. White, 'Labour's Councils of Action, 1920', JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1974, pp. 99-122.

²⁰Department of Employment, 1971, op.cit., Table 89, p. 167 (cost of living); Table 160, p. 306 (%age unemployed).

²¹Calculated from B. Supple, THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH COAL INDUSTRY, VOL. IV, 1913-36, TABLE 4.2(A), p. 164.

²²Ibid., p. 155; 159.

The Miners' Federation voted by over three to one to resist any return to District wage negotiations and the battle lines were drawn for a major confrontation between the miners, the heavyweights of the labour movement, and the government and coalowners.²³ The miners turned to their allies in the Triple Alliance who were, along with a number of other industries, also faced with proposed wage reductions.²⁴ In the event, amid widespread recrimination and accusation of betrayal, the much vaunted Triple Alliance strike never took place. The strike was called off on the 15th April - Black Friday - by the leaders of the National Union of Railwaymen and the Transport Workers' Federation. Whether Black Friday was primarily the result of leadership spinelessness, genuine confusion within the Triple Alliance, or antipathy among the rank and file because of fears of unemployment, the consequences were clear. The miners were left to struggle alone and their strike ended after three bitter months in almost total defeat. Other unions similarly found themselves unable to resist attacks on wages and conditions. Black Friday and the continued rise of unemployment also ended any lingering hopes that labour might employ 'direct action' to impress its claims on government. The post-war industrial challenge of labour had ended.

This thesis considers certain aspects of the relationship between working class unrest and British labour organisation in the period from

²³The voting on a proposal to return to district negotiation was 237,750 for and 719,860 against. M.F.G.B. Special Conference, 18.3.21, p. 45.

²⁴Railway Review, 15.4.21., article by G.D.H. Cole.

1914 to 1921. The first Section assesses the development of labour as a movement at the local level. Studies of Sheffield, Pontypridd and Liverpool, examine the fortunes of labour organisation, in particular the Labour Party, and the progress of efforts to draw political, industrial and consumer organisations into a closer alliance. A brief conclusion to the Section offers a comparative assessment of the significance of the period for labour.

A second Section switches attention to the national level. Four labour institutions are studied in a re-assessment of certain common approaches to the nature and causes of the labour unrest between 1914 and 1921. The first chapter focuses on the changing attitudes of co-operation to Labour and trade unions and considers the extent of any long run, 'natural' rise of labour. It is argued that among co-operators, at least, the conversion from a primarily Liberal outlook to support for Labour only really took hold after 1914. A further theme of each of the studies in this Section is the growth of centralisation. In the view of a number of labour historians the trend towards a greater centralisation of government within labour organisations has contributed substantially to the nature, causation and eventual frustration of labour unrest during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Much of this interpretation has relied upon studies of the engineering industry, the debate is widened below in studies of the National Union of Railwaymen, the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen and the South Wales Miners' Federation. Both in these trade union studies and the chapter on co-operation, it is argued that centralisation of internal government was not, as has been argued elsewhere, imposed upon a reluctant rank and file by a combination of leadership pressure and a range of exogenous forces. Rather activist reformers often played a significant part in determining the timing and

character of any moves towards greater internal centralisation.

The studies in Section II also consider the responsiveness of labour bodies to the aspirations of their constituents. Particular attention is paid to internal struggles over 'frontiers of control' within labour bodies between officials, activists and membership. Theoretical approaches to the role of leadership in labour institutions are also examined. A central conclusion is that traditional perspectives of labour institutions which posit a dichotomous divide between a theoretically militant rank and file and a naturally conservative leadership cannot be sustained. Such a stereotypical view of leaders and led is found to be inappropriate in a number of cases. A tri-partite model is advanced which distinguishes between the interest of the rank and file, leadership and activist. This model, if still imperfect, has more to offer than previous interpretations.

The three trade union studies in Section II present the opportunity for a re-assessment of established explanations of changes in the industrial relations machinery. It is argued that too much emphasis has been placed upon a collaborative triumvirate of state, employers and trade unions in the creation of a centralised system of national collective bargaining. In the coal and rail industries it appears that the unions and in particular the most radical groups within them, were an important factor in the emergence of such a system. This Section, therefore, poses a number of challenges to those who have sought to explain much of the industrial unrest as a reaction against the emerging corporatist embrace of the state and the machinery of conciliation.

A fuller discussion of the issues and debates raised in Sections I and II is conducted in a separate introduction and conclusion to each

Section.

The final chapter of thesis reviews the debate over the rise of labour and the causes of labour unrest between what has been termed the 'rank and file-ist' school and some of its recent critics.²⁵

Much of the history of twentieth century labour institutions has relied heavily upon national source material which has led to an interpretation overly influenced by the view from the centre. To some extent this approach has tended to underestimate any alternatives to the natural evolution towards the post-Second World War establishment of a highly institutionalised labour movement and industrial relations system. This impression is enhanced by the approach adopted by many historians of the Left which, having dismissed the official machinery of labour as part of capitalism's corporate system of control over workers, focuses on singularly atypical communities and, most of all, upon unofficial activity.²⁶ For such reasons the detailed impact of membership activity on labour's mainstream organisations after 1914 has received relatively little attention.

This thesis contributes to correcting that imbalance, and by combining local and national sources, both diminishes the influence of

²⁵ Authors such as R. Price, K. Burgess, J. Hinton and R. Hyman, have all been described as part of the 'rank and file-ist' school. Their critics include A. Reid and J. Zeitlin.

²⁶ See, for example, S. Macintyre, *LITTLE MOSCOWS: COMMUNISM AND WORKING CLASS MILITANCY IN INTER-WAR BRITAIN*, 1980; J. Hinton *THE FIRST SHOP STEWARDS MOVEMENT*, 1973. For a fuller discussion of these tendencies in the study of labour history see, Editorial, 'The Labour Party and Social Democracy', *HISTORY WORKSHOP JOURNAL*, No. 12, Autumn 1981, pp. 1-7.

the centre while avoiding a parochial fixation on vanished solidarities. My intention has been to avoid the temptation to generalise from local experience. Therefore the overall emphasis of the thesis is on the analysis of events at a national level; an analysis which is informed by, rather than dependent upon, local studies. Thus the national studies in Section II (below) are rather more substantial than their local counterparts in Section I. Many of the sources employed tend to illuminate only the attitudes and actions of the activist, although press reports and records of mass meetings can offer a wider perspective. However, the following studies do not attempt to recreate community; rather, the focus is on one aspect of working class activity, the development of those representative organisations collectively described as the labour movement.

SECTION I - INTRODUCTION

...the most troublous and stormy age of profound
social crisis ever known in this country.
A. Hutt.

Local studies of official labour organisation in the inter-war period are, sadly, relatively few in number. Perhaps it is because labour's challenge was so central to post-war politics that historians have sought to explain changes in the movement solely from a national viewpoint. The greatly increased role of the state in labour affairs certainly enhanced the power and influence of national labour figures and organisations. However, labour leaders could hardly afford to ignore pressures from below. By the end of the war the movement was in a state of flux. In 1918 the new Labour Party constitution included, for the first time, a role for local parties. At the same time the union leaders were reportedly struggling to re-establish their authority over a rebellious rank and file. Today's political columnist has learnt not to underestimate the role of the labour activist in recent years. Similarly the historian cannot afford to ignore the aspirations and actions of those in the localities.

The studies in this Section are intended to offer some measure of corrective to the 'view from the centre' approach to twentieth century labour history. In choosing Sheffield, Pontypridd, and Liverpool it was perhaps inevitable that the diversity of labour experience would become apparent. Sheffield with a predominance of metal and allied industries became the leading English centre of wartime industrial unrest. Politically too Sheffield proved exceptional. In 1926 Sheffield became the first major provincial city to be administered by Labour. Throughout our period the city had a reputation as one of the most "forward" Labour

cities in the country. Liverpool in contrast was a noted black spot for both the industrial and political movements. Religious sectarianism and the prevalence of casual labour severely handicapped labour organisation in the city. Pontypridd, by contrast with both Sheffield and Liverpool, was dominated by one industry - mining.

In spite of these substantial differences one theme of this section is the similarity of certain trends of change experienced in all three locations. Each chapter examines the development of official labour organisation and discovers a common tendency towards greater centralisation of organisation and authority in the local movement. Moreover, in each case political, industrial, and co-operative organisations were found to be growing, more or less rapidly, together. Both trends were particularly strong during the post-war years. A third element of each study is the electoral fortunes of the Labour Party. Here too there was a measure of common experience, as it is argued that Labour's electoral improvement represented a decisive break with the pre-war situation despite the continued differences in the standing of Labour in each area.

To avoid excessive repetition, in addition to this common core, each study tackles particular issues most appropriate to its own peculiarities. Thus the study of Sheffield - a city noted for its industrial militancy - considers the reaction of workers during the key passages of the unrest in an assessment of the nature of post-war militancy.¹ In the study of the much smaller Pontypridd it was possible

¹Wartime development and in particular the Shop Stewards' movement in Sheffield are not considered in detail here largely because they are already the subject of a published study. See B. Moore, 'Sheffield Shop Stewards in the First World War', in L. M. Munby (ed), THE LUDDITES, 1971.

to confront the issue of community so significant in the context of the South Wales coalfield. The chapter poses a challenge to those who have stressed the degree of continuity in the relationship between 'Labourism' and notions of community in South Wales over the early part of the century. The final chapter in this section addresses the issue of the extent to which Liverpool's individuality was eroded by the homogenising influence of the war. These issues of diversity and similarity in the post-1914 labour experience are returned to in a brief conclusion to the section.

CHAPTER I - SHEFFIELD

Organised labour in Sheffield emerged from the First World War stronger and more self-confident than at any time in its history. Trade union recruitment thrived on wartime full employment. There was also a significantly more militant attitude particularly among the engineers. The Sheffield Labour Party achieved a major breakthrough after the war establishing itself as a major force in the political life of the city. For the co-operative movement in Sheffield the years from 1914 to 1921 witnessed increased membership and a major re-orientation of the movement towards the socialist wing of the local labour movement.

Wartime conditions played a significant role in these developments. In 1917 the government's own Commissioners reported that workers in and around Sheffield "...have been for three years working at high pressure during too long hours and under strenuous workshop conditions never before experienced." This harsh factory life created much unrest which was further fuelled by food shortages, allegations of war profiteering, state restriction of free speech and the success of the Russian Revolution. During the later war years Sheffield was renowned as the English centre of opposition to the government's wartime industrial policy.¹

The immediate post-war years witnessed a new peak of activity in almost every section of Sheffield's official labour movement. Workers

¹In 1914 there were under three thousand ASE members employed in Sheffield, by 1919 the figure had reached 5,416. See S. Pollard, A HISTORY OF LABOUR IN SHEFFIELD, 1959. p. 338. Commission Of Enquiry Into Industrial Unrest, Report of No.3 Division, Yorkshire and East Midlands Area. (Cd. 8662-8668).

had good cause to be discontented. Many, particularly the skilled, found that their wages failed to keep pace with wartime inflation. The cessation of hostilities signalled a fall in demand for Sheffield's munitions. As a result, according to the Sheffield Independent "...the chief sufferers are the workers whose earnings have been reduced by about 40% by the abolition of overtime, meal-time pay and weekend duties." The rate of inflation continued upwards during 1919 and 1920. Thus merely to maintain standards of living it was necessary to adopt an aggressive stance in pay bargaining.²

There were sharp, but shortlived, increases in Sheffield's unemployment before the major slump of late 1920.³ These provoked considerable reaction from labour organisations conscious of the history of trade slump and mass unemployment in previous post-war periods.

Poor social conditions similarly generated widespread resentment. Seebohm Rowntree calculated that "...in Sheffield there was a shortage of 10,000 houses." The prospect of employment in the munitions factories had drawn people into Sheffield from the surrounding area. During and after the war both private and public sectors failed to build anything approaching the required number of new houses. In 1919 a Sheffield Labour Councillor stated that he "...found that 3,000 people died every year because of the housing conditions."⁴

²See Pollard op. cit., p. 327; Sheffield Daily Independent 7.12.18., [henceforth Independent]. The Independent was one of two main daily papers in Sheffield, its Lib-Lab views made the paper a sharp critic of the labour movement in post-war Sheffield.

³In January 1919 registered unemployment reached 36,000, in November 1919 over 10,000 were out of work. Independent, 11.1.19.; 15.11.19..

⁴Independent, 18.11.18.; 25.11.19..

Inadequate and unequal educational provision also provoked much disquiet in labour circles. Working class children were particularly badly affected by the city's limited educational facilities. In 1920 there were only enough places in secondary education for 8 per cent of the children in that age group. The system of school fees ensured that very few of these came from working class families.⁵

I. Sheffield Labour and Social Issues.

The Labour Party's soaring post-war electoral success was founded on its oft-repeated commitment to alleviate working class social deprivation. How did labour in Sheffield organise its response to these issues from 1918?

The housing issue had a high profile in labour's post-war agitations in Sheffield. The problems of housing quality and quantity featured prominently in Labour's election material, and Labour councillors regularly highlighted the issue in the council chamber and the press. Much of the campaigning effort outside of electoral politics was conducted through pressure groups. Labour lent its support to the "Sheffield Federated Health Association", under whose aegis an association of the homeless was formed in June 1920 to highlight the issue - although little was heard of it after its initial burst of activity.⁶

In 1921, when rent increases were threatened, labour mobilised opposition through a "Tenants Defence Association". By April the

⁵Pollard, op. cit., p. 262.

⁶Independent, 15.6.20.

Association had around 1,200 members. At a "largely attended" meeting on 10th April the platform's step-by-step policy was defeated by an amendment from the floor to organise an immediate rent strike. However, the collapse of industrial labour after Black Friday, 15th April, was reflected in the disappearance of support for militant action over rents. In June the Trades & Labour Council (henceforth T. & L.C.) refused even to organise a local protest petition, relying instead on the ritual lobbying of Sheffield M.P.'s.⁷

An improvement of the city's educational provision was similarly an insistent Labour demand at elections. Although given slightly less public prominence than housing, within labour's ranks education received much greater attention. In 1921 it was the cuts in education which drew the loudest protests from trade union and political bodies alike. Unable to organise mass campaigns for the extension of state and local education, much effort was concentrated on working class self-education. Trade unions, political bodies and the co-operative movement were all involved in the establishment of the Sheffield Labour College in 1921. Activists, keen to emancipate their fellow workers, initiated a whole network of classes. Most were organised under the auspices of the Workers Educational Association or the Central Labour College, although there were many other local bodies involved, even individual trade union branches ran totally independent classes.⁸

⁷Ibid., 11.4.21.; Sheffield Trades & Labour Council Executive Committee Minutes 7.6.21.. The "Tenants Defence Association" was in effect a labour body. The Secretary was an I.L.P. member and Labour council candidate and the Chair, Mrs. Wilkinson, was also President of the T. & L.C.

⁸Independent, 8.3.21.; Sheffield Independent Labour Party Minutes, 10.2.21.; Executive Committee of the T. & L.C. Minutes, 8.2.21.; Pollard, op. cit., p. 263; Sheffield No. 1 Branch A.S.L.E. & F. Minutes, 12.5.20.; Brightside & Carbrook Co-operative Society Political Council Minutes - *passim*.

Labour attitudes to the dangers of drink also suggested that many labour activists put substantial emphasis on working class improvement. In 1919 prohibitionist sentiment remained strong among Sheffield's labour activists. This placed them out of step with large numbers of workers who engaged in protests over beer shortages in May and June 1919. Pubs closed in order to ration beer supplies - were forced to open by bands of workers roaming the city. Reportedly "...quite a little army of thirsty hunters have intimated that unless there is an alteration quickly they will storm the public houses wholesale... The food queues promise to have been a mild scourge compared with the menace of the beer hunters." Workers in heavy industry were particularly concerned. Local foundry workers' officials asserted that "...the shortage of real beer..." was one of the issues which "...had influenced the men to such a pitch that they were almost ready for anything." Confronted by widespread and growing discontent, both in Sheffield and elsewhere, the Cabinet withdrew all quantity restrictions and agreed steps to improve quality.⁹ Workers had organised their own "direct action", outside the formal structures of labour - and did so to great effect. Although deeply divided, labour gradually moved away from what was an increasingly unpopular prohibitionist stance after the war.¹⁰

In spite of labour's efforts in the realm of social policy it is perhaps significant that Labour councillors and the T. & L.C. did more on behalf of various groups of municipal employees than they did over either housing or education.

⁹Independent, 23.5.19.; 26.5.19.. War Cabinet (583) 23.6.19..

¹⁰Independent, 9.2.20.. In 1920 at a local labour conference a policy of public ownership of the liquor trade was only endorsed following strenuous denials that nationalisation would lead to prohibition.

Unemployment initiated more committed activity by labour than any other social issue. It was, of course, the social problem with the most important and immediate industrial ramifications. The widely anticipated post-war slump failed to materialise, but when unemployment in Sheffield increased towards the close of 1919 the response was very swift. A charged atmosphere had developed because of government reductions in the out-of-work donation. Violent protest against unemployment broke out in November. A large demonstration of the unemployed and strikers led to "...lively scenes outside Sheffield Town Hall... police and iron gates were necessary to restrain the eager throng." Labour councillors and T. & L.C. leaders led a deputation to the City Council. Meeting inside the Town Hall the councillors could clearly distinguish cries from the crowd which apparently included "rush the gates" and "three cheers for the worker's republic." The Council was persuaded to unanimously endorse a Labour demand that the government should provide "...work or full maintenance for the unemployed." It was also agreed to establish local public works, and rates of relief were subsequently increased. This bout of unrest subsided as unemployment levels stabilised in December.¹¹

Despite the onset of a major trade slump at the close of 1920, unemployment in Sheffield, although rising, had not returned to the levels of late 1919. A mass meeting on 22nd December was completely peaceful. However, its leaders - members of the newly formed Communist Party - threatened illegal and violent action. Unemployment rose steadily during the early months of 1921. The Communist Party dominated "Local Unemployed Committee" set out to organise the workers and

¹¹Independent, 27.11.19.; 4.12.19.; 6.12.19.; T. & L.C. Minutes, 2.12.19.; 7.12.19.

establish a register at the Engineers' Institute. A series of meetings were organised outside the factory gates and Employment Exchanges.¹²

During March demonstrations to the Board of Guardians achieved an increase in the rates of relief, and an organised boycott of the despised "task work" assigned to those on relief resulted in a reduction of hours. Support for "direct action" by the workless grew still stronger during April. Illegal assemblies and marches secured a new meeting hall for the unemployed and a further increase in the rates of relief. The Independent reported that on the 12th April:

...the 'test-labour' system of the Sheffield Board of Guardians was reduced virtually to a farce... by the organised efforts of the Sheffield (unofficial) Unemployment Committee... about 1,000 presented themselves for 'test-labour' and the Guardians were faced with an insurmountable difficulty as a result.¹³

It was only after the collapse of the Triple Alliance on Black Friday that rates of relief began to be reduced. With the unemployed increasingly unable to win concessions, clashes between police and the organised unemployed became increasingly violent during the remainder of 1921.¹⁴

Trade unions in Sheffield adopted a variety of tactics in their attempts to avert unemployment. The first, and most insistent, post-armistice demand by Sheffield's unions was for a reduced working week. This was partly a reaction to the long hours worked in wartime,

¹²Independent, 18.12.20.; 23.12.20.; 7.1.21.; 26.1.21.

¹³Independent, 15.3.21.; 17.3.21.; 11.3.21.; 24.3.21.; 13.4.21.

¹⁴Independent, 19.5.21.. Executive Committee Minutes T. & L.C., 16.8.21..

but it was largely regarded as an insurance against unemployment.¹⁵ The issue was kept alive locally by local strikes of bakers and steam service workers in 1919 and 1920. The limitation of overtime was strongly favoured by activists and several unions were active on the issue during peaks of unemployment. In February 1921 one Sheffield firm locked out moulders because they limited overtime hours and night shift time with the express purpose of spreading the available work among as many men as possible. The dispute was apparently resolved in the men's favour.¹⁶

Unions were regularly chastised for deliberately restricting production to prevent unemployment. Despite repeated official denials it seems probable that some degree of "ca-canny" was indeed practised. At a mass meeting of senior and unskilled engineering workers in April 1920 the men rejected the introduction of payment by results. Reportedly, "...one member who said that they did not want increased production while hundreds of thousands of people were unemployed was loudly applauded."¹⁷

II. Sheffield Labour and the Industrial Unrest.

The second part of this study examines Sheffield's involvement in the key episodes of the post-war industrial unrest.

As elsewhere the early weeks of 1919 were fraught with tension.

¹⁵On 1st December 1918 Sheffield No.1 Branch of A.S.L.E. & F. demanded strike action to enforce the 8 hour day and on 8th December 1918 a mass meeting of engineers voted for a 36 hour working week.

¹⁶Minutes of Sheffield No. 1 Branch A.S.L.E. & F., 16.11.19.; 30.11.19.. Independent, 19.2.21..

¹⁷Independent, 12.4.20.

Unrest in engineering, which provoked general strikes in Glasgow and Belfast, was also evident in Sheffield. As early as 4th January "industrial trouble" was forecast as lay-offs increased and it was reported that "...certain extremists... are manoeuvring behind the scenes in the hope of promoting Soldier's and Workmen's Councils in Sheffield." In the large engineering works the atmosphere remained very tense throughout January. At the end of the month an unofficial strike movement started in the collieries around Sheffield. It was sparked off by the refusal of the owners to cease work during the surface worker's "snap time". Within a couple of days over 150,000 were out. The Yorkshire Miner's Association were pressed into making it official. The union officers quickly reached agreement with the owners, but the activity of unofficial pickets delayed the re-start at several pits. Railwaymen in Sheffield appeared equally keen to "down tools" in sympathy with the strike on the London Tube. Local strike preparations were finalised and A.S.L.E. & F. members appeared particularly anxious to enter the fray, complaining "...that too much time is being spent in negotiations..."¹⁸

As in Glasgow the mood of the engineers provoked much disquiet. Shop stewards were reportedly fomenting a general strike by "sounding out" other Sheffield trade unionists. Contact had been made with Clydeside shop stewards and a conference of the "Allied Engineering trades" was held in Sheffield on the eve of the Glasgow "40 hour strike". The press speculated that "...events are drifting into an industrial crisis... into trouble of a kind which none can see the end." However, clearly unsure of rank and file support, local leaders delayed

¹⁸Independent, 4.1.19.; 20.1.19.; 22.1.19.; 23.1.19.; 24.1.19.; 27.1.19.. Minutes of Sheffield No. 1 A.S.L.E. & F., 6.2.19.; 7.2.19.. Independent, 7.2.19.; 8.2.19.; 10.2.19..

any decision on the Scottish "call to arms". There appears to have been insufficient support for a strike either amongst engineers or other trades. The shop stewards did not meet again until 11th February when they heard encouraging - and misleading - reports of success delivered by delegates from Clydeside and London. Even in this highly charged atmosphere a motion for an immediate strike was defeated in favour of the platform's proposed ballot on the strike question. The time for action had long passed, the Glasgow stoppage had been on the wane since 31st January and was finally called off the day after this Sheffield conference. It appears that inadequate local preparation and insufficient motivation amongst Sheffield workers, rather than poor Glaswegian organisation, prevented the spread of the "40 hour strike".¹⁹

In September 1919 the railway strike created an industrial crisis of truly national proportions. On this occasion it was the government who appeared to be spoiling for a fight. Their "definitive offer" to the railwaymen involved substantial wage reductions for some rail workers. In Sheffield officials of the National Union of Railwaymen reported that the response to the strike call was the best ever. The strike had an immediate effect on Sheffield industry - within three days 7,000 men were laid off.²⁰

Sheffield railwaymen made strenuous efforts to involve other trade unionists. Their strike bulletin called for Triple Alliance support and the men aired their case at factory meetings throughout the city. A

¹⁹Independent, 28.1.19.; 10.2.19.

²⁰See P. Bagwell, THE RAILWAYMEN, 1963, p. 383; Independent, 26.9.19.; 27.9.19.; 29.9.19. The branch ledger of Sheffield No.1 A.S.L.E. & F. - striking in sympathy with the N.U.R. - showed that only three out of over 500 members worked during the strike while 7 non-unionists received strike pay.

packed "Special Meeting" of the T. & L.C. "heavily defeated" a call for a general stoppage but unanimously committed itself to "...give active support to those on strike." Only one delegate voted against a resolution from a miner's delegate urging a full Triple Alliance strike. During the stoppage strikers received financial assistance from the Sheffield Co-operative Societies. Tension increased as the strike continued. Union officials and local labour leaders were kept busy attempting to restrain the men, who had stoned troops brought into the city to unload trains and guard the station.²¹ In Sheffield the settlement appeared very unpopular. On 5th October "...a large crowd gathered outside the Union headquarters... awaiting the official verdict and when the terms became known there was considerable dissatisfaction." The return to work was delayed and a mass meeting on the 6th unanimously carried a resolution expressing regret at the terms of the settlement. Evidently Sheffield railwaymen felt that defeat had been snatched from the jaws of victory.²²

In a period when international developments frequently dominated the front pages of the British press it was the Russian Revolution which most stirred Sheffield's labour activists. During the engineering strike of May 1917 a local reporter observed that the Russian example had increased the self-assertiveness of the strikers. Reportedly some of the "youngbloods" even believed they were starting a British revolution. The creation of the Soviet regime transformed the whole political outlook of the Attercliffe Independent Labour Party (henceforth I.L.P.). In January

²¹Executive Committee T. & L.C. Minutes, 29.9.19.. T. & L.C. Minutes, 30.9.19.. Independent, 3.10.19..

²²Bagwell has suggested that the settlement was popular among rail workers - possibly such adverse reaction was minimised by the editor of the N.U.R.'s Railway Review. See P. Bagwell, op. cit., pp. 398-99. Independent, 6.10.19.; 7.10.19.

1919 they attempted to alter the Party's "Principles" to read "The I.L.P. is a revolutionary political organisation, its ultimate object being to establish a Socialist Soviet Republic." During 1919 the "impending social revolution" was frequently referred to at labour meetings in Sheffield. However, few were prepared to adopt the political methods of Bolshevism. Established British organisations had to be tried and tested before the Russian alternative was adopted by all but a few activists.²³

There was greater unanimity over the defence of "the workers of Russia" from "capitalist intervention". In July 1918 the T. & L.C. unanimously urged "...the Labour Party to take all possible steps to prevent this outrage on the rights of labour..." In the post war years opposition to conscription and Russian intervention became linked in a twin pronged assault on government policy. In May 1919 the T. & L.C., again unanimously, urged affiliated bodies to "...bring pressure to bear upon their members and executives to take drastic action..." The T. & L.C. also undertook to organise its own mass demonstration. On 6th July miners at Dinnington held a protest march and on the 20th Sheffield A.S.L.E. & F. advocated "...a 'Down-Tools Policy' to enforce the cancellation of conscription and withdrawal of troops from Russia." The unrest subsided when Churchill announced British withdrawal in a timely announcement on 29th July.²⁴

However, during the summer of the following year Russia returned to

²³See B. Moore, 'Sheffield Shop Stewards in the First World War', in L.M. Munby, (ed.) THE LUDDITES, 1971, p.256; Attercliffe I.L.P. Minutes, 15.1.19.

²⁴Executive Committee T. & L.C. Minutes, 16.7.18.; 1.7.19. T. & L.C. Minutes, 27.5.19.; 24.6.19. Sheffield No 1 Branch A.S.L.E. & F. Minutes, 20.7.19.

centre stage. In May 1920 the T. & L.C. favoured an official boycott of work on all British supplies in aid of the Polish invasion. They also despatched a letter of protest to the T.U.C. "...re the inactivity of the Parliamentary Committee on the matter." When the telegram appeal to form Councils of Action appeared in the press on 6th August it was Attercliffe Labour Party, not the T. & L.C., which responded by organising an immediate programme of protest action. On the 8th and 9th mass meetings of engineers and railwaymen pledged to refuse to make or carry munitions should British troops intervene. A "Council of Action" was formed on the 15th from the Executive of the T. & L.C., the convening shop stewards of each industry and representatives from union district committees and the city's Co-operative Societies.²⁵

There appeared to be great strength of feeling over the issue in some quarters. Sheffield N.U.R. supported a "down-tools policy" and contended "...that the time for action is overdue." A huge open-air meeting "...enthusiastically and unanimously pledged its support of any steps... to prevent the war with Russia." Speakers boasted that the National Council of Action "...on behalf of the organised workers... have practically taken over the government of the country on that particular issue [Loud Applause]." Local leaders reportedly felt "...that the present circumstances have given Labour such a lever of power and solidarity as scarcely seemed possible before, and that with careful handling its plans might become irresistible. The idea... was to keep the new power... for action even when the war crisis is over."²⁶

²⁵Executive Council T. & L.C. Minutes, 11.5.20.; 8.6.20.; 15.8.20.; 17.8.20. Independent, 9.8.20.; 10.8.20.; 16.8.20. Sub-committees of the Council of Action included "Supply and Transport"; "Strike Committee"; and "Publicity and Information."

²⁶Independent, 16.8.20.; 17.8.20.

However, when the war crisis had ceased, attempts by the left-wing of the T. & L.C. to reactivate the "Council of Action" over the miner's "datum line" strike and, in 1921, unemployment, were never realised. The "Councils of Action" remained dormant in the absence of national leadership and, most importantly, a cause with sufficient emotional and unifying appeal.

From 1918 to 1921 the mining industry was the principal focus of industrial conflict. Wartime state control played a major part in transforming nationalisation of the mines from a conference "hardy annual" into a live issue. A strike recommendation in February 1919 for a package of demands including nationalisation was overwhelmingly endorsed by the miners in the Sheffield area. Thirty thousand men struck on 27th March in advance of the national strike deadline. The unofficial stoppage was probably more a symptom of the "strike fever" of early 1919 than any desires to enforce immediate nationalisation.²⁷ The enthusiasm for the issue expressed amongst certain labour leaders was not reflected in the actions of Sheffield labour. A local "Mines for the Nation" campaign lacked vigour and gained little response. Even traditionally militant unions were sceptical.²⁸ Many workers in Sheffield had good reason to question the benefits of nationalisation in the light of their wartime experience of state control.

It was in their role as industrial "storm troops" that the miners made their biggest impact. In each year from 1919-21 there was a major strike in the Yorkshire coalfield. The first, in July and August of

²⁷ Ibid., 28.-31.3.19. The Independent reported that no reason for the stoppage was given to management.

²⁸ See for example, Sheffield No. 1 A.S.L.E. & F. Minutes, 18.1.20.

1919, hardly affected the movement in Sheffield - there was no request for sympathy action from the Yorkshire miners. Their defeat after a bitter struggle in isolation from the Miner's Federation led to some resistance to a national strike call in August 1920. However, as the crisis mounted Yorkshire miners voted by almost 2:1 against the government's "datum line" offer. The miner's opposition to the linking of wages to output drew support from other Sheffield unions. Locally, the N.U.R., A.S.L.E. & F., the tramwaymen and other transport workers all advocated strike action.²⁹ Trade union activists sought to adopt one union's pay battle and transform it into a more general contest between labour and the government. However, in the absence of a national call for sympathy action these resolutions remained merely brave words.

Six months later the miners were once again at the forefront of the pay battle. In early 1921 the prospect of wage cuts confronted all sections of workers. It appeared that in the face of mounting unemployment only the miners and their Triple Alliance allies would be able to halt what appeared to be a joint assault by government and employers on wage and employment levels. The T. & L.C. paper, the Sheffield Forward, announced "The colliers are making the first stand. They are fighting the battle of all workers." Sheffield A.S.L.E. & F., formally outside the Triple Alliance, unanimously supported their executive's strike call. A mass meeting of N.U.R. members did likewise and only narrowly defeated a move to avoid delay and strike from the 6th April. The T. & L.C. advocated a general strike and appointed a "Provisional Strike Committee" which included the local Co-operative Societies and a range of unions outside the Triple Alliance. This body

²⁹T. & L.C. Minutes, 29.7.19. Sheffield No. 1 A.S.L.E. & F. Minutes, 17.10.20.; 24.10.20. Independent, 1.10.20.; 16.10.20.; 19.10.20.; 22.10.20.; 25.10.20.

was intended to act in tandem with a local Triple Alliance strike committee. Preparations were being made for a strike of unprecedented proportions. The Sheffield evidence offers no suggestion that support for the strike call was declining in the lead up to "Black Friday".³⁰

The climb down on 15th April was a shattering blow. Locally, desperate attempts were made by the miners to re-activate the Triple Alliance but only financial and propaganda support was now available. The Triple Alliance and "direct action" were still-born, political activity now appeared to be Labour's last hope.³¹

III. Sheffield Labour: Organisation and Achievement.

The war and post-war unrest witnessed significant change in the structure of labour organisation in Sheffield. Perhaps the most important of these developments was the emergence of the T. & L.C. as the recognised organising centre for political and industrial activity. This represented a significant victory for independent labour politics over the strong tradition of Lib-Lab politics in the city. Labour had been formally divided in Sheffield since 1908 when the advocates of independent labour established the Trades & Labour Council in opposition to the long established Federated Trades Council. The split followed years of bitter rivalry over labour's relationship to the Liberal Party. The Federated Trades Council, largely founded by the unions in the 'light trades' during the 1850s, had established strong links with local Liberalism. This alliance had resulted in a number of trade unionists

³⁰ Sheffield Forward, issue No.1; Sheffield No. 1 A.S.L.E. & F. Minutes, 15.4.21.; Independent, 4.4.21.; 5.4.21.; 13.4.21.; 15.4.21.

³¹ Independent, 30.4.21. T. & L.C. Minutes, 2.5.21.

being elected to the City Council as Lib-Labs. From the early 1890s the Independent Labour Party strove to break labour's dependence on the Liberals. From the formation of the new Trades & Labour Council in 1908 up to the First World War labour organisation in Sheffield was divided into two roughly equal camps. The Labour body drew most of its support from the 'heavy trades' largely associated with the east side of the city and the districts of Attercliffe and Brightside in particular. The Federated Trades Council, on the other hand, retained most of its affiliations from the unions in the 'light trades' and also the general unions. The F.T.C.'s electoral strongholds were around the central areas of Sheffield.

During the war the rough equality of the two bodies disappeared and by 1919 the Labour body was receiving almost three and a half times as much in affiliation fees as its rival.³² The wartime expansion of employment in the 'heavy trades' clearly played a part in the growth of the Labour body. Perhaps more significant were the defections from the Lib-Lab to the Labour Trades Council during the war.³³ The latter was a consistent and forceful advocate of working class causes during the war, while the more intensely patriotic Federated Council was less willing to countenance protest which might disrupt the war effort. Political change in Sheffield and nationally had weakened the ties between trade unions and the Liberal Party.³⁴ By 1919 in Sheffield support for the Lib-Lab

³²The changes in the relative strength of the two trades councils are illustrated by the following figures:

	Affiliation Fees	S.T. & L.C.	S.F.T.C.
1912		£70	£74
1919		£342	£100

Source: Pollard, op. cit., pp. 198-201.; 265.

³³See, for example, Sheffield No. 1 A.S.L.E. & F. Branch Minutes, 9.12.17..

³⁴The death, in 1914, of H. J. Wilson, nonconformist Liberal M.P. for
(Footnote continued)

strategy had declined so far that the continuation of a separate trades council was no longer tenable. Long before it absorbed the F.T.C. in July 1920, the Labour body was recognised as the political and industrial focus in Sheffield. Acting as a local equivalent of the T.U.C., the T. & L.C. intervened to resolve disputes between unions, and even between unions and employers.

In the political sphere the organisation of the new Labour Party membership groups was enthusiastically undertaken by the T. & L.C.. The divisional and ward parties concentrated almost exclusively on electioneering and played only a minor role in the full Council. By 1921 Labour had established a complete network of divisional organisations, however, the response was very patchy, suggesting that there was no widespread demand for individual Labour Party membership. As elsewhere the I.L.P. played the major role in establishing the local Labour Parties.

Gradually as local Party organisations grew the T. & L.C. relinquished its control over the selection of Parliamentary and Council candidates. During these early years rank and file control over Labour councillors was not a major issue in Sheffield. A suggestion from Brightside Labour Party that the Executive should send six voting members to meetings of the Labour Group on the City Council was rejected. The Executive felt it was sufficient that "...resolutions expressing the opinions of labour organisations on matters of policy will always receive careful consideration by the Labour Group."³⁵

³⁴(continued)

Holmfirth and prominent local industrialist, severely weakened those in the Liberal Party who favoured a Lib-Lab alliance.

³⁵Executive Committee T. & L.C. Minutes, 7.6.21.

The authority of the T. & L.C. in local Labour circles, although growing, could still be successfully challenged, for example, certain Lib-Lab trade union leaders retained personal political machines capable of defying the T. & L.C.. A. J. Bailey, full-time secretary of the National Amalgamated Union of Labour, had been City Councillor before 1914 principally as a result of Liberal support. Councillor Bailey fought Central Division in the 1918 General Election as "Independent Labour" standing against the T. & L.C. candidate. The result was a disaster for "official" Labour who polled only 643 votes - Bailey gained 5,959. In 1920 he was due for re-election to the City Council. Having renounced all his Liberal connections, and pledged wholehearted support for the Labour Party, Bailey was added to the T. & L.C.'s list of prospective municipal candidates. However, the Labour Party in Bailey's seat rejected his candidacy, because, according to the local press "...his views and policy do not suit the extreme left-wing of the party." Bailey once again stood as unofficial Labour. Under pressure from the T. & L.C. the local Labour Party withdrew its candidate to avoid another humiliating defeat, but could not bring itself to select or support Bailey. Despite attempts to instigate an enquiry into Bailey's rule-breaking activities the T. & L.C. could do little more than negotiate a truce. Bailey became Lord Mayor in 1924 with Labour support. However, in the main the T. & L.C. successfully imposed their rules of selection which increased the influence of the activist to the detriment of the local trade union official.³⁶

In Sheffield's Hillsborough Division the T. & L.C. were confronted

³⁶Executive Committee T. & L.C. Minutes, 6.7.20.; 5.9.20.; 23.11.20.; 29.11.20.. Independent, 14.8.20..

by an even more formidable rival. The Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Political Council (henceforth Co-op Party) were first to organise in the area and regarded the Division as their own. Before the war local co-operative society political involvement had been firmly linked with the Lib-Labs. Fred Maddison, a leading co-operator and prominent local politician, was an outspoken opponent of independent labour politics in Sheffield.³⁷

The co-operative organisation was an attractive prize in Labour eyes. Their assets included healthy finances, a full-time paid organiser and direct access to a local newspaper - the Sheffield Co-operator. Repeated attempts by the T. & L.C. to bring the Co-op Party under its control failed. As a result of lengthy and at times acrimonious negotiations the Co-op Party retained the right to control the selection and campaign of the Labour and Co-operative candidates for Hillsborough.³⁸ The T. & L.C. made this concession because it recognised the Co-operative Societies as an important and influential partner in the Labour movement - a status sometimes underemphasised by Labour historians.

There was increasingly strong support among leading local Co-operators for a formal political alliance between the Labour and Co-operative Parties. Joint campaigning effort over wartime food supply had brought the T. & L.C. and co-operative societies closer together.

³⁷ S. Pollard, 'The foundations of the Co-operative Party', in A. Briggs & J. Saville, (eds.) *ESSAYS IN LABOUR HISTORY 1886-1923*, 1971, p. 191. See also C. Burke, 'Working class politics in Sheffield, 1900-1920: A Regional Study in the Origins and Early Growth of the Labour Party,' Ph. D., Sheffield City Polytechnic, 1983, p. 178.

³⁸ Executive Committee T. & L.C. Minutes, 23.7.18.; 19.11.18.; 9.12.19.; 13.9.21.. Brightside and Carbrook Co-op. Political Council Minutes, 11.7.18.; 25.7.18.; 24.10.18..

Relationship improved further following the Co-operative Society's support for the striking railwaymen in October 1919. Thereafter, the T. & L.C. and Co-op Party conducted regular joint political propaganda campaigns. The two bodies formed a "Joint Council" in December 1920. This collaboration was borne out of a substantially common analysis of capitalism's shortcomings and the shape of society to come.³⁹

During the later war years the shop stewards movement occupied a prominent place in labour's campaigning activity in the city. For the most part there was no conflict between the unofficial Sheffield Workers' Committee and official structures locally. The T. & L.C. and the Workers' Committee collaborated in the organisation of labour's response to wartime problems such as the food supply.⁴⁰ However, the shop-stewards organisations faded into the background after the Armistice and the collapse of the "40 hour movements". Weakened by the sackings of prominent shop stewards, the "Workers Committee Movement" failed to make an effective impact during the post-war militancy.

On the T. & L.C. itself the Independent Labour Party was undoubtedly the most important socialist group. Its members occupied prominent positions on the Executive. And they were easily able to defeat attempts by non-political trade unionists to restrict the Party's influence on the Council. The I.L.P. was particularly dominant in the political wing of the movement. By 1921 13 of the 18 Labour City Councillors were I.L.P. members. In 1918 and 1919 several engineering

³⁹B & C Co-op Party Minutes, 30.9.20.; 14.12.20.. Independent, 20.5.20.; 23.9.20.; 9.3.21.; 22.3.21.. Sheffield A.S.L.E. & F. No. 1 Minutes, 19.10.17.. Sheffield Forward, No. 4, August 1921..

⁴⁰T. & L.C. Executive Committee Minutes, 4.12.17.; T. & L.C. Council Minutes, 18.12.17.

trades union activists gained prominence from their leadership of wartime industrial militancy and were selected as Labour candidates. The I.L.P., however, provided the backbone of the new Labour Party groups and was able to gradually replace these "direct actionists" by advocates of political action from their own membership.⁴¹

By the latter half of 1921 I.L.P. activity in Sheffield had completely shifted its emphasis away from propaganda campaigns towards organisation for elections. This switch increased the similarity of the roles performed by the I.L.P. and the local Labour Parties. It was a tendency which must have helped to undermine the viability of an independent socialist party, increasingly committed to success at the polls. The main Sheffield I.L.P. branch continued to thrive. However, Attercliffe I.L.P. collapsed during 1921. Some members drifted into the Labour Party while others were attracted by the revolutionary appeal of the Communist Party.⁴²

Despite at first being regarded as a "splitter" in some Labour circles relations between the newly formed Communist Party and the T. & L.C. were generally good. In 1921 a formal electoral pact was negotiated between the two. The T. & L.C. rejected national Labour Party demands for the expulsion of Communists "...on the grounds that the Party should include within its ranks all those who were out for the common object, irrespective of opinions held as to methods to be employed." Individual members of the Communist Party continued to

⁴¹Sheffield I.L.P. minutes, 24.11.21.. The Parliamentary candidate for Brightside in 1918, Mr. R. E. Jones, an ex-District Secretary of the A.S.E., was replaced in 1920 by Arthur Ponsonby a nationally prominent ex-Liberal member of the I.L.P..

⁴²Sheffield and Attercliffe I.L.P. Branch Minutes, 1921 passim.

command considerable support on the T. & L.C. especially among delegates from the engineering unions.⁴³

Clearly by 1921 Sheffield's Labour movement had undergone important political and organisational changes against a background of recurring crises and intensive activity. How can we assess its achievements?

In electoral terms Labour's success in Sheffield was remarkable (see table below).

Sheffield Municipal Election Results

Year	1	2	3	4	5
	Labour & CP vote	Anti-Labour Vote - all Parties combined	No. of Seats fought by Labour	Total No. of Labour Councillors	Turnout %age
1913	5,908	31,329		5	
1919	20,217	24,608	11	11	33%
1920	23,825	32,305	12	11	46%
1921	40,227	59,833	15	16	55%

Source: Sheffield Independent, 1913-21.

Column 1: Total number of votes polled by Labour and Communist candidates.

Column 2: Total number of votes polled by Labour's opponents including Coalition, Independent, and Ex-Servicemen's candidates.

Column 3: Number of seats contested by Labour and Communist candidates.

Column 4: Total number of Labour councillors following the elections of that year.

Column 5: Total percentage voter turnout.

⁴³Executive Committee T. & L.C. Minutes, 27.9.20.; 7.10.20.; 10.10.21.. Independent, 27.4.21..

In the municipal elections of 1913 the Labour voter had been outnumbered by around five to one by supporters of rival parties. In the subsequent contest during November 1919 Labour polled 45% of all votes cast. However, in 1920 any 'onward march of Labour' was almost stopped in its tracks. The established parties had been alerted by Labour's stunning success in 1919. The "Citizen's Municipal Association" (C.M.A.), a coalition of local Conservatives and Liberals, was formed in 1920 as an anti-Labour bloc. A combination of "red scare" tactics, exceptionally adverse press coverage and criticisms from a particularly virulent anti-waste lobby further eroded Labour's chances. Evidently in 1921 repetition diminished the effectiveness of this approach. The anti-Labour bloc had split and the internal wrangling in the C.M.A. diverted some press criticism away from Labour. "Black Friday" and mass unemployment appeared to convince more Labour activists of the need to campaign to increase Labour's vote. Labour went on to the attack, directing its main fire against the City Council's record on housing and work provision for the unemployed. The effort was rewarded by an increase in Labour representation on the Council of almost 50%.

While Labour remained in opposition, however, it was necessary to combine electoral activity with other forms of pressure in order to win concessions from the City Council. Demonstrations by the workless and trade unionists in November 1919 and December 1920 persuaded the Council to instigate public works schemes to relieve unemployment. Similarly the "Unemployed Committee" used public demonstrations to extract concessions from the Boards of Guardians in early 1921.⁴⁴

For the majority of activists in Sheffield political action and

⁴⁴Pollard, 1959, op. cit., p. 266; Independent, 4.12.19.

'direct action' were both legitimate and complementary weapons in labour's armoury. There was division during 1921 over the legality of some of the unemployment protests led by Communists. The more vigorous and militant approach of the unofficial "Unemployment Committee" disturbed many in the mainstream of the Trades & Labour Council who established their own alternative organisation for the unemployed. However, the unofficial movement was both more effective and had more widespread support among the unemployed. Nevertheless, for the most part the T. & L.C. in Sheffield did not fight shy of advocating a policy of confrontation. The leading labour organisations in Sheffield repeatedly demanded action which could only have led to a major challenge to the government. On several occasions there appeared to be a widespread desire for a General or Triple Alliance strike. Sheffield labour was not explicitly revolutionary in its actions but it did advocate steps with revolutionary implications. The mass unemployment and defeats of 1921 postponed any hopes of short-term success. The majority turned to parliamentary methods, while others preferred the revolutionary politics of the Communist Party. For many this was a time of acute disillusionment.

Nevertheless labour had made significant strides forward in these years. After the breakthroughs in municipal elections, all sides recognised that Labour would shortly form an administration. Further electoral victories came in 1922 when three of the six Sheffield constituencies returned Labour M.P.s. The pre-war division between Lib-Lab and independent labour was decisively resolved in the latter's favour. The high degree of co-operation and solidarity in the labour movement was another feature of the period. The T. & L.C. provided labour with a centralised and authoritative voice for both its political and industrial wings. Similarly the co-operative movement had become an

important and valued ally. Strenuous efforts were made throughout to co-ordinate labour's efforts in Sheffield. While division along political and industrial lines persisted into the post-war years these were, nonetheless, years in which labour exercised unprecedented influence in the affairs of the city. An influence which was increasingly founded on the growing perception of labour as a single movement with common goals.

CHAPTER II - PONTYPRIDD.

Pontypridd has been chosen from among the many centres in South Wales precisely because it does not totally reflect the most 'extreme' aspects of the coalfield's industrial and political history. The town emerged as a largely accurate indicator of the overall temperature of the region unlike its more 'advanced' - and unrepresentative - neighbours in the Rhondda. Some explanations for Pontypridd's relative moderation will be considered below.

This study of the labour movement in a South Wales mining centre falls into three main parts. After a brief outline of the occupational and social structure of Pontypridd, part I undertakes an analysis of the impact of mining union dominance on the strength and organisation of the local labour movement. The prevalence of one union - the South Wales Mining Federation (henceforth S.W.M.F.) - provides a contrast with the more diverse Sheffield labour movement. However, Pontypridd's labour movement was no monolith, and a study of its structure necessarily involves the activity and influence of a number of organisations.

The second part of the chapter examines the post-war performance of the Labour Party. It has been suggested that political change in the region followed a peculiarly Welsh pattern. The argument outlined below is that factors other than nationality provide a more effective explanation of the fluctuations in electoral support for the Labour Party in this part of the South Wales coalfield. In addition this part discusses Labour's changing role in the municipal politics of Pontypridd. Labour's performance in and out of control of the Urban

District Council reveals much about the re-definition of labour attitudes to its relationship with the community as a whole. The suggestion is made that the post-war years witnessed a reconciliation of the conflict between labour's sectional interest and that of the community.

The third and final part further develops the consideration of the changing relationship between sectional class interests and the 'community'. This includes an examination of the various factors which undermined the communitarian spirit of class harmony. Mechanisms of influence similar to those utilised by employers and their social allies, highlighted in Patrick Joyce's study of late Victorian communities are found to persist in post-war Pontypridd.¹ However, it will be argued that labour itself made a conscious and largely successful effort to subvert the influence wielded by anti-labour forces through social and other mechanisms.

Pontypridd, although heavily dominated by coal mining performed many other functions. Indeed the town's early industrial centre was the large chain works at Ynysyngharad which by 1921 was still employing around 800 workers. In this major market centre in the East Glamorgan coalfield, lying across the junction of the Rhondda and Taff Valleys, around one in five of the working population were professional, commercial, or retail trade workers. Another significant group numerically and industrially was the transport workers who totalled almost 1,000. Over 400 of these were railway workers employed on the key rail link between the South-East Wales coalfield and the coast. Nevertheless, by far the largest group was the 9,000 or more miners who

¹P. Joyce, WORK, SOCIETY AND POLITICS, 1980.

comprised roughly 50% of the total employed workforce. Many of these were relatively recent immigrants from the western counties of England or even further afield. Although the rate of population increase was not so high between 1911 and 1921 as it had been in earlier decades the trend was still firmly upwards. The fact that according to the 1921 census over 60% of the townspeople were English speakers only, indicates the degree to which ties of tradition, culture and community were being eroded in the early decades of the twentieth century.²

Pontypridd was then very largely working class in character, and situated at the heart of the coalfield which, both before and during World War I had become the storm centre of miners' industrial militancy. Despite the town's proximity to the Rhondda, the exchange and overlap of workers between the two, and close formal links with Rhondda union bodies, Pontypridd had a long standing reputation for moderation in the industrial and political spheres.³ At the close of the war Pontypridd was still regarded somewhat dismissively by the I.L.P. as "...that hotbed of Liberalism."⁴

Thus Pontypridd did not conform to the classic model of the 'isolated mass', nor was it identified with the pre-1918 spread of socialist ideas so rife in neighbouring Rhondda. However, as we shall

²Figures from 1921 Census - see E. W. Edwards, 'The Pontypridd Area', in M. Morris, GENERAL STRIKE, 1976, p. 411.

³Pontypridd lies within 3 miles of Porth, at the junction of Rhondda Fach and Fawr, which was a major centre for the activities of mining militants in addition to being the power base for A.J. Cook at this time. Of the 5 delegates from a Lodge in Pontypridd to the Lewis Merthyr Combine Committee whose addresses were cited in the minute book, only 2 were from Pontypridd itself, the other 3 came from various parts of the Rhondda.

⁴Merthyr Pioneer, 21.12.18.

see, Pontypridd was by no means immune from the rising tide of Labour politics or industrial militancy in the post-war years. By April 1920 the I.L.P., startled by its own improving fortunes, declared that "...no one can credit the change that has come over Pontypridd during the last twelve months."⁵ In pithead ballots over industrial policy the Pontypridd district of the S.W.M.F. generally reflected the overall balance of opinion in the coalfield as a whole in the post-war years.⁶

I. The Miners' Federation and Labour Organisation in Pontypridd.

The predominance of the mining interest undoubtedly influenced the structure and policy of the Pontypridd labour movement. In an area such as Sheffield (see Chapter I) the T. & L.C. came to be looked upon as the natural co-ordinator of labour's efforts in any industrial crisis. In Pontypridd, however, despite the affiliation of the miner's lodges, the T. & L.C. in these years was generally by-passed. The miners' organisations, whether through the official District Committee or local lodge and combine committees, were the obvious centre for industrial organisation. Unions in need of solidarity assistance, such as the N.U.R., approached the miners' organisations directly rather than resorting to the mediation of the T. & L.C.. With industrial relations dominated by mining industry disputes the T. & L.C. did not figure prominently in Pontypridd's industrial disputes. Moreover, when the miners did engage in strike activity there is no evidence of any approach by them to the T. & L.C. for sympathy action - with the single exception of a request for relief aid during the latter part of the

⁵Merthyr Pioneer, 24.4.20.

⁶See for example, the South Wales Daily News, 20.2.19.; 26.8.20.; and the Merthyr Pioneer, 17.4.20.; 6.11.20.

lengthy lock out of 1921.⁷

However, the T. & L.C. wielded greater influence in the administration of labour politics in the town. The council played a central role in the establishment of both ward organisations and the parliamentary Divisional Labour Party.⁸ In the key area of the selection of election candidates it was the T. & L.C. and the Miners' Federation who exercised control. Here again, single industry domination influenced the development of local selection systems. The T. & L.C. had fully effective control only over the selection of town councillors, for which it determined its own rules and procedures. These were respected by the District Miners' organisation who refused to support the Chairman of the Penrhyn Lodge, Mr. Gwilym Jones, who stood as Independent Labour having been rejected by the T. & L.C.. Furthermore, unlike Labour rebels in other areas of the country, Jones was heavily defeated by the Labour Party candidates in the 1920 elections.⁹ This illustrates the degree of loyalty to the official Labour Party amongst miners at this early stage. Moreover, the absence of any successful rebellion against official local Labour discipline underlines the importance of single industry domination. In the absence of inter-union rivalry Lib-Labs could find no power or financial base upon which to rest their challenge to the T. & L.C..

⁷ Pontypridd T. & L.C. Minutes, 1918 -1921. *passim*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.12.17.; 8.5.18.; 5 & 19.6.18.

⁹ Result of Graig Ward U.D.C. election April 1920:-
 (elected) Ben Davies (Lab) 971
 (elected) Griff Maddocks (Lab) 917
 H. Morgan (Lib) 753
 Gwilym Jones (Lab) 639

Source: Pontypridd Observer, 3.4.20.

At the parliamentary level Miners' Federation influence over selection became more direct as the only likely sponsor of a Labour candidate in the Division. In the 1918 General Election, because Pontypridd was only accepted into the S.W.M.F. sponsorship scheme in November, the Miners' Executive merely rubber stamped the D.L.P.'s selection who was in any case the local miner's sub-agent.¹⁰ Thereafter, however, it was the miners' district organisation which balloted its members between internally nominated miners' candidates and became the de facto selection body, while the D.L.P. performed the role of rubber stamp.¹¹ Although there were some signs of conflict between the D.L.P. and the S.W.M.F. District Committee in 1920, in the main both parties were happy with this division of responsibilities.¹²

All the major sections of the labour movement made an active contribution to the spread of labour propaganda in the town. Weekly public meetings were organised at various times under the auspices of the I.L.P., Pontypridd District of the S.W.M.F. and the T. & L.C.. During the winter of 1919-20 all three bodies pooled their resources for a programme of Sunday meetings headed by major national speakers at the local cinema.¹³ For the activist, the Co-op ran weekly speakers classes on a Thursday, and the miners' District Committee organised 'Labour

¹⁰ S.W.M.F. Exec. Council Minutes, 29.11.18.

¹¹ Pontypridd Observer, 24.1.20; 30.4.21; S.W.M.F. Exec. Council Minutes 1.8.19; 26.1.20; 14.2.20; 13.11.20.. Participation in the Pontypridd District ballot was high at over nine thousand in the final round. Labour had only secured 10,152 votes in the Division at the General Election two months earlier.

¹² A local miners' Lodge warned the Pontypridd District Committee of the S.W.M.F. that in their opinion "...the organisation of the Division was the work of the Trades Council and not of the District Committee." Lady Windsor Lodge Minutes, 16.6.20..

¹³ Merthyr Pioneer, 3.1.20.

Classes' on Monday evenings when subjects included 'The Coming Crash'; 'Revolution' and 'The Workers and Education'.¹⁴ The local Labour Party also conducted occasional public meetings and support for the Party was undoubtedly growing. However, ward organisations only appeared to function effectively in two of the town's five wards.¹⁵

The I.L.P. occupied a particularly prominent position in Pontypridd's political life. The leading labour figure in the town was D.L. Davies, the miners' sub agent, Parliamentary candidate for the division and I.L.P. member. Griff Maddocks, another I.L.P. member, was Chairman of the Maritime Lodge of the S.W.M.F. in 1920, local town councillor, Labour group leader and President of Pontypridd Divisional Labour Party. Numerous other I.L.P. members held important positions in local labour organisations, but perhaps the key indicator of the Party's local importance was the agreement of the T. & L.C. to organise its own political campaigns in conjunction with the I.L.P..¹⁶ Moreover, the I.L.P. spearheaded the early development of Labour Party membership groups and constituency organisation.

Popular support for the I.L.P. in Pontypridd during the post-war years fluctuated quite wildly. Describing their summer programme of public meetings in 1919, the Merthyr Pioneer reported:

Pontypridd in the past may have been reactionary as far as the I.L.P. is concerned, but today the great mass of the population has seen the necessity of accepting our message, as shown by

¹⁴Ibid., 12.7.19.; 26.2.21.

¹⁵The Merthyr Pioneer of 13.9.19. reported that: "Labour under the auspices of the Pontypridd Trades and Labour Council, is making rapid strides in the town and district." Only the Trallwn and Treforest wards appeared to have active L.P. membership groups - see T. & L.C. Minutes, passim and Merthyr Pioneer, 13.9.19.

¹⁶Pontypridd T. & L.C. Minutes, 4.6.20.; 10.9.21.

the great crowds that have turned up on each occasion...

Such optimism did not last; reports indicated poor attendances during the summer of 1920. However, "good gatherings for public meetings" were recorded in the early part of 1921.¹⁷ Periods of high support for the I.L.P. appear to have coincided with periods of relative industrial peace in the South Wales coalfield.

With A. J. Cook's power base at Porth only two miles away we might expect there to have been considerable conflict within the Pontypridd labour movement between the 'political actionists' of the I.L.P. and 'direct actionists' influenced by syndicalism. However, there are no signs of such a conflict or indeed any policy debate which differentiated between political and direct action. The majority of labour activists in Pontypridd rejected the notion that there was any conflict between industrial and parliamentary means of struggle, or that one was inherently superior to the other. In practice they simply switched the emphasis of their effort from one to the other as the situation demanded. The political and industrial struggle could be maintained side by side so easily because neither was seen in any immediately revolutionary sense.

The principal role of the I.L.P. was in the organisation of political education and campaigning. As individuals I.L.P. members played a leading and central role in the Pontypridd labour movement. However, the I.L.P. does not appear to have acted as an important independent organising centre within the local movement. This was partly because its broad political philosophy allowed the I.L.P. to include

¹⁷Merthyr Pioneer, 16.8.19.; 25.9.20.; 26.2.21.

figures from the centre-right and radical left of the labour movement. Consequently there appears to have been no single coherent strategy around which the I.L.P. could co-ordinate an effective intervention within the local movement. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, many of the I.L.P.'s local activists gave their first allegiance to the Miners' Federation. Despite the high membership of the I.L.P. and the co-ordinating function of the T. & L.C. real power in Pontypridd labour circles rested with the miners.

II. Labour's Electoral Rise; Timing, Dimensions and Causation.

This part of the chapter assesses various explanations of the fluctuations in Labour's electoral performance and considers the impact of shifting attitudes towards the 'community interest' within labour circles.

The electoral popularity of Labour in Pontypridd closely mirrored the trend across Britain. In the General Election of 1918 D.L. Davies, the Labour candidate, secured over 10,000 votes - 3,000 short of his Coalition Liberal opponent.¹⁸ The relative closeness of the contest was a reflection of Davies' pro-war stand and his declared support for Lloyd-George's reconstruction programme.¹⁹ Davies was particularly anxious to distance himself from charges of extremism and in particular any association with the I.L.P. - of which he was a member.²⁰ Any hint

¹⁸ Pontypridd Division General Election 1918
 D.A. Lewis (Co Lib) 13,327
 D.L. Davies (Lab) 10,152

¹⁹ Pontypridd Observer, 30.11.18.

²⁰ The I.L.P. run Merthyr Pioneer of 21.12.18. declared: "...we ourselves
 (Footnote continued)

of pacifism was as much a liability in South Wales as elsewhere in Britain at this most patriotic election.

K. O. Morgan has alluded to the specifically national character of Welsh politics even after the First World War. He suggests that the elections of 1918 in Wales were "...a national tribute to the greatest Welshman yet born..." and, moreover, once the tide turned during 1919 that "...the revulsion against the government was more evident in Wales than in any other region of Britain."²¹ Any "national tribute" in December 1918 was clearly not confined to Wales. Moreover, the rising tide of Labour support in local elections during early 1919 was reflected in working class areas throughout Britain. That Labour secured control of the Glamorgan and Monmouthshire County Councils in March 1919 - including narrow victories in the Pontypridd district seats - was surely more due to the predominance of miners amongst the electorate than the Welshness of the electorate.²²

The local I.L.P. press did not include national peculiarities in its explanation of the dramatic turnaround in Labour's electoral fortune. The General Election defeat, in I.L.P. eyes, resulted from the impact of war and:

²⁰(continued)

felt that Mr Davies' popularity would not be enhanced by our advocacy of his candidature, since our views are well known in that division."

²¹K.O. Morgan, WALES IN BRITISH POLITICS 1868-1922, 1970 p. 282; K.O. Morgan, 'Post-war Reconstruction in Wales 1918 and 1945' in J. M. Winter, (ed.), THE WORKING CLASS IN MODERN BRITISH HISTORY, 1983, p. 87.

²²County Council Elections March 1919:-

<u>Pontypridd</u>	B. Davies (Lab)	1008
	H. Morgan (Lib)	999

<u>Treforest</u>	W.H. May (Lab)	1194
	W. Mile (Con)	828

Source: South Wales Daily News, 4.3.19.

...the absence of the menace of unemployment, and the readiness of the Government and the capitalist employers to give way to his [the worker's] little demands when he could not be persuaded that he was demanding things contrary to the interests of the state, produced a feeling of industrial security and importance that lulled the spirit of restless revolt into quiescence...

While victory in March apparently demonstrated:

...the universal truth of the socialist contention that the developments on the industrial field precede and determine the political consciousness of the workers... for 3 months the problem of re-absorption of this surfeit army of workers has haunted the industrial²³ worker with the dread of a terrible nightmare.

The problem of the effects of the return of demobilised men upon the employment of those who had replaced them in the mines exercised the minds of the S.W.M.F. membership more than either pay or nationalisation in these early weeks of 1919. Industrial developments may well have undermined the political gains for Labour.

The very low turnout at the County Council elections in South Wales during March 1919 suggests that industrial events were still very much uppermost in the minds of miners. A slightly increased turnout in April at the District Council elections saw Labour win only two of a possible seven seats in Pontypridd. Board of Guardian elections, held at the same time, created much greater interest, a higher poll seeing Labour candidates confined to last place in every ward. It would appear that local government bodies were held in particularly low esteem. Labour's relatively poor performance at the polls in the first week of April 1919 might also have been a reflection of industrial changes. The collapse of unofficial industrial action in the Rhondda over the recommendation to

²³Merthyr Pioneer, 15.3.19.

accept the Sankey pay award and the apparent overwhelming desire to accept the offer in the Pontypridd area signalled the end of the first chapter of post-war industrial militancy in the coalfield. These events preceded the local government poll by a matter of days. The coincidence is at least suggestive.

One year later, in April 1920, Labour secured its first ever majority on the District Council, winning ten of the twelve contested seats. This success occurred against a background of great industrial militancy. Union power at colliery level was at a peak following prolonged full employment. National wage negotiations were at a crucial stage and within days of the council elections Pontypridd miners voted by over two to one to strike in rejection of the government's pay offer. It would appear that a background of on-going industrial turmoil was not a handicap for Labour electoral fortunes in Pontypridd. In 1919, Labour fared badly at the polls, immediately following the settlement of a dispute. In 1920 Labour made a major breakthrough with strike action imminent.

The absence of elections in the latter half of 1920 makes it impossible to identify any local reflection of the national decline of Labour's electoral fortunes. However, as elsewhere Labour financial 'waste' was a repeated theme in the local press, although it seems to have done little to undermine Labour's standing in Pontypridd. The single 'anti-waste' candidate finished bottom of the poll in April 1921 and Labour fared little worse than a year earlier despite a sharp decline in campaign funds and many activists concentrating their efforts on the miner's lock-out and impending Triple Alliance strike.

The various swings in voting behaviour amongst the electorate of

Pontypridd resulted in the Labour Party exercising some degree of real political power for the first time from April 1920. During Labour's period of opposition the T. & L.C. had placed demands for various forms of increased intervention before the Council. Improvements were urged in the provision of public parks, sanitation and the prevention of river pollution. But foremost among the T. & L.C.'s demands were more and better working class housing and the municipalisation of the milk supply.

Even before the Labour Party gained an overall majority on the Council they were able to secure sufficient Liberal support to advance the key demands in their municipal programme. During the summer of 1919 Labour councillors, at the request of the T. & L.C., "...press[ed] the question of housing forward."²⁴ A Council report was presented in October and proved to be a damning indictment of the failure of private builders to provide working class housing. The report revealed that while population had increased by over 5,000 since 1914 - due largely to the immigration of labour - only 12 working class houses were built between January 1915 and December 1918; 1,306 of the houses already built for one family were now housing two or more. As a result the Council agreed, prior to Labour control, to a programme of municipal building of over 2,000 houses. Labour achieved further success when the Council agreed to promote a Parliamentary Bill for powers to establish a Municipal Milk Supply.²⁵

The charge has been made against the post-1918 programme of the national Labour Party that its ideals and principles were too vague to

²⁴T. & L.C. Minutes, 26.7.19.

²⁵Pontypridd Observer, 11.10.19.; South Wales Daily News, 7.10.19.

be seriously considered as being of any practical application to the short-run problems faced by working people. This was certainly not the case with the Labour Party's local authority policies. In Pontypridd Labour's adherence to, and advancement of, municipal enterprise was clearly seen by the electorate as both practical and desirable for the improvement of working class living standards in the town - a point acknowledged by some political opponents. Labour proved to be fervent advocates of increased municipal intervention in the local economy. New powers were sought to control, among other things, milk supply, gas prices and land purchase. These reforms were couched in terms of bringing immediate relief to working class families against inflation, profiteering and housing shortage. Labour's apparent willingness to act stood in stark contrast to its political rivals who remained principally concerned with rate levels and 'economy'. The practical initiatives and campaigning activity towards greater municipalisation by the Labour Party during late 1919 and early 1920 made a major contribution to the sweeping electoral success of the Labour Party in April 1920.²⁶

After such an optimistic start in opposition the Labour Party in Pontypridd was very quickly acquainted with the limitations on their ability to implement a reforming programme. Unable to raise the cash for municipal housing either from the government or via the sale of Housing Bonds, the Council was reluctantly forced to accept a national government offer to build a mere 500 houses on behalf of the municipality.²⁷ The plan to municipalise the milk supply similarly fell

²⁶In January 1920 leading Labour Party figures organised and ran a 'Town Meeting' in order that rate-payers could endorse a Bill intended to be put before Parliament based upon Labour's municipal proposal. Pontypridd Observer, 8.5.20.; 9.10.20.

²⁷Pontypridd Observer, 8.5.20.; 9.10.20.

foul of the Conservative dominated coalition government. By June 1920 the Council was forced to run a "Local Loans Campaign", because the banks refused loans to meet ever rising costs.²⁸

An important element in the pressure on Council finances was a burgeoning wage bill. Many of Pontypridd's Labour councillors were well accustomed to wage negotiation, but not, however, in the role of employer. A series of disputes arose between the Council and its employees during the latter part of 1920. The Labour majority had little compunction in refusing the demands of its technical and clerical staff trade unions. A threatened strike by the electrical power engineers over improved sick pay was opposed in the following terms by a leading Labour councillor: "The demand is an unreasonable one and if the miners made it they would be regarded as anarchists, at least, but here we have respectable people making such a demand."²⁹

The T. & L.C., however, evidently felt less impelled to balance Council budgets at Council employees' expense. During disputes involving masons and local government officers the T. & L.C. initially 'recommended' Labour councillors to support the unions' claims and subsequently became increasingly involved in mediation and conciliation.³⁰ The Pontypridd labour movement experienced great difficulty in reconciling the conflict between its two roles of industrial organiser and public representative which had been brought into such sharp focus by the acquisition of power at a time of financial

²⁸ Pontypridd Observer, 19.6.20.. Significantly the only loan mentioned by the paper was one of £500 from the Great Western Lodge of the S.W.M.F..

²⁹ Pontypridd Observer, 18.12.20.

³⁰ T. & L.C. Minutes, 18.9.20.; 14.1.21.

stringency. Sections of the T. & L.C. felt that councillors were showing a tendency to give Council interests precedence over those of labour whenever there was a conflict. The former's response was to attempt to bring its representatives under closer control.

Activist dissatisfaction at the performance of Labour Councillors during their first year in control was clearly displayed by the following entry in the T. & L.C. minutes:-

Arising from the communication from the I.L.P. and General Workers:- Resolved this Council call upon the Labour councillors who are directly responsible to the T.C. for [to?] immediately form a Labour Group and draft out a programme of action. Also, that when the group is established, that some form of Register be kept in order to ascertain how the Labour councillors attend this group, before percipitating [sic] themselves in any direct policy. The group to meet at least once a month.³¹

Clearly some at least of Pontypridd's Labour councillors placed their own view of the needs of the community before that of the Labour Party. These councillors believed that their status as representatives of the people and guardians of the public purse held precedence over any responsibility to the organisation on whose behalf they were elected. The significance of the conflict between councillors and Party is discussed further below.

The evidence presented thus far tends to support those who stress the degree of continuity in the practice, if not the ideology, of labour in South Wales over the first two decades of the twentieth century. Peter Stead has emphasised the continuity of labour leadership in South

³¹T. & L.C. Minutes, 1.4.21.

Wales in terms of the reliance on a consensus rather than a sectional (labour) interest. This continuity also resides in a common social experience and career structure across several generations of labour leadership.³² Undoubtedly, both before and after the war labour leaders followed a familiar path rising through the ranks of trade union activity and/or public service.

Although correct to suggest that the difference between the Lib-Lab leaders of earlier generations and their socialist successors was more apparent than real, Stead and others have under-emphasised important changes in attitude and action by labour in South Wales precisely in relation to community versus sectional interests. When considering political leadership this omission partly came about because the comparison of 'old' and 'new' has centred on the movement's generals. The fact that differences between post-war elected M.P.s and their pre-war counterparts were so small, as highlighted by Stead, had perhaps as much to do with the peculiarities of the 1918 General Election as the labour movement's ideological rigidities. The new candidates of the Left were decisively defeated in South Wales at the 1918 election. Successful Labour M.P.s owed their victory at least as much to their patriotic stance as to their standing as 'consensus leaders'. It seems that any generational transition had not worked through in sufficient strength to have radically transformed the nature of Labour parliamentary candidates. We might reasonably expect to find more evidence of change amongst the emerging local leaders.

In 'moderate' Pontypridd there was no wholesale shift to the left

³²P. Stead, "Working Class Leadership in South Wales 1900-20", in WELSH HISTORY REVIEW, Vol. 6, No. 3, June 1973, pp. 329-53.

amongst Labour's post-war political leaders. However, Griff Maddocks, Labour group leader and president of the D.L.P., was a publicly avowed supporter of the Russian revolution and villified in the local paper as an 'extremist'.³³ Although among the local men, such treatment was reserved exclusively for Maddocks, there was a growing division within the Labour group of councillors in Pontypridd. 'New' councillors gave far greater weight to sectional labour concerns, whereas many of the 'old' school clearly felt that an often undefined community commitment should retain precedence.

There were a number of issues which served to highlight the increasing divergence between 'new' and 'old' views within Pontypridd's labour leadership. Following an illegal lightning strike by some of the town's 'scavengers' council officials refused to re-instate eight of the men.³⁴ At the succeeding council meeting a deputation of trade union officials pleaded for re-instatement while the Council officers insisted that the eight men should not be re-employed. Only one of the Labour councillors present failed to put sectional interests first and endorse the motion for re-instatement. In another incident it was reported in the Merthyr Pioneer that the Pontypridd and Rhondda Councils had refused to provide a civic reception for the Prince of Wales during his visit to the valleys in June 1919.³⁵ Again Labour was split and several of, what the Pioneer described as the "old councillors" attended a reception for the Prince. In 1920, the first Pontypridd Council meeting with a Labour majority, two T. & L.C. resolutions, on Irish hunger strikers and the

³³Merthyr Pioneer, 1.6.18.; Pontypridd Observer, 12.4.19.

³⁴Pontypridd Observer, 8.1.21. and 22.1.21. The scavengers (refuse collectors) struck in bad weather conditions over the Council's failure to provide them with oilskins.

³⁵Merthyr Pioneer, 5.7.19.

French invasion of the Ruhr, appeared straight on the meeting's agenda.³⁶ One of the longer standing Labour councillors threatened to resign if "politics" were going to be discussed at a Council meeting. However, the majority of Labour councillors stood by this new departure and the recently elected Griff Maddocks successfully moved the resolutions.

These divisions in Labour's ranks cannot simply be ascribed to the length of service or age of the individuals concerned - although there is some degree of correlation. It is rather a clash between new and old attitudes to the assertion of Labour's pre-eminence in the community. Labour councillors, 'new' and 'old', were still strongly influenced by notions of civic pride and duty, plus a desire to maintain traditions and play the rules of the game. However, Labour councillors were not in sole control of labour's performance of public duties. As a result of Labour's unsatisfactory and somewhat muddled approach to its first year in office, activists sought to stiffen Labour's resolve. In the Rhondda the Labour Party passed resolutions to the effect "...that all Labour Members on the R.U.D.C. [Rhondda Urban District Council] be instructed..." in their actions.³⁷ In Pontypridd the T. & L.C. resolved:

...that the Labour group meet prior to the annual meeting of the P.U.D.C. [Pontypridd Urban District Council] and choose the chairmen of the various committees and that the group representing the T.C. confer amongst themselves and define their policy.³⁸

The group duly followed instructions and were roundly criticised by their opponents in the local press for ending the traditional sharing of

³⁶ Pontypridd Observer, 8.5.20.

³⁷ Rhondda No.1 District Committee S.W.M.F. Minutes, 12.4.20.

³⁸ Pontypridd T. & L.C. Minutes, 1.4.21.

Committee Chairs. The gentlemanly sharing out of influence and adherence to rules of seniority were abandoned; the maintenance of a community interest had been undermined by Labour's sectional assertion of power and control.

This is not to suggest that labour leaders in the locality, spurred on by activists, necessarily saw themselves asserting their sectional interest in direct opposition to that of the community. Rather, there was the growing belief that Labour now represented the entire community. Indeed, that in such an overwhelmingly proletarian area working class interest was the community interest. Moreover, it was felt that now the Labour Party members were, at last, the recognised political representatives and leaders of the working class. The Labour Party became the custodian of a community interest which was at the same time its own sectional interest. In this sense, and at this level, Stead's dichotomy between sectional and community interests is a false one and ignores a real and important change in the attitudes and actions of labour leaders and activists.

Although the Labour Party had developed the self-confidence to view itself as the rightful interpreter and leader of the community interest this did not mean that their pre-war Liberal predecessors no longer held similar aspirations. Indeed, Labour's opponents in the crucial 1920 elections rested their entire case upon an appeal precisely to community feeling. Specific policies were eschewed while stress was laid on individual records as pillars of the community and notions of public spiritedness and service.³⁹ In the minds of the majority of voters such

³⁹See the electoral appeals published in the Pontypridd Observer, 3.4.20.

appeals were no longer sufficient to secure election.

In explaining Labour's success in Pontypridd the Liberal Party's demise cannot be ignored. In Pontypridd after 1918 Labour's rise was almost a mirror image of Liberal decline. As K.O. Morgan has already observed the absence of constructive policy was an important element in the post-war decline of Welsh Liberalism.⁴⁰ As Morgan states:

...the old Liberal quasi nationalist nonconformist ethic which had dominated Welsh life at least since the general election of 1868, proved to be a casualty of total war... Old cries such as land reform, temperance and government devolution aroused little interest. Disestablishment, the national objective for two generations past... was⁴¹ achieved in 1920 amidst monumental indifference.

In this part of the chapter it has been suggested that the post-war rise of the Labour Party in this part of South Wales is best explained without reference to peculiarly national factors. Of greater importance were the political economy of the coalfield, the electoral appeal of Labour's municipal reform programme, labour's self-confident assertion of its right to community leadership, together with the almost total absence of any positive political programme from its opponents. It has also been suggested that Labour was itself undergoing change. The Party's post-war rise was not just the result of the workings of impersonal social and economic forces. The newer local labour leaders were developing a much more positive and assertive approach to labour's status in the community. In part III below further dimensions to labour's positive role in its own political rise are investigated.

⁴⁰See K.O. Morgan, op. cit., 1970.

⁴¹K.O. Morgan, 1983, op. cit., pp. 84, 89.

III. Labour, Community and Class in Pontypridd

Just as Labour's opponents entered the post-war arena with reduced political leverage, changes in the industrial structure similarly weakened their influence over Pontypridd's working class electors. Joyce, in his study of relationships between work, community and politics, has demonstrated the connections between the decline of Liberal and Tory allegiance amongst the working class with - among other things - the demise of the family firm and the tendency towards industrial concentration.⁴² Joyce explains that the limited company undermined the paternalist links between employer and employed which had allowed a high degree of political voting identification. Certainly there was an unprecedented increase in the concentration of ownership within the South Wales coal industry between 1914 and 1918. This, together with the general rise of corporatism located after 1914 by Hannah, may well have reduced the influence of employers over the electoral preferences exercised by their employees.⁴³

A key element in the successful identification of employer and employee political affiliation is a reasonably stable population. Pontypridd was of course subject to a huge flood of immigrants during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, the appeal

⁴²P. Joyce, op. cit., chapters 8 & 9. See also, N. Whiteside, 'Wages and Welfare: Trade Union Benefits and Industrial Bargaining before the First World War.' BULLETIN OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY, Vol. 51, No. 3, 1986, pp. 21-33.

⁴³See D.J. Williams, CAPITALIST COMBINATION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY, 1924, p. 118; L. Hannah THE RISE OF THE CORPORATE ECONOMY, 1976, Chapter 3.

to the notion of community of interest still played a large part in local politics. And Pontypridd, unlike so many of its valley situated, ribbon developed neighbours, had a physical civic centre to its community.⁴⁴ Pontypridd also possessed professional and commercial groups large enough to maintain some of the older social institutions essential to the development of a community spirit. These factors may go some way to explain the relative strength of Liberalism and "moderation" in the town when compared to the neighbouring Rhondda valley; a corollary being that the enhanced rate of geographical mobility occasioned by war eroded much of the sense of community. The returning soldiers can scarcely have felt, in common with the 3,200 new workers who had arrived since 1914, any great attachment to the town's post-war would-be community leaders.⁴⁵ The social cement of community identification was being increasingly eroded by the flow of human migration.

These processes undoubtedly had some influence on voting behaviour in Pontypridd. However, it appears that even after 1918 some of the mechanisms utilised by Joyce's nineteenth century employers still operated in Pontypridd, albeit in diluted form. It seems possible that some of the influence over voting exercised by employers could be passed on to managers. A Mr. T. Taylor, the manager of the nearby Nantgawr pit,

⁴⁴The 1917 Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest for the South Wales area was evidently conscious of the situation, expressing the view that "Owing to the absence of municipal centres and centralised institutions, the development of the civic spirit and the sense of social solidarity - what we may in short call the community sense - is seriously retarded." They also singled out Pontypridd - along with Aberdare and Merthyr - as one of the very few places with any municipal building. Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest: Wales and Monmouthshire, Parliamentary Papers, 1917-18, (Cd.8662-8668).

⁴⁵See U.D.C. report on the housing situation in Pontypridd Observer, 11.10.19.

was the only successful Liberal candidate in the 1920 U.D.C. elections. Taylor topped the poll in Trallwn Ward, with Labour second and third, and his fellow Liberal last.⁴⁶ This was despite a bitter dispute over safety in the Nantgawr pit only months before the election. Colliery managements and other employers certainly still remained keen to extend their influence over their workers' lives beyond the workplace. For example, the Great Western Colliery continued to organise Horticultural Shows and Sports Days for all the family at the company Athletics Ground.

In Pontypridd, employer paternalism seems not to have relied upon the existence of an identifiable figurehead or family leadership. The South Wales Electrical Power Distribution Company organised a social evening at which members of a local branch of the National Union of General Workers, joined the officials of their employers.⁴⁷ Reportedly a cold buffet and entertainment by several artistes made for a convivial evening. In addresses by company and union officials the employers apparently praised the good relations between management and labour and expressed the hope that these would continue. The toasts were 'The King', 'The S.W.E.P.D. Company' and the 'N.U.G.W.'.

It has not been possible to confirm that such measures had any influence over voting behaviour. However, it does appear that Labour activists in the mining industry were clear in their opposition to such patronage. At the Lady Windsor colliery in Ynysybwl (2 miles from Pontypridd) activists "did not look with favour" on the scheme whereby the 'Ocean Area Recreation Association' financed by the employers

⁴⁶Ibid., 3.4.20.

⁴⁷Pontypridd Observer, 8.1.21.

organised most sports and some musical and dramatic societies in the village. Trade union activists felt:

...that the company... should operate welfare amenities at the colliery, leaving their leisure hour welfare to the workmen themselves. Also there was the fear that it would take away the interest of the members from the 'things that mattered', which, in their opinion, of course, were trades unionism and Labour politics.⁴⁸

The licensed victualler has reputedly been a most useful ally for employers hoping to stem the rise of independent labour politics. In post-war Pontypridd decades of increasing social and geographical mobility and the advent of votes for women appears to have done little to undermine the influence of the publican over the electorate in his locality. At the very hub of so much of working class social life, the inn keeper was ideally situated both to influence opinion and enhance his own social and, potentially at least, political standing. In Pontypridd two such men gained particular prominence. Publicans Zenas Thomas and David Williams were in great demand at community based social functions.⁴⁹ The latter, a long standing District Councillor, was felt to be too strong an opponent for the Labour Party at the elections in 1921. Williams was unopposed in the Graig Ward, an area which included many miners' houses and had been won with some ease by Labour in 1920.

Another source of anti-Labour political organisation which based itself in working class social life was the Tory working men's club. According to a local Lodge Secretary these retained a surprisingly high

⁴⁸ J.E. Morgan, A SHORT HISTORY OF THE LADY WINDSOR LODGE, S.W.M.F., 1956, p. 54. The author was Lodge Secretary.

⁴⁹ See, for example, Pontypridd Observer, 24.8.18.

degree of influence amongst miners in these years.⁵⁰ Conservative Club members led by the Tory agent organised campaigns against the payment of the political levy to the Labour Party and increases in the S.W.M.F. subscription. Apparently the dispute over the political levy caused, "...much bickering and bad feeling... in General Meetings, at the contribution tables, as well as at the pit approaches..." The Club-led Tories scored their greatest success following the imposition of a fl re-entry fee on all those S.W.M.F. members they had persuaded to default on their contributions in protest at the increase. Reportedly, "...they turned up in force at the next Annual Meeting securing a majority of seats upon the Lodge Committee and the Vice-Chairmanship."⁵¹

Perhaps significantly in the early post-war years it was the social support for working class Toryism in the Pubs and Clubs that appeared more resilient than those of their Liberal counterparts. However, the examples given above of employer, publican and political club influence and patronage in Pontypridd were very much vestigial residues of the late Victorian systems of employer domination and worker response outlined by Joyce.

Nevertheless the decline of working class allegiance to the old two party system did not result solely from the working through of secular economic and social change. Local labour activists were acutely aware of the influence employers could have on worker consciousness. Consequently they sought both to subvert employers organisations and to supplant them with their own. The advancement of an alternative labour culture and the belief that labour could justly lead the community are closely

⁵⁰J.E. Morgan, op. cit., pp. 48-49.

⁵¹Ibid., pp. 48-9.

interwoven with the decline of the 'old politics'. In the South Wales coalfield such efforts met with some success.

It was the S.W.M.F. - the "Fed" - which led labour's social and cultural assault. Will Paynter, future General Secretary of the N.U.M., described the role of the S.W.M.F. in the following terms:

The Fed was a lot more than a trade union, it was a social institution providing through its local leaders an all round service of advice and assistance to the mining community on most of the problems that could arise between the cradle and the grave. The leaders of the local miner's lodges were very much more than representatives dealing with problems of wages and conditions of employment in the mines. They were acknowledged social leaders called upon to help and advise in all kinds of domestic and social problems; they were indeed the village elders to whom the people went when in any kind of trouble...

The Fed was a social institution and acted as such without question. Without doubt, its strength and ties with the communities were based on its intimate involvement in social and domestic affairs...⁵²

Lodge Committee members strove to extend the control of the workmen into most spheres of social activity. This of course, by and large, meant placing 'labour men' into key positions. In Ynysybwl the Lady Windsor Lodge Committee secured the post of secretary to the local branch of the employer's 'Ocean Area Recreation Association' for one of their own men. In 1916 the Committee waged a propaganda campaign against the employers to secure control of the Lady Windsor Hall and Institute built by the company in 1904. The old directors were heavily defeated by the Lodge Committee's candidates in a pit ballot. The trade union

⁵²Will Paynter, MY GENERATION, 1972, pp. 110-11 cited in H. Francis, & D. Smith, THE FED, 1980, pp. 41-42.

nominees took over the management of the Hall and Institute from September 1916 and from then on Labour propaganda meetings became fairly common.⁵³

Throughout the coalfield Lodges took the lead in encouraging "popular and democratic" control of a wide range of social institutions. Many of the Miners' Institutes and Halls incorporated a library run by the Lodge.⁵⁴ Activists were most anxious to ensure that their fellow workers should have every opportunity to educate themselves, particularly in labour politics. The task of "raising the consciousness" of the workers was undertaken with great fervour by a range of working class organisations. In Pontypridd regular Central Labour College Classes and Co-operative Speaker's courses can be added to the impressive list of labour propaganda activity outlined earlier.⁵⁵

In addition to the education of its own members the labour movement in Pontypridd strove to extend its influence into the wider community. Great efforts were made primarily to involve members' families and also to woo other social groups. A Labour Party supporters' social gathering in September 1919 included a sit-down tea for "several hundred" clearly involving a wider group than Labour activists and their families. The main drive for extra membership support was amongst women. For the political wing of a particularly male-dominated local movement this

⁵³J.E. Morgan, op. cit., p. 54. See also the introduction to the REPORT OF MINER'S WELFARE WORK IN THE SOUTH WALES COALFIELD 1921-31, 1932, published in Cardiff by 'The Ocean Area Recreation Union'. The report complains that their schemes were greeted, "...with a great deal of suspicion, and often with an unexpected amount of bitter antagonism...", Ibid., p. 5.

⁵⁴See Francis, H. 'Survey of Miners' Institute and Welfare Hall Libraries', LLAFFUR, Vol. 1, No. 2, 1973.

⁵⁵See Merthyr Pioneer, 6.4.18.; 12.7.19.

became a matter of some urgency now that women had secured the vote. In the build up to the 1918 General Election Pontypridd was the site for a Joint S.W.M.F. and Labour Party conference to discuss the political organisation of women. Both the I.L.P. and the Labour Party in Pontypridd started their own Women's Sections in 1920 and within a year the latter was reported to have nearly 100 members and to be holding regular weekly meetings.⁵⁶

However, not all of labour's activity amongst women can be dismissed as a belated vote catching exercise. The local Co-operative Society had long organised working people as consumers. A local Co-operative Women's Guild had been active since before 1914. Of even longer standing was the link between the S.W.M.F. and miners' wives. Their pre-war involvement during mass strike movements led to a more formal recognition and orchestration of women's support during post-war crises. The Lewis Merthyr Joint Committee, anxious to involve women in strike movements called them together in mass meetings where resolutions of support for the strike were passed.⁵⁷ These meetings were clearly intended to pass on information and rally support amongst the women who on past performance would act to strengthen resolve amongst the men. By 1921 such expressions of female solidarity were clearly becoming a carefully orchestrated component of the union's pro-strike propaganda.⁵⁸

In South Wales, as elsewhere, the labour movement was keen to form an alliance with the organisations of the demobilised soldiers and

⁵⁶Merthyr Pioneer, 13.9.19.; 3.1.20.; Pontypridd Observer, 3.2.21.

⁵⁷Minutes of Lewis Merthyr Joint Committee, 25.3.19.. This semi-official combine committee was based in Porth and strongly influenced by A.J. Cook. Pits from Pontypridd sent delegates to the Committee.

⁵⁸See, for example, S.W.M.F. Minutes of Council Meetings, 30.4.21.

sailors. In Pontypridd, again as elsewhere, no basis for a formal alliance could be agreed. It was not until the foundation of a local branch of the National Union of Ex-Servicemen (N.U.X.) that the T. & L.C. secured the affiliation of any demobilised men's organisation. However, amongst much of the rank and file of the other servicemen's organisations in the coalfield there was a great deal of sympathy and identification with Labour's cause. This was best illustrated during the national rail strike of October 1919. Uproar was caused by attempts to involve the ex-servicemen with the government's strike breaking organisation. In several towns meetings of the National Federation of Discharged Soldiers & Sailors repudiated the national call to assist the government, while the Swansea branch threatened to secede from the organisation if their demand for the resignation of the leadership was not met. A mass meeting of the Comrades of the Great War in Cardiff rejected a resolution from the platform which called for support for the government machine. Instead they resolved:

...that under no circumstance will we take any action to prevent the railwaymen achieving their just demands...[they]...are fighting our battle..⁵⁹ We therefore wish them every success.

The miners' strikes occasioned the greatest displays of support for labour from outside groups. During the 1921 lockout local distress committees were established which often received generous donations from members of the middle class. In Pontypridd this relief effort was supported by the local shopkeepers who cut prices and ensured supply to the relief committee.⁶⁰ Signs of a more positive identification with the

⁵⁹South Wales Daily News, 3.10.19.

⁶⁰J. E. Morgan, op. cit., p. 26.; Pontypridd Observer, 23.4.21. The Pontypridd Grocers' Association offered goods at cost price, whilst
(Footnote continued)

strike itself were displayed by local newspaper agents who agreed to the Lewis Merthyr Strike Committee's request to boycott the Western Mail and South Wales Daily News because of their anti-strike attitude.⁶¹ Even though these gestures from sections of the middle class may have been generated from motives ranging from self-interest to fear of reprisal they nevertheless serve to underline the dominant position labour organisations had attained in the South Wales coalfield.

IV. Conclusion.

The labour movement in Pontypridd contained very different power structures to that of Sheffield. These reflected the different composition and structure of the workforce. The principal contrast lay in the relative unimportance of the Trades & Labour Council. Mining union dominance was so great that the Pontypridd District of the S.W.M.F. could afford, by and large, to ignore the T. & L.C. until and unless it suited them. The T. & L.C. retained some authority in the organisation of local politics both in terms of policy and candidate selection. However, Parliamentary and County Council politics remained the domain of the local district of the Miners' Federation. As in Sheffield, I.L.P. members dominated the upper echelons of the local movement. However, there is little evidence to suggest that they worked as a co-ordinated group - particularly as local members of the I.L.P. held views which covered almost the whole spectrum of contemporary labour politics.

⁶⁰(continued)
butchers guaranteed supplies to the kitchens.

⁶¹Minutes of the Lewis Merthyr Employees Joint Committee, 23.4.21.

Politics in South Wales had been transformed by the war. Nationalist concerns lost their pre-1914 significance. Labour's fortunes in Pontypridd were determined rather more by factors which affected the region as a coalfield than as part of the Welsh nation. The ebb and flow of the industrial situation in the coalfield appeared to have an impact on Labour's performance. An important, and sometimes ignored, factor in Labour's rise was the shifting balance of control over mechanisms of social influence. The diminished effectiveness of employer and middle class paternalism and influence did not result solely from secular industrial and social change. Labour activity, more or less consciously, played a considerable role in this process. Labour activists in the area mounted a largely successful challenge in which they sought either to usurp employer founded institutions or to create and substitute their own.

A central weakness in pre-war years had been Labour's portrayal as a party which represented only one section of the community and was therefore unfit to govern the whole. This had influenced the performance of labour's pre-war leaders who had sought to avoid political attack by conceding that the wider community interest must have precedence over narrow sectional loyalties. This posed the danger of internal conflict which, if labour leaders backed the status quo, could result in disenchantment among their supporters. Where labour bowed to activist pressure it ran the risk of presenting opponents with an opportunity to reassert their characterisation of labour representatives as the servants of the sectional interest. After the war the newer more radical labour leaders re-defined the position and removed the conflict to their own satisfaction by asserting the interests of the labour movement could be synonymous with the community interest. There was then significant

change as well as continuity in the perspectives and approach of local leaders of the South Wales labour movement during the early decades of the twentieth century.

Labour's ability to develop its own tools of social influence and control, together with the new perspectives which denied any divergence between its own sectional interest and the community interest were important elements in labour's post-war success in this area.

CHAPTER III - LIVERPOOL.

The picture of the Liverpool labour movement as fragmented and weak in the early decades of the twentieth century is now well established.¹ The labour force was divided between port and city employment; the size of the former meant that casual and unskilled work governed a significant proportion of the labour market. The numbers in skilled and regular employment, often the staunchest supporters of labour, were relatively few in number.² Politics in Liverpool were dominated by the pervasive influence of religion. The Protestant majority amongst the working class was firmly wedded to the Conservative Party, which in turn held sway over local politics. The Nationalist Party retained the allegiance of most Catholic voters. In a city where religious groups were to a large degree residually segregated the Nationalists were guaranteed one Parliamentary, and several municipal, bailiwicks. In such an environment the growth of labour as an independent force was substantially retarded. In the years before the First World War the trade union movement was particularly prone to division, and the Labour Party remained completely overshadowed by the Conservatives.

¹See, for example, the work of J. Smith, 'Labour Tradition in Glasgow and Liverpool', HISTORY WORKSHOP JOURNAL, No. 17, Spring 1984. And the thesis by the same author, 'Commonsense thought and working class consciousness: some aspects of the Glasgow and Liverpool labour movements in the early years of the twentieth century,' Ph.D. Edinburgh, 1980. And also S. Maddock 'The Liverpool Trades Council and Politics 1878-1910', M.A., Liverpool, 1959.

²See E.L. Taplin, LIVERPOOL DOCKERS AND SEAMEN 1870-1890, 1974. p. 3. "No urban area of comparable size had as small a proportion of its labour force employed in manufacturing industry... Manufacturing concerns that did exist were on a small scale involving the employment of a considerable number of unskilled workers. Thus the artisan class in Liverpool was small compared with most urban areas."

Some authors have continued to stress Liverpool's conservatism both during and after World War One.³ It would be churlish to deny the city's individuality yet despite all the glaring dissimilarities between the Liverpoolian labour movement and those elsewhere, the direction of change in Liverpool between 1914 and 1921 closely reflected the national trend. Labour did remain exceptionally weak in Liverpool but in emphasising that fact some authors have tended to ignore or understate the advances made by labour institutions in Liverpool over this period. Between 1914 and 1921 it is the similarities between Liverpoolian developments and those elsewhere that require greater attention than they have received hitherto.

This study of the Liverpool labour movement seeks to demonstrate the impact both of continuity, in the form of local peculiarities, and change, through reflections of national trends. The single most important factor undermining the distinctive nature of Liverpoolian politics was the impact of war. Continuity ensured that Liverpool remained a blackspot for Labour organisation; its responsiveness to national pressures meant that this was much less the case in 1921 than it had been before 1914.

This chapter, then, discusses the impact of the often contending and contradictory local and national influences on the development of labour in Liverpool. The chapter opens with an assessment of Labour's electoral performance and changes in its organisational strength. The second part of the chapter discusses explanations of the relative ineffectiveness of the Liverpool Trades Council. Defeat and

³Smith, op. cit., 1980; 1984.

demoralisation on the eve of war and wartime internal splits over attitudes to the conflict left the Trades Council facing reconstruction in some disarray. It is argued that the strength of its post-war recovery suggests that earlier accounts have exaggerated the weakness of the Trades Council. It is also argued in this element that the trend towards greater centralisation of labour organisation, identified elsewhere, was also reflected in Liverpool. A concluding part of the chapter considers the post-1914 expansion of support for labour organisations, and assesses this development in the light of national trends.

I. Labour and the Electorate in Liverpool.

The Liverpool Labour Party experienced mixed fortunes at elections in the post-war years. At first sight Labour's performance appears from Table I below, to be constrained within the pre-war pattern of Liverpoolian politics.

Table I. Liverpool Municipal Election Results.

YEAR	Labour & Co-op vote	No. of Seats contested by Labour	Anti-Labour vote		Lab. vote as % of total vote	
			(a)	(b)	(a)	(b)
1913	6110	7	*9928	28730	*38.1	17.5
1919	37740	21	47814	55273	44.1	40.1
1920	36247	24	78866	94695	31.5	27.7
1921	32930	21	60451	82749	35.3	28.5

* In 1913 Labour only contested seven seats and there were seventeen candidates returned unopposed none of whom were Labour. These factors combined to substantially depress the figures for the total anti-Labour vote.

The two columns headed '(a)' are based solely on seats contested by Labour or Co-operative candidates

The two columns headed '(b)' are based on all seats whether contested by Labour or not.

The only major dent in Tory hegemony occurred in 1919 when Labour won ten seats. This breakthrough was achieved against the background of the railway strike. The electoral victories of 1919 therefore appeared to be a direct parallel to the Labour success at the 1911 elections in the aftermath of the transport strike.⁴ The successes of 1911 were not repeated in subsequent elections and have been dismissed as a freak result. Labour's failure to win a seat in 1920 seemed to suggest that similarly the 1919 result was an aberration which undermined the importance of industrial militancy for Labour's electoral fortunes. A closer examination of Labour's post-war electoral performance indicates that Liverpool politics had undergone a more lasting change after 1919.

As might be expected in Liverpool, a city on the front-line of the North Atlantic war, patriotic feeling ensured the success of the 'coupon' candidates at the 1918 General Election. In straight fights Labour only exceeded one-third of the vote in two seats - and then only narrowly. However, in common with other areas of the country sympathy for the government quickly waned. In February 1919 a Parliamentary by-election in West Derby saw Labour increase its percentage of a reduced poll by over ten points.⁵ In the same month Labour won over 67%

⁴Joan Smith suggests that the 1919 gains rested on the way "...the railwaymen's strike had posed the reality of class politics." J. Smith, 1980, op. cit., p. 604. See also Ibid., p. 600.

⁵Liverpool Labour Party E.C. Minutes, 28.2.19.. This advance appears all the more striking in view of the following assessment by a delegate to the Liverpool Trades Council, which was endorsed by several other speakers, who complained "...very strongly of the utter absence of workers and of enthusiasm. He stated with better help the seat would have been won." Liverpool Trades Council, Minutes of the AGM, 26.3.19.

of the votes in a municipal by-election in Garston.⁶

These successes for Labour early in the year suggest that the gains of November 1919 did not solely rely on the local response to the railway strike. Labour's performance in 1919 seems to have accurately reflected the trends across the country. Undoubtedly the rail strike had an electoral impact; in Liverpool as elsewhere, however, the tide had turned in Labour's favour well before November. The leader of the Liverpool Labour Party, reflecting on the Party's success at the polls in November 1919, attributed the rise in the Labour vote to housing, tram fares and services, profiteering revelations and the "...persecution of the wives and children of the police strikers" - but not the rail strike.⁷

Labour's defeat in the municipal elections of 1920 appeared to be more severe than in other parts of the country and the strength of the Conservative recovery encouraged the view that Liverpool politics remained fundamentally unchanged by the war. However, the contrast between Labour's 1919 and 1920 performance is not as great as suggested by a simple comparison of the number of candidates returned. In 1919 Labour won seats with under 50% of the vote in three-cornered contests in Anfield, Garston, Low Hill, and West Derby; in two other wards Labour's majority was less than forty votes. The anti-Labour alliance forged between Conservatives and Liberals in 1920 ensured Labour faced a

⁵(continued)

speakers, who complained "...very strongly of the utter absence of workers and of enthusiasm. He stated with better help the seat would have been won." Liverpool Trades Council, Minutes of the AGM, 26.3.19.

⁶Liverpool Daily Post, 2.11.19.

⁷Garston & Woolton Weekly News, 7.11.19.

straight fight in every ward. Labour also suffered in 1920 from a rupture in their alliance with the Nationalists following the former's decision to run candidates against Nationalists in South Scotland. Whereas in 1919 the Nationalist leader, T.P. O'Connor, had spoken for the Labour party candidates in Catholic areas, in 1920 the Tory Liverpool Courier gleefully demanded:

...where is Mr. T. P. O'Connor? Twelve months ago he was vigorously supporting... Labour platforms. Now Labour has entered the Irish stronghold, and Mr. O'Connor is silent and absent.

Although this row did not in the end lead to any electoral confrontation between Nationalist and Labour outside the South Scotland ward it seems likely that the public disagreement temporarily damaged Labour's support amongst Liverpool's Catholics. Labour's pact with the Nationalists cost them seats in 1920 for another reason. Where the electoral pact remained intact in 1920 it was Labour's turn to stand down in favour of Nationalist candidates in seats favourable to Labour.⁹ Thus a series of largely unrelated factors worked together to exaggerate the contrast between Labour's performance in 1919 and 1920. Moreover, in 1921 Labour recovered from the nadir of 1920 taking two seats and pushing its vote back over 40% in straight contests with the Conservatives in Garston, Dingle, Edgehill, Everton, and Low Hill. Examined in this light Liverpool's post-war electoral politics reflect national trends particularly closely.

However, it is possible to overstate the post-war improvement of

⁸Liverpool Courier, 26.10.20.

⁹In 1920 no Labour candidates stood for Brunswick or St. Anne's, both Labour wins in 1921. See Liverpool Courier, 2.11.21.

Labour's electoral fortunes in Liverpool. The Party's municipal representation lagged far behind cities of comparable size. More pertinently Conservative domination of the city's political life remained as strong as ever. Labour was certainly no match for the Tories. It now ranked alongside the Liberals and Nationalists as an additional minor party.¹⁰ Nevertheless, however much the Conservatives, and a sympathetic press, attempted to cast Labour as a sectional 'Trade Union' party, Labour's place in Liverpoolian politics had changed substantially. The Liberals were more than ever dependent upon the Tories for any electoral success. And the Nationalists could not venture beyond their own limited and clearly defined areas. Labour had emerged as the only party capable and willing to mount city-wide opposition to the Conservatives. The Liverpool Labour Party remained relatively weak, but it would be wrong to suggest that the war had not made a significant impact on the balance of power in local politics.

To some extent Labour's rise resulted from the reduced effectiveness of the central pillars of working class Conservatism in Liverpool. Before 1914 the Working Men's Conservative Association [W.M.C.A.] was a thriving and powerful body which "...mobilised the sectarianism of the Orange Order on behalf of the local Tory party."¹¹ However, "...by 1916 the W.M.C.A. had only three or four thousand subscribing members; and after the war twenty five branches were considered 'skeletons'."¹² The Mersey Carters' Union had also traditionally acted as a pillar of Conservative power within the city.

¹⁰The state of the parties on the City Council in October 1920 was Conservative 79; Liberal 28; Labour 22; Nationalist 16; Others 2.

¹¹Joan Smith, 1984, op. cit., p. 48.

¹²P. J. Waller, DEMOCRACY AND SECTARIANISM: A POLITICAL AND SOCIAL HISTORY OF LIVERPOOL, 1868-1939, 1981, p. 285.

Although the Union remained aloof from formal affiliation to the Labour Party or the Trades Council its commitment to Conservatism must have been brought into some doubt by its General Secretary, Albert Denaro, who stood as an accredited Labour candidate at post-war municipal elections.¹³ This weakening of Tory influence in part resulted from the impact of full employment in reducing the pull of sectarian politics. The war had also provided Catholic and Protestant workers with a common foreign enemy. Calls for national unity tended to temporarily undermine traditional 'tribal' loyalties.

Working class Conservatism had also been damaged by the death of the influential Pastor Wise in 1917, which contributed to a slump in the activities of the Protestant Church. However, by 1921 in the Orange heartlands the Protestant Reformed Church had rebuilt its influence through a wide variety of educational and recreational activities. Economic and political classes run through the church were often explicitly anti-socialist. In areas such as Breckfield, Kirkdale, St. Domingo, and Netherfield the church was able to play the role of 'universal provider' for working class communities, and ensure the return of Conservative or Protestant Party candidates at almost every election throughout the inter-war years.¹⁴ Nevertheless elsewhere in the city the Protestant church did not fully recover its pre-war influence. Waller points out the accelerated decline in church attendances amongst the protestant denominations during this period, and further added that:

...the old faithful residuum tended to be the young and old, single rather than married, women

¹³The Liverpool Pioneer, No.4, Nov. 1919.

¹⁴See Waller, op. cit., p. 285; R.S.W. Davies 'The Liverpool Labour Party & the Liverpool Working Class, 1900-39', in NORTH WEST LABOUR HISTORY SOCIETY, BULLETIN No.6, 1979-80, pp. 2-14.

rather¹⁵ than men, and anything but working class.

Conservatism in Liverpool retained much of the pre-war opportunism it had developed to secure the working class vote. However, its post-war attacks upon Labour betrayed the increased 'nationalisation' of Liverpoolian politics. In Liverpool, and the country as a whole, the Tories played assiduously on the alleged 'red threat' and Labour overspending.¹⁶

In terms of organisational strength the post-war years were a time of advance for the Liverpool Labour Party. Attempts to establish local organisations during the latter part of the war had not succeeded. It was not until mid-1919 that any real progress was made. The Party's organisational activity continued to prosper into the following year. In March 1920 the Labour Party learned that:

Reports from the divisions show a large influx of individual members and it is anticipated that during the coming year¹⁷ Labour clubs will be opened all over the city.

By 1921 nine Divisional Labour Parties had been established.¹⁸

Early optimism was, however, short-lived as Labour organisation

¹⁵Waller, op. cit., p. 286.

¹⁶See, for example, the Liverpool Courier 1.11.21., p. 5, where Salvidge charges that the Labour Party "...has asked for and obtained the help of Communists..." Other attacks in the same article centred on Labour's alleged lack of patriotism and the overspending of Labour run authorities.

¹⁷Liverpool L.P. Minutes, 4.3.20.

¹⁸Liverpool Trades Council and Labour Party Executive Committee Minutes, 1.7.21.

declined in tandem with the party's electoral support during the early 1920's. Labour's organisational advances were also very largely confined within certain occupational and geographical boundaries. Although the number of affiliated Trade Union branches had increased to around 150 by 1920 there was almost no representation from unions employed in and around the docks - by far the largest group of Liverpool's workers. Labour's strength lay largely in the activity of the city's largest group of non-casual workers - the railwaymen.¹⁹ It has been suggested that a strong correlation existed in Liverpool between concentrations of railwaymen and Labour electoral and organisational strength.²⁰ Certainly 'railwayman' was the most common single occupation amongst the ranks of Labour officials and candidates. Although their influence was disproportionately large Liverpool's railwaymen did not play a dominant role in the Labour Party beyond local strongholds such as Garston. Across the city Liverpool Labour was occupationally heterogeneous. The only groups capable of real domination - the port workers - remained aloof from the Party.

A suggested link between the non-casual trades in general and the Labour Party seems to rest on firmer ground.²¹ The relationship between areas of the city that contained large numbers of workers in non-casual trades and established Labour organisation is strong. However, the 'fit' is by no means total, as suggested by the establishment of D.L.P.'s in Kirkdale and Scotland - Protestant and Nationalist strongholds respectively. Nevertheless in Liverpool, as in the other areas studied,

¹⁹Liverpool L.P. Accounts, year ending 31.3.20.. However, the N.U.R. was only the third largest affiliate to the Liverpool Labour Party behind the Municipal Employees and the A.S.E..

²⁰Joan Smith, Ph.D., 1980, op. cit., pp. 250; 296.

²¹Davies, op. cit., p. 9.

Labour's activists, from whatever part of the city, were overwhelmingly from the non-casual trades.

The balance of political power in the Liverpool Labour Party certainly differed from the other areas studied (see Chapters I & II above). Here the I.L.P. fell far short of the pervasive influence wielded in Sheffield and Pontypridd. Throughout the war and post-war years the I.L.P. was in a minority on local Labour and trade union bodies. Given the strength of local patriotic feeling the war might be expected to have eroded support for the pacifist I.L.P.. Smith has argued that before 1914 the Fabians were Liverpool's premier Labour society. However, by 1919 the I.L.P. had overtaken the Fabians suggesting that during the war the I.L.P. actually gained strength.²² In 1918-19 the I.L.P. affiliated seven branches to the Labour Party, contributing over four times the amount in affiliation fees paid by the single Fabian group.²³

As in Sheffield it was the I.L.P. activists who earned repeated praise for their efforts to build local party groups and mount effective election campaigns.²⁴ Unlike Sheffield the Liverpool I.L.P. often found itself in conflict with the majority of the Party. Its opponents fell into two camps. One faction led by the Party secretary Fred Hoey, who for the most part stood on the Left of the Party; the other faction being a group of right wing trade unionists. This unholy alliance succeeded in excluding I.L.P. delegates from power in the central Party

²²J. Smith, 1984, op. cit., p. 440, "...the strongest Labour Society for many years was the Fabian Society...".

²³Liverpool L.P. Accounts, year ending, 31.3.19.

²⁴See, for example, Liverpool Trades Council Minutes, 8.1.19.; 13.11.19.

organisation. These splits, and in particular Hoey's vehement opposition to the I.L.P. have been explained in terms of power and personality clashes between the leading protagonists.²⁵ In reality the anti-I.L.P. alliance was motivated as much by the desire to minimise Labour's association with pacifism - perhaps the most damaging charge in early post-war Liverpool politics.

When compared to the electoral advances made by Labour in other industrial centres Liverpool remained at best a backwater for the Labour Party. Labour gains at municipal level were confined to 1919, and only two of the eleven Liverpool parliamentary constituencies returned Labour candidates before 1929. The city was to remain dominated by the Tories throughout the inter-war years and the influence of religion upon political affiliation declined both very gradually and most unevenly. For all that the post-war performance of the Labour Party in Liverpool displayed a truly remarkable advance over the pre-war record (see Table I above). Labour may not have been capable of defeating the Conservatives in 1921 but their challenge was now by no means inconsiderable.

II. Labour Organisation in Liverpool.

The tendency amongst historians of the Liverpool Trades Council has been to emphasize weakness and division in direct contrast to the more commonplace 'heroic' approach to this aspect of local labour history.²⁶

²⁵See, for example, R. Baxter, 'The Liverpool Labour Party 1918-63', D. Phil. Oxford, 1969, pp. 37-38.

²⁶S. Maddock, op. cit., 1959; W. Hamling, A SHORT HISTORY OF THE LIVERPOOL TRADES COUNCIL 1848-1948, Liverpool, 1948; E.L. Taplin 'The Liverpool Trades Council 1880-1914', N.W.L.H. Bulletin, No.3, 1972.

Such an assessment finds strong support during our period. Both before and after World War I the Liverpool Trades Council was relatively small and ineffective. However, by contrasting the Liverpool Trades Council's development with apparently more glorious achievements elsewhere it is possible to underestimate the extent of change within Liverpool's labour movement. Liverpool's Trades Council could hardly match the influence of those in Sheffield or Glasgow during this period. However, both the direction of change, and the areas of strength and weakness, display striking similarities. Elsewhere the emphasis has repeatedly been on the uniqueness of the Liverpool Trades Council, in fact the responses of this body reflected the national trend between 1914 and 1921.

The central weakness of the Liverpool Trades Council lay in the structure of the city's labour market as highlighted in Taplin's description of the pre-war situation:

...the major group of the City had never looked on the Trades Council as a premier organisation deserving allegiance. The major groups of workers were to be found along the waterfront; seamen, ships stewards, dockers, coalheavers, warehousemen, bargemen, tugboatmen and the like... In most Cities with a more diversified occupational structure, the Trades Council might be looked upon as the hub of trade union activity. This was very much less the case in Liverpool...²⁷

A number of powerful umbrella organisations catered for these and other groups of workers. Local Federations existed of Transport Workers, Engineers and Shipbuilders and amongst the Building Trades. The Trades Council found great difficulty in securing affiliations from amongst these groups. Consequently the Trades Council was unable to assert

²⁷E.L. Taplin, op. cit., 1975, p. 15.

itself as the focus of labour activity in the city. However, there were signs that this fragmentation was being broken down. From an early stage in the war the Trades Council was joined by the above Federations, together with the Women's Trade Union Federation, the Liverpool Labour Representation Committee and the Co-operative Society in the formation of the 'Liverpool Workers' Industrial Vigilance Committee'.²⁸ This body took up campaigns on the issues of food and conscription during the war.

In the post-war period there were signs that the Trades Council was gaining increased recognition along the waterfront. During the police strike of 1919 and the Councils of Action crisis in 1920 the Trades Council again made common cause with the various Federations. By 1921 the Council included branches of the Dockers and the Sailors' and Firemen's unions amongst its affiliates.²⁹ Furthermore, prominent individuals from the Federations and the waterfront unions became involved with the Trades Council, often through the political wing of the movement.³⁰ The trade unions in Liverpool were drawing closer together in the post-war years. However, the Trades Council remained just one of a series of trade union combinations in Liverpool. On any joint bodies the Trades Council and the Federations were usually represented as equals, signifying the former's lack of overall authority.³¹ It remained true that the Trades Council needed the Federations more than they needed it.

²⁸S. Maddock, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

²⁹Liverpool T.C. & L.P. Balance Sheet for Half-year ending 30.9.21.

³⁰Councillors Wilson and Robinson claimed at various times to represent the Building and Engineering & Shipbuilding Federations respectively. Albert Denaro, General Secretary of the powerful Mersey Quay & Carters' Union, stood for Labour at post-war Municipal elections.

³¹See, for example, the Liverpool L.P. Minutes, 6.8.19.

Part of the explanation for the coolness between the majority of portworkers and the Trades Council lay in the religious sectarianism which so profoundly influenced Liverpudlian politics. The development of any wider 'labour consciousness' was inhibited by the pervasive influence of sectarian power amongst the dockers. However, wartime full employment undermined an important cause of sectarian rivalry. This might have been expected to benefit the Trades Council, however, the war also had a divisive effect. The traditional patriotism of Protestant Liverpool was enhanced by incidents such as the sinking of the Lusitania which carried locally based sailors and had sparked off widespread anti-German riots. The Council's repudiation of Sexton, the ultra-patriotic dockers' leader, in a dispute over conscription led to the establishment of a rival 'Trades and Labour Representation Council'. The latter was founded upon the port unions, and resulted in the further isolation of the official Trades Council.³²

The Trades Council was also handicapped by the willingness of prominent local union leaders to ignore its authority. Sexton often eclipsed the Trades Council as the mouthpiece of labour in Liverpool. The split with the dockers proved highly damaging in the short-term. However, eventually the episode revealed that the Trades Council was not totally in awe of Sexton and his other port allies. The latter's efforts to establish a rival Trades Council ended in failure. Similarly, Sexton's attempts to create an alternative to the official Labour Representation Council collapsed after the war. The official body, referring to Sexton's rival, alleged with some justification that: "This

³²The episode is dealt with in some detail in E. L. Taplin, *THE DOCKERS' UNION: A STUDY OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF DOCK LABOURERS, 1889-1922*. 1986, pp. 134-37.

much lauded venture, after going up like a skyrocket, has come down like a stick."³³ The rival body had emerged because of the alleged pacifism of the Trades Council. With the war over, and Sexton's efforts diverted towards his parliamentary seat at St. Helens, there appeared little to justify its continued existence. During 1919 and 1920 a number of docker's and seamen's union branches trickled back to the official Trades Council.

Despite this defeat of a rival organisation and continued near-full employment the Liverpool Trades Council was unable to establish itself as a real force in the post-war years. From 1919 the Labour Party was the Trades Council's main rival for the time and energy of union activists. In January 1919 a delegate observed that:

...many of the societies believe that the Council fails to provide that complete representation which the movement needs, and they are looking for it more in the direction of the Labour Party.

Mason, an official of the Shipwright's Union and a Labour Party candidate at municipal and parliamentary elections, went so far as to suggest that: "The Trades Council was now unnecessary; it had neither influence nor finance."³⁴

The Labour Party and the Trades Council drew their affiliations from amongst the same, largely non-port based, group of trade unions, and amalgamation was advanced as the obvious solution. Approaches were made in early 1919 but the final amalgamation scheme did not become operative until 31 March 1921. Such prolonged indecision did not help

³³Liverpool L.R.C. Annual Report & Statement of Accounts for Financial Year 1917, in 'Annual Report' 1917, p. 3.

³⁴Quoted in S. Maddock, op. cit., pp. 236; 229.

either body. However, the final scheme was approved with a near unanimity which bode well for the future.³⁵ Some old divisions also appeared to be healing. The first Executive Committee of the new Trades Council and Labour Party included several members from transport unions, including George Milligan, Sexton's number two amongst the Dockers, and J. H. Borlase, leader of the Sailors' and Firemen's Union.³⁶ This apparent rapprochement remained far from complete in 1921. The affiliations of the Dockers and Sailors' were in each case from a single token branch and many groups remained aloof from the new body.³⁷

Nevertheless the continued weakness of the Trades Council should not obscure the advances that had been made. On the eve of war the Council had suffered a series of setbacks which left it demoralised and no longer in a position to claim the leadership of the local movement.³⁸ The recovery was slow and highly uneven. However, the formation of the

³⁵ Liverpool T.C. & L.P. Minutes, 7.2.21.. Only 7 of the 227 delegates present voted against the amalgamation scheme, and several of them were Communists who felt the scheme did not go far enough.

³⁶ Liverpool T.C. & L.P. Inaugural Meeting 6.4.21.

³⁷ Liverpool T.C. & L.P. Balance Sheet For Year Ending 30.9.21. The principal T.U.'s affiliated to T.C. & L.P. in 1921 were (subscriptions in parenthesis):

1) M.E.A.	£90
2) N.U.R.	£43
3) N.U.D.A.W.	£43
4) Dockers	£25
5) U.P.W.	£25
6) Amal. Soc. Woodworkers	£18
7) Plumbers	£18
8) A.E.U.; Shop Assistants; Warehousemen & Clerks; Typographical Association	£16

³⁸ See J. Smith, 1980, op. cit., p. 400. Her full assessment was as follows: "The institutionalisation of Sexton's power over the dockers, the Clearing-House scheme, the battoning down of the Garston Bobbin worker's picket, the introduction of a new conciliation arbitration scheme on the railways and the lack of any discipline over the Labour councillors, all helped to dissipate the Liverpool Labour movement's confidence. From August 1912 the Trades Council's fighting spirit
(Footnote continued)

'Trades Council and Labour Party' in 1921 created a body which could claim to provide a single centre for the labour movement in Liverpool. It would take some time before that claim could be fully realised but significant progress towards that end had been made over the period from 1914 to 1921.

The effort to increase power at the centre was also reflected within the Labour Party itself. The combination of the new Labour constitution and increased Labour representation on local councils encouraged attempts to increase the authority of the party activists over policy and the conduct of councillors. The Party had little difficulty in establishing its authority over published declarations of intent at elections, but significantly less success in controlling the statements and actions of its public representatives. Sexton remained his own man, and the Central Party clashed with the Council Labour Group on several occasions. However, the Central Party asserted its authority by forcing a climb down by the group in disputes over direct labour schemes and the nomination of candidates to the Aldermanic bench.³⁹ The need for a new constitution for the amalgamated T.C. & L.P. gave the Party the opportunity to institutionalise its authority. The Standing Orders of the new body included a clause that all local candidates must support the programme of the Party "...which may from time to time be decided by the Central Party", and further:

They shall also be require, if elected, to report to the party as often as may be deemed necessary by the Central Party, the proceedings

³⁸(continued)

evaporated and it gave up its pretensions to be the centre of the Liverpool Labour movement."

³⁹Liverpool Labour Party Minutes, 14.5.20.

of any body to⁴⁰ which they are attached as representatives.

The Liverpool Labour Party had been traditionally highly centralised largely out of the necessity born from the absence of any local organisation. The coming of local parties after 1919 only partially reduced central control. Candidate selection was conducted locally, where a viable body existed, but the Central Party retained the power to make nominations and ultimately ratify local selection.

Co-operation in Liverpool also reflected the trend towards greater centralisation. In 1915 the City of Liverpool and Toxteth Co-operative Societies amalgamated to form a single Liverpool Society. The new body grew rapidly, particularly after the war. Despite the influence of sectarianism and the local strength of Conservatism the leaders of the Society were supporters of co-operative political involvement. Some, like W. R. Blair, were longstanding labour activists and sought to bring co-operation into political alliance with the Labour Party. These leaders did not in this respect reflect the views of their members who, at the end of the war, voted by over ten to one to remain politically independent.⁴¹ This did not prevent the society from entering into negotiations with the Labour Party to prevent "...anything that would split the progressive vote..." at local elections.⁴² The relationship was not always harmonious but clashes at the polls were avoided.

⁴⁰ Standing Orders for Trades Council and Labour Party in Liverpool T.C. Minutes, 1921.

⁴¹ Liverpool L.P. Minutes, 14.3.19.

⁴² Ibid.

III. Conclusion.

In conclusion we can suggest that during the post-war years the Liverpool labour movement experienced several changes which closely paralleled developments in other parts of the country. These include: a significant improvement in the fortunes of the Labour Party, both in terms of organisational development and electoral support; the higher levels of affiliation amongst local trade union branches to both the Trades Council and Labour Party which suggested that 'labour consciousness' was spreading into new areas and gradually overcoming sectarian based loyalties; the substantial expansion of the co-operative movement, and the development of closer links between local co-operation, the trade unions and the Labour Party. Of great importance in the Liverpool context was the amalgamation of the political and industrial wings of the movement to provide a single, and more authoritative, centre for labour in the city. That centre made less of an impact on the life of the city than many of its counterparts elsewhere, nevertheless the broadening of its constituency indicated that the worst of the internal divisions were now being healed.

Labour was also active in the creation of structures able to impart an alternative labour ideology. By the summer of 1921 a Liverpool and District Labour College was functioning.⁴³ The Co-operative Society also strove to fulfil the role of 'universal provider', organising classes for men, women and children in an attempt to spread the principles of the movement.

⁴³See 'Justice for All', Issue No.1, 13.10.21., in Liverpool L.P. Minutes. See also Liverpool L.P. Minutes, 7.1.20., E.C. Minutes, 2.7.20.

These achievements should not be overstated. Their educational efforts penetrated only the homes of the already converted few. The churches, particularly the reinvigorated protestant denominations, were the true 'universal providers' for working class communities in Liverpool. The Conservative Party retained the allegiance of the majority of protestant workers, while the Nationalists maintained only a slightly less firm grip amongst Catholic voters. The T.C. & L.P. may have increased its affiliations from local trade union branches but the overwhelming majority of waterfront workers stood apart from organisations not centred on the port.

Nevertheless the situation had changed in several important respects since 1914. From 1914 to 1920 the chronic under-employment which had characterised the port's economy was eliminated; over the years between 1911 and 1921 census material suggests a dramatic increase in the percentage of Liverpudlians engaged in manufacturing industry largely at the expense of the employment on the docks and domestic service;⁴⁴ the Conservative Working Men's Association was in decline; the war had reduced the seductive influence of sectarianism, and church attendances, particularly among young males, were in accelerated decline; the Irish Question was nearing a 'solution' and the Irish voters up and down Britain were drawing ever closer to the Labour Party. The factors which had for so long constrained the growth of an independent labour interest in Liverpool everywhere appeared to be in decline. And yet it cannot be claimed that Labour had 'broken the mould' of Liverpudlian politics. The roots of Conservative domination ran far too deep for the edifice to be toppled by the war, or the unrest of the aftermath.

⁴⁴See Appendix 1.

APPENDIX 1.COMPARISON OF CENSUS OF OCCUPATIONS FOR LIVERPOOL, 1911 AND 1921.

	TOTAL	<u>1911</u> % i	%ii	TOTAL	<u>1921</u> %i	%ii
1) Ag. & Fish.	1628	0.5	0.2	1197	0.4	0.2
2) Mines & Quarries	1279	0.4	0.2	2217	0.7	0.3
3) Non-metal Manufacture	75577	23.6	10.0	13095	40.9	16.3
4) Engineering & Metal Trades	24494	7.7	3.3	31446	9.8	3.9
5) Construction & Building Trades	28221	8.8	3.8	16117	5.0	2.0
6) Gas, Water & Electricity	1967	0.6	0.3	2711	0.9	0.3
7) Railwaymen	9774	3.1	1.3	12941	4.0	1.6
8) Transport & Associated (non-rail)	67955	21.2	9.0	39569	12.4	4.9
9) White Collar, Prof. & Dom. Serv.	93944	29.3	12.5	79633	24.9	9.9
10) Miscellaneous	15308	4.8	2.0	3221	1.0	0.4
TOTAL OCCUPIED	320147	100.0	42.6	320037	100.0	39.8
TOTAL POPULATION	753353			802940		

COLUMN %i = the number in each category as a percentage of the total occupied population of Liverpool in each year.

COLUMN %ii = the number in each category as a percentage of the total population (occupied and unoccupied) of Liverpool in each year.

SOURCE: CENSUS OF ENGLAND AND WALES, 1911, VOL. X (PART 20), OCCUPATIONS AND INDUSTRIES, pp, 227-30. CENSUS OF ENGLAND AND WALES, 1921, Industry Tables, 1925, p. 206.

These figures must be treated with some caution not least because of the slump in 1921 which witnessed disproportionately high unemployment in and around the docks. Nevertheless despite the slump the numbers involved in 'Non-Metal Manufacture' and the 'Engineering and Metal Trades' increased substantially both in absolute terms and when expressed as a percentage of the total population - occupied or unoccupied.

SECTION I - CONCLUSION

This brief conclusion considers certain points of similarity and contrast between the case studies in this Section. In some respects the two major cities, Liverpool and Sheffield, provide the most fruitful comparison. The overall structure of labour organisation in Sheffield and Liverpool differ substantially from that in Pontypridd. Apart from the size and scope of labour organisation the single most important distinguishing feature was the domination of Pontypridd's labour movement by a single union - the South Wales Miners' Federation. In Sheffield and Liverpool the labour force was far more diverse providing the foundation for the development of faction and division between alternative industrial power bases. That said, perhaps the most obvious differences were between the relatively highly developed labour consciousness of Sheffield and Pontypridd, on the one hand, and its weakness in Liverpool on the other. The First World War is widely held to have caused a considerable homogenisation of the experience of British working class groups.¹ Do the case studies of this Section support the suggestion that the impact of war and aftermath reduced the distinctiveness of labour in Liverpool when compared to Pontypridd, Sheffield and centres discussed by other authors?

As discussed in the previous chapter Liverpool labour consciousness has elsewhere been unfavourably compared with its counterpart in Glasgow. One point of contrast concerned political awareness and the tendency to street violence. In a recent comparative study which emphasised the continued exceptional nature of the Liverpool working

¹See, for a recent example, B. A. Waites, A CLASS SOCIETY AT WAR, 1987.

class Joan Smith suggested:

In Liverpool from 1909 to 1922, the pattern of politics was one of alternating riot; anti-Catholic riot, strike riot, anti-German riot, post-war riots, anti-black riot, unemployed riot...[and]...Glasgow working men were good socialists but lousy rioters;² Liverpool working men were quite the reverse.

Just how exceptional was Liverpool's post-war riot record? Race riots in the early summer of 1919 also broke out in South Wales where similar concentrations of black minority groups came under attack in port areas.³ Undoubtedly, the rioting which broke out in Liverpool during the police strike in August 1919 was unparalleled elsewhere but perhaps more important than some inherent Liverpoolian tendency to riot was the fact that in no other centre was police cover so drastically reduced. Police were an important factor for quite different reasons in the other major post-war outbreak of rioting in Liverpool when an unemployment demonstration developed into a battle between police and demonstrators. Can we attribute street fighting which results from police attacks upon unemployment demonstrations to the riotous nature of Liverpoolians? It is surely open to question whether such outbreaks can be classified alongside sectarian or race rioting for a number of reasons including their different causes and composition. Moreover, battles between police and unemployed or labour demonstrations were no more a feature of Liverpool than other major industrial centres including Glasgow, London and Sheffield.

² J. Smith, 'Labour Tradition in Glasgow and Liverpool', HISTORY WORKSHOP JOURNAL, 17, Spring, 1984, pp. 43; 43.

³ See N. Evans, 'The South Wales Race Riots of 1919', LLAFFUR, Vol. 3, No. 1, Spring, 1980, pp. 5-29. And also R. May & R. Cohen, 'The Interaction Between Race and Colonialism: A Case Study of the Liverpool Race Riots of 1919', RACE AND CLASS, Vol. XVI, NO. 2, Oct. 1974, pp. 111-26.

The reaction to beer shortages in Liverpool and Sheffield during early 1919 provide an illuminating contrast. It was Sheffield with its much more highly developed labour consciousness which witnessed public disorder over the issue. The supposedly riotous Liverpoolian waterfront workers confined themselves to threats of strike action.⁴ Pontypridd also experienced street violence on a number of occasions during the summer of 1919 when police stations were attacked in attempts to release prisoners.⁵

My argument is not that Liverpoolians were anything other than 'good rioters'. Rather it is that this trait should not be seen as peculiarly Liverpoolian. The riots of 1919, with the exception of the looting during the police strike, and the unemployed disturbances of 1921, were reflected elsewhere. And both of these exceptions can, to some extent, be explained by reference to factors exogenous to the character of the Liverpool working class. As rioters, Liverpoolians may have been at or near the top of the table, but they were certainly not in a league of their own!

Were levels of industrial militancy in Liverpool also distinctly different from those elsewhere? As in Sheffield, the engineers in Liverpool established their own Workers' Committee during the war. Liverpoolian engineers, although distinctly less militant and less highly politicised than their counterparts in Sheffield, were by no means totally quiescent. During 1916 Merseyside engineers threatened strike action which won them a pay award that took the District to the

⁴See Chapter I above and Liverpool Echo 15.1.19.

⁵Pontypridd Observer, 31.7.20; 7.8.20.

top of the national pay league. A local union organiser for the engineers made it clear that the strike threat was genuine. He felt during the dispute "...we were living near to the crater of a social and industrial volcano."⁶ Rail workers in Liverpool developed a reputation as the most 'advanced' in the country. The unofficial 'go-slow' organised by the N.U.R. in Liverpool during 1917 represented the most significant wartime industrial action by members of that union outside of the South Wales coalfield. Moreover, Liverpool's trade unionists were not afraid to strike despite the wartime industrial truce. On the waterfront Liverpool dockers were involved in strike action on a number of occasions between 1915 and 1918.⁷

At the close of 1918 and into early 1919 there was a rash of strikes in Liverpool, Pontypridd and Sheffield. In all three areas despite fears that a serious confrontation might develop none resulted. Similarly the summer months of 1919 were reported to be full of tension. In July Sexton felt that among the Liverpool dockers "the tension is so great at present that they are apt to strike on any question..."⁸ During the national rail strike in September 1919 and the Triple Alliance crisis in 1921 trade unions in Liverpool played a full part. There was little sign that, in any of the three centres studied, support for a Triple Alliance strike was wavering in the lead up to Black Friday. In Liverpool only four N.U.R. members voted against the strike at a "largely attended" mass meeting at the Picton Hall, and four thousand

⁶Quoted in H. A. Clegg, A HISTORY OF BRITISH TRADE UNIONS SINCE 1889, Vol. II, 1911-1933, 1985, p. 169.

⁷J. Smith, 'Commonsense thought and working class consciousness: some aspects of the Glasgow and Liverpool labour movements in the early years of the twentieth century,' Ph. D. Edinburgh, 1980, p, 536.

⁸Liverpool Weekly Courier, 26.7.19.

Carters were also reported to be firmly behind the strike.⁹

However, in one episode Liverpool did clearly distinguish itself as significantly less militant than the other centres examined in this study. During the 'arms to Poland' crisis in August 1920 there seemed every prospect of strong support for a general strike in Sheffield and Pontypridd. In Liverpool the Council of Action was relatively weak and, clearly lacking confidence that a strike call would be heeded, limited itself to holding up the supply of munitions.¹⁰

To what extent did post-war changes in the Liverpool labour movement reflect trends at work elsewhere? Certainly the shift in labour organisation towards more highly centralised structures occurred in both Liverpool and Sheffield. By the end of our period both cities had established a single centre for the labour movement. The similarities do not end there. During the war the Sheffield and Liverpool movements had been divided between rival bodies of patriotic and 'pacifist' trade unionists. In both cities the official Trades Councils found difficulty in penetrating certain important sections of the labour force. In Liverpool it was the portworkers, in Sheffield the Cutlery and 'light trades'. Both also experienced stiff resistance to their authority from prominent right wing trade union figures; in Sheffield from Bailey of the N.A.U.L. and Wardle of the Cutlery Union, and in Liverpool from Sexton of the Dockers. However, in both cities the post-war years witnessed a healing of the wounds and a growth in the authority of the Trades Council. Of course the dissimilarities remained writ large - most

⁹Liverpool Evening Express, 4.4.21.; 11.4.21.

¹⁰Ibid., 19.8.20.. See also Sheffield Independent, 16.8.20.; Pontypridd Trades & Labour Council Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Council of Action, 3.9.20.

notably the difference of power and authority. Nevertheless the trend of change for the Liverpool and Sheffield Trade Councils over these years was the same; towards a growth of centralised authority, and a diminution of the debilitating influence of division.

In Liverpool this period also witnessed the unification of the industrial and political wings of the movement when the Labour Party and T. & L.C. amalgamated to form the Trades Council and Labour Party in 1921. This brought Liverpool into line with the situation in both Pontypridd and Sheffield. In all three cases the centralised body strove to impose its authority over individuals and constituent organisations, though everywhere such efforts met with mixed success. In this respect at least the Liverpool body appeared to exercise central power more effectively than its Sheffield counterpart.

In electoral terms, Labour's post-war improvement in Liverpool was dwarfed by the Party's achievements in Sheffield and Pontypridd. Nevertheless, in Liverpool, Labour had made an important breakthrough after the war. By 1921, it was established as the only party capable of mounting city-wide opposition to the Conservatives. After the success of 1919 Labour in Liverpool did not fall back to its poor pre-war performance. Labour retained strong electoral support even in the absence of any upsurge in industrial militancy of the kind which had underpinned its fleeting pre-war success in 1911. Further, the year by year fluctuation in Labour's fortunes from 1918 to 1922 followed a similar trend in all three urban centres.

Within the co-operative movement, Liverpool carried through a major amalgamation to establish a single society for the entire city in 1915. In Sheffield although the city's two co-operative societies had formed a

single Sheffield Co-operative Political Council during 1921, they did not achieve full unification during our period. However, the Liverpool Co-operative Society could hardly compare with the political strength of the Brightside & Carbrook Society in Sheffield. Nevertheless the Liverpool Society was the third largest contributor to the National Co-operative political funds in England and Wales during the early post-war years.¹¹ In all three of the case studies the local co-operative societies devoted increased attention to education and attempts to become the 'universal provider' for working class families.

The post-war years undoubtedly saw the Liverpool labour movement moving in much the same direction as its counterparts in Pontypridd and Sheffield. Strides forward were being made in the industrial, political, and co-operative wings of the movement. Moreover, in each case these three wings increasingly viewed themselves as having a common cause. However, in each respect Liverpool lagged far behind Sheffield and Pontypridd. In Sheffield the Trades Council was a body of real significance in the industrial and political life of the city; and it appeared only a matter of time before the Labour Party would run the municipal administration. In Pontypridd, Labour had gone a step further and had overcome the charge of representing only a sectional interest by adopting the language of the 'community interest' for itself. In Liverpool, labour bodies still struggled to establish their claim to represent even that sectional interest. Liverpool was undoubtedly an exceptionally poor area for labour as a movement. But then equally Pontypridd and Sheffield were areas of exceptional strength. Perhaps the most significant development of the years 1914 to 1921 was that the trends for labour, in such widely differing areas, were so similar and

¹¹Co-operative Congress Report, 1919, p. 811.

broadly favourable.

SECTION II - INTRODUCTION

As suggested in the first Section of this thesis the widespread unrest amongst working people in these years resulted in significant changes in the fortunes and the structure of labour organisations. This Section focuses on the impact of the unrest on the government of labour institutions at a national level. One theme of this Section is that internal pressures have been underestimated as a force for change. The study of power structures within labour institutions is a subject which has provoked much controversy and debate particularly amongst theorists of industrial relations. In the chapters which follow certain theoretical approaches are assessed in a series of case studies which examine changes in the distribution of power within various institutions. However, the value of these studies extends beyond the assessment of theoretical approaches to the government of labour organisations. Some historians have suggested that changes in the industrial relations system together with the 'incorporation' of trade union leadership during the first two decades of the twentieth century clearly contributed to the rising tide of industrial militancy as trade unions joined employers and the state as part of the governing structures of capitalism. Therefore, in addition to the consideration of certain theoretical approaches, this Section contributes to a fuller understanding of the causation of the unrest itself.

For historians in what has been termed the 'rank and file-ist' school the progressive centralisation of both industrial relations and trade union government from the 1890's were critical factors in a process which witnessed the transformation of the official machinery of

trade unionism into a significant constraint upon workers' aspirations.¹ Put simply the 'rank and file-ist' school have argued that trade unions became enmeshed in centralised collective bargaining systems imposed by an alliance of employers, trade union leadership and the state. As control over the conduct of negotiations moved away from the workplace and towards union headquarters so did the locus of power within the trade unions. This, it is argued, in turn led to increased levels of internal conflict as the 'rank and file' attempted to re-assert their control over negotiations. Moreover, the 'incorporation' of trade unionism also played a significant role in heightening the unrest among working people during the second decade of this century. Thus Price - a prominent advocate of the 'rank and file-ist' school - has argued that:

...the emergent quasi-corporationist relationship between labour, the state and industry in the pre-1914 period, [and] the corporationist compromise of the war years... provided the essential impetus for the syndicalist spirit to enter labour's political consciousness.²

In this interpretation the machinery of collective bargaining and trade unionism had ceased to be part of the solution to workers' grievances and had become part of the problem itself.

The second decade of the twentieth century did indeed witness a dramatic increase in the centralisation of industrial relations systems. Moreover, in some unions there was a significant growth of internal

¹See, for example, R. Price, LABOUR IN BRITISH SOCIETY: AN INTERPRETATIVE HISTORY, 1986; R. Price, 'The Labour Process and Labour History', SOCIAL HISTORY, Vol. 8, No. 1, January 1983, pp. 57-75; K. Burgess, THE CHALLENGE OF LABOUR. SHAPING BRITISH SOCIETY, 1850-1930, 1980; J. Hinton, THE FIRST SHOP STEWARDS MOVEMENT, 1973; Van Gore, 'Rank and File Dissent', in C.J. Wrigley, (ed.), A HISTORY OF BRITISH INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS, Vol. I, 1982.

²R. Price, 1983, op. cit., p. 69.

anti-leadership activity amongst the 'rank and file'. Any thesis which links these two developments to the industrial unrest of the period would at first sight appear to be well founded. However, much of the evidence advanced by the 'rank and file-ist' school for the post-1914 period relies very heavily on wartime developments in the engineering industry. The chapters in the remainder of this Section broaden the perspective to include industries other than engineering.

In establishing their case for the 'incorporation' of trade unionism the 'rank and file-ist' school have argued that the process of centralisation was imposed upon unions largely from outside. It was felt that the only group within the unions to gain from the centralisation of industrial relations were union officials who stood to extend their power and prestige both within the union and in society at large. Thus Van Gore has argued that:

...the enhanced authority of the leader over the rank and file and the resultant tensions were primarily the exogenous outcome of progressive entanglement in compromising relations with employers and the state.³

In the following chapters it will be argued that the majority of activists on the left supported the centralisation of industrial relations in their industry. This was of course the very group which the 'rank and file-ist' school suggested would demonstrate their opposition to centralisation via the establishment of unofficial organisation. In the interpretation outlined in this Section trade unions played a substantial part in the establishment of a centralised system of negotiations.

³Van Gore, in Wrigley, 1983, op. cit., p. 49.

It is further argued that the centralisation of union government far from being a cause of unrest amongst a broad layer of discontented 'rank and file' militants, was actually a basic element in the reform programmes of radical union activists. Thus the centralisation of union structures in these years did not result in the alienation of workers from labour organisations. On the contrary in the period up to Black Friday a greater number of workers and particularly the more militant amongst them, placed greater faith in, and expended more time and energy on, activity aimed at developing the established formal organisations of the labour movement than perhaps at any other time. That faith may appear misplaced with the benefit of hindsight, as indeed it was in the minds of a small number of theoretically minded contemporaries. Nevertheless, that does not justify the notion that centralisation was a significant contributory factor in the unrest. Rather it was precisely what the great majority of militant activists in each of the bodies studied in this Section desired and advocated. The complexities and nuances of the attitudes to centralisation among historians and in contemporary labour circles are highlighted throughout this Section and analysed in greater detail in its conclusion.

The 'rank and file-ist' school places particular emphasis upon the emergence of unofficial organisation within trade unions as a result of the processes of centralisation outlined above. The centralisation of power prompted resentment among the 'rank and file' of the union who responded with the establishment of informal organisation based around the workplace. Thus, according to Price, co-ordinated unofficial activity:

...emerged as a response to the incorporative pressures of burgeoning conciliation and

arbitration structures and ⁴the general tightening of executive authority.

The industrial case studies in this Section examine the extent to which unofficial organisation increased during and after the war as a response to centralisation of industrial relations and union government.

A further cornerstone of the 'rank and file-ist' analysis is the suggestion that leaders and led in labour organisations developed conflicting interests. The relationship between paid officials and lay members has been a particular concern of both historians and theorists of labour organisations for almost a century. Early writers in this area, such as the Webbs and Michels, stressed the ability of the leadership to impose their own policies upon labour organisations.⁵ Furthermore, they argued that the impact of leadership intervention was characteristically conservative or 'moderate' in nature. Despite recent criticism this approach warrants serious attention both because it underpins the analysis of the 'rank and file-ist' interpretation and because it has permeated institutional histories of labour organisation in this period.⁶ In this Section the role of leadership is examined in some detail in order to test the proposition that leadership should be characterised as theoretically conservative. Did labour organisations develop "...oligarchic and collaborationist tendencies..." during our

⁴Price, 1983, op. cit., p. 58.

⁵R. Michels, POLITICAL PARTIES, 1959, p. 143. "...in the trade union movement, the authoritative character of the leaders and their tendency to rule democratic organisation on oligarchic lines, are even more pronounced than in political organisations." See also S. & B. Webb, INDUSTRIAL DEMOCRACY, 1897.

⁶For a recent consideration of this perspective see the paper by J. Zeitlin, "Trade Unions and Job Control: A Critique of 'Rank and Filism'", in BULLETIN OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY, Vol. 46, No. 4, Spring 1983, pp.6-7.

period as Hinton has suggested?⁷ The findings in this area are developed in the concluding chapter of this thesis which considers the contention that labour's leadership played a key part in heading off a post-war clash between capital and labour.

For the 'rank and file-ist' school the corollary of a necessarily conservative leadership is a lay opposition which performs the function of guardians of the radical aspirations of the movement. Indeed it has become a commonplace to describe internal opposition as the 'rank and file'. As well as a strong tendency to adopt a radical stance the rank and file are depicted as having had necessarily divergent interests and more radical policies than the leadership. Although this Section is largely concerned with the conflict between leaders and activists its findings do not support the perspective which relies on a dichotomous divide between 'rank and file' and 'leadership'. As will become clear, neither configuration necessarily conformed to its respective conservative or radical stereotype.

In the discussions of labour organisation government which follow, the distribution of power between leaders and led is assessed largely through an examination of the ability of lay members of the union to influence the policy and performance of the organisation. It will be argued that rather than conforming to an oligarchic form of government British labour organisations proved remarkably responsive to the pressure from their own radical constituents. Explanations of differences in the systems of government, and particularly the distribution of power, between organisations will be explored in the

⁷Hinton, 1973, op. cit., p. 315. Hinton was clearly influenced to some extent by the analysis of Michels. See Michels, 1959, op. cit., p. 143.

conclusion to this Section.

The chapters in Section II embrace studies of British retail co-operation, the National Union of Railwaymen, the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers & Firemen, and the South Wales Miners' Federation. The co-operative movement is clearly the 'odd one out' amongst these studies of trade unions. However, it will be argued that the trends of change within co-operation over these years were closely analagous to those experienced in the trade union movement. In addition to discussions of the causes and timing of closer links between co-operation and other labour organisations the chapter on the Co-operative Union examines trends towards greater centralisation and the relationships between leaders and led. It will be argued that co-operation experienced pressures for change very similar to those experienced by the unions. Co-operation was included by Michels as a working class organisation subject to his 'iron law of oligarchy'.⁸ However, this study suggests that such a perspective is at best misleading when applied to the British Co-operative Union in these years.

The studies of trade unions which comprise the bulk of this Section concentrate on similar themes: the impact of activists on power structures; the trend towards centralisation; and issues raised by the 'rank and file-ist' perspective of the relationship between leaders and led. The unions examined were chosen for a number of reasons. The N.U.R., and its leader J. H. Thomas, is repeatedly advanced as the classic illustration of the tendency towards oligarchy in the twentieth century British labour movement. This study qualifies that view, while

⁸Michels, 1959, op. cit., pp. 146-49.

the chapter on A.S.L.E. & F. argues that any attempt to suggest some generalised spread of oligarchy is fundamentally mistaken. The contrast between the N.U.R. and A.S.L.E. & F. is useful because as members of the same industry they experienced broadly similar external changes while responding in a rather different manner. Moreover, the N.U.R., at least at the outset of our period, has been characterised as radical and industrially militant while A.S.L.E. & F. has been viewed as conservative and moderate. Comparing the two railway unions is also particularly valuable in the assessment of certain theoretical approaches which categorise union structure according to 'craft' versus 'industrial' or 'open' versus 'closed' features.⁹ The third union studied, the South Wales Miners' Federation was chosen because, with the possible exception of the engineering industry, the coalfield was the nerve centre of syndicalist inspired opposition to established labour leadership. If the arguments of Hinton, Price and others concerning centralisation, leadership and informal organisation do not apply to the S.W.M.F. they are unlikely to provide an explanation of the rising tide of militancy amongst other groups of workers. The detailed examinations of the case studies is supplemented by evidence from other organisations and industries in the Section's concluding chapter.

⁹ See, for example, H. A. Turner, TRADE UNION GROWTH, STRUCTURE AND POLICY, 1962.

SECTION II

LABOUR ORGANISATION AT NATIONAL AND REGIONAL LEVELS

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CHAPTER IV.THE CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT AND LABOUR 1914-21.Introduction

In recent years British co-operation has been the subject of renewed attention amongst labour historians.¹ Attempts to gain a fuller understanding of the working class community have, to some extent, brought the role of the co-operative as a consumer organisation out of the shadow of the trade unions and Labour Party. However, in most histories of the 'labour movement' co-operation continues to be depicted as having played only a peripheral role. Furthermore, it is often the case that twentieth century co-operation receives the scantiest attention despite the vast increase in the size of co-operative societies and the dramatic expansion of the field of their activities.² To some degree co-operation has remained unfashionable because of its reputation for inertia - nothing could be further from the case during and immediately after the First World War. It was these years that finally confirmed co-operation's position as the third wing of the modern British labour movement. Right up to the eve of the First World War the Co-operative Union insisted on maintaining a stance independent of the Labour Party and the trade unions. However, by 1921 co-operators in many parts of the country operated a close political alliance with the Labour Party and the Co-operative Union was officially engaged in a joint organisation with the trade unions designed to make the two

¹ See, for example, the 1981 Conference of the Society for the Study of Labour History, BULLETIN No. 43, Autumn 1981.

² For example, J.E. Cronin's survey of LABOUR AND SOCIETY IN BRITAIN, 1918-79, 1984, mentions the co-operative movement only once.

movements 'inseparable'.³ Like other working class organisations over these years the co-operative movement experienced significant pressure for change of its structures in which organised internal pressure groups played a significant part.

This chapter focuses on three aspects of the 'impact of working class unrest' on the Co-operative Union and its component retail societies. The first concerns the rapidly changing relationships between co-operation and trade unionism. The second focuses on co-operative political activity, the formation of the Co-operative Party and attempts to bring co-operation into closer alliance with the Labour Party. In both these aspects the issue of the timing and the causation of the move to the left in co-operative opinion is considered in the light of Pollard's re-assessment in which he rejects the traditional emphasis on the events of World War I.⁴ The third and final part of this chapter discusses the extent of pressure for internal reform, concentrating particularly on the co-operative movement's response to pressures for increased amalgamation and centralisation - strategies urged with ever greater vigour by 'progressive activists' in many parts of the British labour movement during these years. Relationships between the co-operative leadership and the 'progressive' reformers are assessed in the light of theories which posit a theoretically conservative leadership in conflict with a more radical 'rank and file'. (See the Introduction to Section II). It will be argued that, while there were disagreements between the leadership and 'progressive' co-operators, these groups were much more often in agreement than in conflict over the

³Co-operative Congress Report, 1921, p. 103.

⁴S. Pollard, 'The Foundation of the Co-operative Party', in A. Briggs and J. Saville, (eds.) ESSAYS IN LABOUR HISTORY, 1886-1923, 1971.

aims and organisation of the co-operative movement.

In keeping with the approach adopted throughout this thesis local material is used to provide further evidence of the motivations of the majority of ordinary co-operators whose voices rarely penetrate the records which survive in the archives of national organisations - almost the only source used in some histories of the Co-operative Union over these years.⁵

I. Co-operation and Trade Unionism.

The first element of this chapter considers the relationship between co-operation and trade unionism over the period from 1914 to 1921. It falls into three main parts: the first concerns the timing and causation of greater collaboration between the two movements; the second outlines the form and content of the joint machinery established as a result of the closer post-war relationship; the third and final part offers an assessment of whether these schemes brought co-operation and trade unionism nearer, in practical terms, to their declared aim:

...to work in the direction of making the two movements supplementary one to the other and eventually inseparable.⁶

(a)

Co-operation and trade unionism maintained quite distinct aims and

⁵ See, for example, Ibid.; G. W. Rhodes, CO-OPERATIVE LABOUR RELATIONS 1900-62, 1962; T. F. Carbery, CO-OPERATORS IN POLITICS, 1969.

⁶ Co-operative Congress Report, 1921, p. 103. Clause 2g) of the 'objects' of the United Advisory Council of Trade Unionists and Co-operators.

methods. Despite this, drawn together by their common constituency, the two movements had a long history of collaboration. Fraternal delegates had been exchanged since 1875 and Joint Committees were first established as early as 1883.⁷ With such a long pedigree it might be expected that, by 1914, strong working ties would have developed. In fact, however, prior to World War I the relationship received little more than lip service. And rather than any smooth pre-war progression towards stronger links, on the eve of war attempts to bring trade unions and co-operative societies closer together suffered a significant setback. A resolution carried at the Co-operative Congress of 1914 committed the Central Board of the Co-operative Union to organise meetings of co-operators nationwide for the consideration of proposals to form an alliance between co-operative societies and trade unions. In the event this scheme to establish a 'Co-operative and Labour Board' was defeated at all levels of the co-operative movement. A clear majority of local committee and members' meetings as well as rejecting the proposal for such a joint board went on to support a motion which disapproved of any joint action with outside bodies.⁸ This latter resolution was a major defeat for those who sought to link co-operation to the trade union movement. Despite these setbacks during 1914, by 1917

⁷A. Bonner, BRITISH CO-OPERATION, 1970, p. 128.

⁸G.W. Rhodes reports that following the 1914 Congress "conferences were held in different areas to discuss the whole matter and three resolutions were dealt with at each of them: (1) Supporting the original scheme for a 'Co-operative and Labour Board'; (2) The same as (1) but excluding the Labour Party, i.e., only the trade unions would be allowed associate with the Movement; (3) disapproving any joint action with outside bodies. The first proposal was defeated at the conferences by 905 to 464, the second by 748 to 477, whilst the third was carried by 740 to 668. A letter was forwarded to member Societies asking for their committees' views and 38 committees supported the first proposal, 41 the second, and 178 the third. The same letter asked the Societies to consult their members at members' meetings and the figures for these were: the first resolution lost by 1,764 to 1,115; the second by 1,372 to 1,119; the third carried by 1,799 to 1,227." Source: G.W. Rhodes, op. cit., p. 12.

co-operation's isolationist stance, together with decades of membership apathy towards joint activity, were apparently swept aside as unprecedented efforts at local and national level were invested in the development of active collaboration between the two movements.

How do we account for this sea change in co-operative attitudes towards trade unions? The timetable outlined above points to the impact of war as the critical development in this growing rapprochement. However, Sidney Pollard has argued that the importance of the war has been overstated by historians of co-operation. Based largely on evidence of co-operative assistance to trade unionists during the unrest of 1912 and 1913 Pollard suggests that:

Like the leftward movement itself, the trade union co-operative link had developed in the pre-war years...

Unfortunately Pollard ignored the events of 1914 (outlined above) which severely undermine his suggested steady evolution of closer collaboration between co-operation and the trade unions. Contrary to Pollard's claim, trade union-co-operative links were established long before the immediate pre-war years, and attempts to extend the formal relationship beyond Joint Committees composed of national figures foundered right up to the eve of war on the resistance of the fiercely independent co-operative activists and membership. Certainly, various wings of the movement displayed a willingness to assist trade unionists involved in strikes during the pre-war labour unrest. There is little to suggest, however, that the co-operative movement as a whole was about to go beyond such ad hoc arrangements and establish a formal "class-based

⁹Pollard, 1971, op. cit., p. 207.

alliance".

Both Pollard's thesis and the impact of war on British co-operation are discussed in greater depth in the second part of this chapter. Suffice to say that all commentators - including Pollard - are agreed that the conduct of the war on the home front had a highly significant impact on co-operative attitudes towards trade unionism.¹⁰ More precisely it was the changed trading position of co-operative societies brought about by wartime shortages and increased government intervention which influenced co-operative thinking. Co-operators confronted by a government firmly wedded to private business interests quickly realised the value of an alliance with working class producer based organisations during a period of full employment.

Co-operators were represented at a very early stage on the War Emergency Workers National Committee [henceforth W.E.W.N.C.]. A majority of the Central Board of the Co-operative Union had been unsuccessful pre-war advocates of closer ties with the unions. They now lost little time in furthering that cause by heaping praise upon the work of the War Emergency Workers' National Committee on pensions, food prices, food supplies and war profits. In 1917 the Board's report to Congress on the activities of the W.E.W.N.C. concluded:

The Co-operative representatives are convinced that the work performed by the committee in dealing with workers' problems arising from the war, and in drawing and holding together representatives of so many workers' organisations is of vital importance to the nation.¹¹

¹⁰Pollard suggests that the "...trade-union-co-operative link... was greatly and remarkably strengthened during the War." Ibid..

¹¹Co-operative Congress Report, 1917, p. 241. The W.E.W.N.C. was a national coordinating body established by working class organisations - including trade unions, the Labour Party and the Co-operative Union - in
(Footnote continued)

Such commendations of the advantages of closer ties with the unions by nationally respected leaders undoubtedly influenced many co-operators. Practical experience of war conditions in the localities was, however, still more persuasive. Food shortages presented a constant and growing headache to the vast majority of co-operative societies. Co-operators urged the introduction of rationing to ensure a steady supply and prevent profiteering. When food finally became rationed in 1917 co-operative societies were disadvantaged by the government's chosen method which left societies to share out a fixed ration amongst a rapidly growing number of consumers. Scarce supplies of such necessities as wheat and sugar were distributed according to a 'datum line' principle based on pre-war orders. However, between 1914 and 1917 membership of distributive societies had risen from 3,054,000 to 3,788,000.¹²

Amongst trade unionists it was the rising price of food, consequent on shortages of supply, which according to a government enquiry, was a principal cause of industrial unrest.¹³ Repeated threats of "down tools" or "local action of a drastic character" were recorded in trade union branch resolutions which protested against shortages. The attempts of many co-operative societies to resist price rises and introduce their

¹¹(continued)

order to protect the interests of workers and their families. See R. Harrison, 'The War Emergency Workers' National Committee 1914-20', in A. Briggs and J. Saville (eds.) *ESSAYS IN LABOUR HISTORY, 1886-1923*, 1971, pp. 211-59.

¹²G.D.H. Cole, *A CENTURY OF CO-OPERATION*, 1944, pp. 265 & 371.

¹³Reports of the Commission of Enquiry Into Industrial Unrest, Cd. 8662-69, 1917.

own rationing systems before 1917 had already enhanced co-operators' reputation amongst trade unionists. Thus trade unionists were more than willing to add their weight to campaigns to secure co-operative representation on the local food control committees established by the government during the spring of 1917.¹⁴ In areas such as Sheffield co-operative societies despatched a series of deputations to local trade union branches and trades councils in order to gain support against the mainly middle and upper class members of the local food control committees. The repeatedly sympathetic response received by such deputations must have done a great deal to convert those co-operative activists who doubted the benefits of an alliance with other labour bodies in 1914.

The wartime food shortages were thus a key factor in uniting trade unions and co-operative societies over an issue of immediate direct material relevance to both. However, it needed more than the existence of short-term specific grievances to bring about the post-war transformation in co-operative - trade union relationships. The war radically broadened the perspectives and outlook of many co-operators who were forced to look beyond the horizon of the local store and the community it served. It was in the immediate post-war years that the Co-operative Union for the first time specifically incorporated among its objects "...the establishment of a Co-operative Commonwealth." The Union's President even suggested to Congress that "...this definite statement shall stand first and foremost among the objects of our Co-operative movement."¹⁵ This was without doubt a consciously inflated

¹⁴See, for example, Sheffield No. 1 A.S.L.E.F. Branch Minutes, 3.2.18.; 24.2.18.; 3.3.18.. Also the Lanarkshire Miners' County Union E.C. Minutes, 18.2.17; 26.1.18..

¹⁵Co-operative Congress Report, 1920, p. 49.

view of the strength and immediate aspirations of British co-operation. Nevertheless, it serves to illustrate the way that co-operative activists were now much more prepared to consider the wider implications of their activity. The coincidental expanded awareness of class ensured that co-operators, now concerned with a whole range of social issues, sought allies amongst other working class organisations, and in particular the trade unions. By 1918 the willingness to work together had become almost automatic and was so generalised, particularly at the national level, as to include issues with little direct relevance to co-operative trade.

(b)

This growing identification between co-operators and trade unionists manifested itself in a number of ways and at various levels. Joint Advisory Committees were established which formalised collaboration at local and national level. In 1917 the Co-operative Union, having been approached by the Trades Union Congress, agreed without serious opposition to reverse its pre-war stance and form a joint committee with the T.U.C.. In some areas joint trade union and co-operative bodies had been established in advance of the national decision. These lay bodies were urged upon the Co-operative leadership by activists in order that the relationship "...can be a real live one ... brought into active partnership by local committees."¹⁶ Interestingly while the co-operative leadership immediately took up the suggestion for local committees the T.U.C. resisted giving official sanction during the war. In the light of the unions' own internal war-time problems this possibly reflected a not unnatural fear within

¹⁶Co-operative Congress Report, 1917, p. 511. Part of a speech to Congress by a delegate from Leicester which indicated that a joint body had already been established in that area.

the T.U.C. leadership of local activist power bases.

After the war, however, trade union officialdom's resistance to local organisation waned and co-operators displayed still greater enthusiasm for joint activity. During 1919 the national United Advisory Council of Co-operators and Trade Unionists arranged large scale conferences of activists in Birmingham, Bristol, Glasgow, London and Manchester in an attempt to encourage the formation of local councils. The development of local links was also initiated by regional bodies of the Co-operative Union and indeed via direct contact between local co-operative societies and trades councils.¹⁷ Thus local and national agitations succeeded in establishing joint committees in most major industrial centres. However, great difficulty was experienced in developing beyond the traditional strongholds of the labour movement.¹⁸ Nevertheless, the formal constitution finally adopted in 1921 for the Local Advisory Councils illustrates the extent to which attitudes to trade unionism had changed within the Co-operative Union. Congress had already approved a commitment "...to ensure that as far as possible all members and employees of the co-operative movement shall become members of a trade union."¹⁹ The proposal for a closed shop encountered some opposition at Congress on the grounds that individual liberty would be restricted. However, the resolution was successfully carried and no attempts were made to reverse the decision during these years. The local

¹⁷The Southern and North-Western Sectional Boards of the Co-operative Union organised joint conferences with trade unionists in the early months of 1919. In cities such as Sheffield, joint committees emerged from links established locally during the war.

¹⁸The Advisory Council reported to the Co-operative Congress in 1920 that it was "...by no means satisfied with the number of joint committees established." Co-operative Congress Report, 1920, p. 140.

¹⁹Ibid., 1919, p. 8.

councils were primarily charged with the tasks of increasing mutual membership amongst co-operators and trade unionists and the organisation of joint propaganda efforts. The new constitution also urged the local councils "...to work in the direction of making the two movements supplementary one to the other and eventually inseparable."²⁰ This was a far cry from the refusal of co-operators in 1914 to attend meetings with other bodies!

An important aspect of the newly formed alliance from the trade union viewpoint was the possibility of co-operative assistance during strikes and lock-outs. In 1918 the United Advisory Council adopted as one of its objectives:

...the consideration of how far it is desirable and possible to ensure the unrestricted distribution of food supplies, or the payment of benefit during important trade disputes by issuing through the various branches of the co-operative movement food coupons or loans from the Co-operative Wholesale Society's Bank...²¹

The question remains to what extent the full array of post-war expressions of goodwill were translated into real mutual assistance. Many co-operative societies adhered to the commitment to aid striking trade unionists. The extension of cash loans to striking railway workers in September and October of 1919 further enhanced co-operation's standing amongst active trade unionists. However, such overt support for a union which had allegedly challenged the rule of law and the state brought inevitable attacks upon co-operation from the press. The 1920 Congress apparently bowed to such pressure and removed an explicit

²⁰Ibid., 1921, p. 103.

²¹Ibid., 1918, p. 173.

reference in the Central Board Report to assistance for trade unionists "...engaged in industrial disputes..." because of fears that further adverse publicity would hit co-operative society trade.²² This cautious approach did not prevent co-operators from providing considerable support to miners during their strike in the late spring and summer of 1921. In addition to cash advances many local societies gave support in kind, often via a voucher system, others, such as Nottingham, ran soup kitchens for miners and their families. In South Wales the C.W.S. undertook the distribution of foodstuffs and local stores displayed their strong commitment to the miners' cause by major extensions of credit and the display of pro-strike posters in their windows.²³

(c)

Progress towards the declared aim of unifying the two movements is much less easy to find. At a national level the United Advisory Council of Co-operators and Trade Unionists emerged as the only tangible result of closer co-operation. The National Council of Labour established in 1921 did not include the co-operative movement. And even the limited proposal to associate the resources of the Co-operative Union, the T.U.C., and the Labour Party in the joint control of research, legal and publicity departments was never fully operated.

In some areas of the country, however, co-operative societies and trade unions successfully developed a more active partnership. Evidently

²²Ibid., 1920, p. 10.

²³F. W. Leeman, A HISTORY OF CO-OPERATION IN NOTTINGHAM: ONE HUNDRED YEARS OF THE NOTTINGHAM CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY LTD., 1963. Pontypridd Trades and Labour Council Minutes, 16.4.21.. H. Francis and D. Smith, THE FED, 1980, p. 55.

the degree of collaboration varied enormously according to local circumstances. Generally the alliance was most active wherever trade unionism had become an effective and integrated force at community level. Thus the mining districts and centres of heavy industry such as Sheffield displayed particularly strong links between co-operators and trade unionists.

On the other hand, in Liverpool, labour was divided organisationally, politically and along religious lines, and thus any alliance was slow to emerge. In a city where Orange-Conservative identification was still significant amongst the protestant working class the Liverpool Co-operative Society was understandably reticent to tie itself too closely to the labour interest. The co-operatives' less than wholehearted attitude in turn bred suspicion amongst trade union activists. Thus it was only after "...debate and some opposition..." that the Liverpool Trades and Labour Council finally endorsed the establishment of a Joint Committee with the co-operative society in late 1920.²⁴

Elsewhere trade unions and co-operative societies repeatedly provided support and assistance in the conduct of a succession of campaigns and agitations. However, even in areas such as Sheffield the new relationship faced problems in its initial phase during 1919. Common complaints from trade unionists included the underpayment of clerks and the use of piece work rates on building contracts by the local co-operative societies. Such disagreements subsided fairly rapidly, partly as a result of the mediating efforts of local Joint Committees, and also in response to the genuine strengthening of co-operative

²⁴Minutes of the Liverpool Trades and Labour Council, 3.12.20.

society commitment to labour. As indicated earlier the key turning point for many trade unionists was the railwaymen's strike of 1919. This newfound understanding was reinforced in the following months by the experience of collaboration between co-operators and trade unionist in local 'Mines For The Nation' campaigns.²⁵

Although some doubts and areas of friction remained, not least concerning the conditions of employment for co-operative staff, the practice of mutual support and assistance between unionists and co-operators at local level took firm root in the immediate post-war years. The response was highly uneven, but in areas such as Sheffield the two movements, through the continual exchange of speakers and joint propaganda exercises, drew significantly closer together. An important element of the emerging alliance was the high degree of cross fertilisation signified by the large number of leading and lesser activists described as "Trade Unionist and Co-operator". The two organisations were still in the main engaged in differing spheres and often acted as anything but one movement. Nevertheless, the increased awareness of a unity of interest and desire to maximise collaboration between co-operation and trade unionism is clearly apparent in the post World War I period.

²⁵See, for example, Minutes of the Sheffield Trades & Labour Council Executive, 20.1.20.

II. Co-operation and the Labour Party.

Throughout its long history the British co-operative movement had maintained a position of political neutrality, steadfastly rejecting time after time proposals designed either to involve the movement directly in electoral politics or to become allied to an existing party. In what appeared to be a dramatic volte-face the 1917 Co-operative Congress meeting in Swansea voted by a huge majority to "...secure direct representation in Parliament and on all local administrative bodies."²⁶ In 1971 Sidney Pollard offered a new analysis of this critical episode in the history of British Co-operation. His contribution to the Briggs and Saville 'ESSAYS IN LABOUR HISTORY 1868-1923' rejected traditional explanations of the remarkable and sudden changes in co-operative political activity during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Earlier studies had attributed the 1917 decision to the impact of war and in Pollard's words, "...to specific and immediate business grievances..."²⁷ Pollard, on the other hand, sought to play down the significance of short-term pragmatic motivations and emphasised instead the role of ideology, establishing co-operative political involvement as an episode in the steady forward march of the British labour movement.

Pollard's work has highlighted the significance of the emergence of co-operation as an integral part of the British labour movement and as a barometer of the leftward shift in working class attitudes. Neither of these broad developments are in question here. However, the timing and proximate causes of change advanced by Pollard require reconsideration,

²⁶Co-operative Congress Report, 1917, pp. 552-53.

²⁷Pollard, op. cit., p. 185.

in particular the traditional emphasis on the importance of the First World War ought to be restated. Pollard exaggerates the growth of pre-war support for Labour amongst co-operators in an attempt to create a picture of steady evolution towards the modern perception of an integrated 'labour movement' composed of trade unions, the Labour Party and the co-operative movement.

Pollard's essay is a faithful reflection of the concerns and approaches of labour historians for much of the 1960s and 1970s. At times there are hints of 'Whig history' which result from a focus on the 'forward march of labour' wherein the emerging links between labour and co-operation are viewed as a natural and unproblematic consequence of a supposedly steady growth in class awareness. The work is also firmly rooted in the style of the institutional labour history of its time. Despite the highly federal structure of the retail co-operative movement Pollard's story is based almost entirely on national records and particularly accounts of Co-operative Congress debates. Consequently almost the only historical actors are the co-operative pamphleteers and speechmakers. A further legacy of earlier institutional labour history is the stereotypical positions apportioned to the main groups identified by Pollard. The left-of-centre conference speaker was typically viewed as the authentic voice of the rank and file, while the leadership performed the role of conservative frustrators of the progressive aspirations of that rank and file.

An attempt is made in what follows to present some different approaches to those so commonly adopted by labour historians in earlier decades. And to demonstrate how the institutionalist, 'forward march of labour', approach leads Pollard to present both the wrong timetable and an inappropriate set of explanations for the growth of support for

Labour amongst co-operators.

This element falls into three parts. Firstly, the evidence for Pollard's suggested pre-war growth of support for the direct political representation of the Co-operative movement is critically examined. Secondly, rival explanations of the 1917 decision to embark on direct political activity are considered and the 'traditional' emphasis on the impact of war upon co-operative trading is re-affirmed. Finally, it is argued that the real growth of support amongst co-operators for closer links with Labour is to be found in the years after 1917.

(a)

Co-operators sympathetic to Labour were anxious to develop links with the trade unions and the Labour Party, and, as a first step, to involve the co-operative movement in seeking direct political representation. Pollard presents the course of this struggle over the first two decades of the twentieth century as a:

...steady and natural [!] growth of the demand
for direct representation of the Co-operative
movement as a working class organisation.²⁸

Such a conclusion relies upon a highly selective survey of voting patterns at Co-operative Congresses on the issue of direct political involvement. A fuller examination reveals the weakness of the case for any smooth progression.

Pollard suggests that the Congress debates of 1900, 1905 and 1913 "...show a clear line of evolution..." of growing support for political

²⁸Ibid., p. 189.

activity. This conveniently ignores the Congress votes of 1906, 1908, 1914 and 1915 all of which undermine Pollard's thesis.²⁹ Moreover, even if we rely exclusively on Pollard's own choice of data we find that the percentage of delegates who favoured direct political representation was in fact slightly smaller in 1913 than in 1900.³⁰ Examined more closely even the events of the 1905 Congress undermine Pollard's case. It is true that one resolution concerning political involvement was carried. However, the motion was worded to avoid any specific reference to direct co-operative political activity, and in fact was only carried after a plea by a Liberal M.P. from the Congress rostrum for the motion to be passed "...purely in the interests of discussion..." in order that they "...could get to the heart of the matter, which was contained in the second motion..." This second resolution urged an alliance with Labour and was crushingly defeated by 807 votes to 135.³¹ The different terms of each of the motions referred to by Pollard render any assessment of changes in voting behaviour particularly hazardous - it would be, at

²⁹ Pollard actually avoids the unpalatable evidence of 1914 and 1915 by describing 1913 as the "...last important occasion before 1917 when the matter was discussed." Ibid..

³⁰ Ibid.

The Congress votes highlighted by Pollard were as follows:-

- i) 1900 for:409, against:905. Delegates 'for'=31%.
- ii) 1905 for:654, against:271. Delegates 'for'=71%.
- iii) 1905 for:135, against:807. Delegates 'for'=14%.
- iv) 1913 for:580, against:1346. Delegates 'for'=30%.

³¹ The Co-operative News, 17th June 1905, pp. 710; 718. The first motion read:- "That this Congress is of opinion that the time has arrived when it is necessary, in the best interests of the co-operative movement, that co-operators, in and through their own organisation, should take a larger share in the legislative and administrative government of the country." The second motion urged:- "That the Congress is further of opinion that this object can best be attained by joining our forces with the Labour Representation Committee, thus forming a strong party of progress and reform."

best, unwise to suggest a clear and uniform trend on the basis of such evidence.³²

What of the years Pollard chose to ignore? In 1906 the Congress resolved not to seek any form of direct Parliamentary representation by a majority of more than two to one. An attempt to revive the 1905 proposals at the 1908 Congress was defeated overwhelmingly. The 1914 Congress resulted in further setbacks for the Labour cause when a motion from the C.W.S. was passed with an "obvious" majority.³³ The Co-operative Union Central Board received clear instructions:

...to strictly observe, in spirit as well as in letter, the resolution of the Aberdeeen Congress resolving to "maintain the neutrality of the movement in respect of party politics"; not to join in conferences with political parties; not to be officially represented at gatherings of political parties, and not to employ co-operative men and money to the advancement of the Labour³⁴ Party or political organisation or movements.

Worse was to come during subsequent months when the 1914 Congress decision to avoid all outside contact was endorsed by a nationwide

³²The problems of comparability are substantial. The 1900 resolution advocated "independent working class representation" as a means "to secure the possession of political power by the working classes." Co-operative Congress Report, 1900, p. 153. There was no mention of the fledgling Labour Representation Committee although had the resolution been carried affiliation would probably have resulted. The first motion of 1905 was, it would appear, deliberately imprecise and was carried very largely for the purposes of debate. The second motion was the only one of the four which called specifically for an alliance with Labour. The resolution debated in 1913 contained no reference to the Labour Party and, as such, does not constitute evidence of an increase in support for the Labour cause over 1905.

³³The Co-operative News, 1906, pp. 656-57; Co-operative Congress Reports 1908, pp. 378-85; 1914, p. 511.

³⁴Ibid., 1914 p. 510.

series of local committees, members' meetings and regional conferences.³⁵ A forlorn attempt at the 1915 Congress to ignore the message from these meetings and establish a Joint Labour-Co-operative Board was quickly dispatched by an "overwhelming" majority.³⁶

Pollard may be right to suggest some growth of support for links between co-operation and the labour movement. However, by ignoring the unpalatable evidence of 1906, 1908, 1914 and 1915 he greatly overstates the strength of such support. Pollard felt that:

...the natural groundswell which drove the Co-operative movement into the arms of the Labour Party seemed to be irresistible, no matter how many victories Greening [see footnote³⁷] and his forces seemed to win on the surface.

On the contrary, after the defeats of 1914 and 1915 Labour supporters cannot have sustained a perspective of victory in the short-term. The advocates of political neutralism, often led by active Liberals, were firmly in the ascendant on the eve of war. The advances of 1905 and 1913, given such prominence by Pollard, were followed by severe defeats in 1906 and 1914. There was, therefore, no "steady and natural growth", "inevitability", or "clear line of evolution" towards a rapprochement with Labour before World War I. Rather there was a long and hard road of persuasion, debate and political struggle, along which the occasional step forward for Labour activists was invariably followed by disappointment and defeat.

³⁵G. W. Rhodes, op. cit., p. 12.

³⁶Co-operative Congress Report 1915, p. 501.

³⁷Pollard op. cit., p. 194. E. O. Greening was the most prominent spokesman among the opponents of direct co-operative political representation and a member of the Liberal Party.

(b)

Only two years after the 'overwhelming' defeat of 1915 the Co-operative Congress completed a most remarkable U-turn and endorsed co-operative political action by 1,979 votes to 201. Most historians of co-operation have accounted for the decision of the May 1917 Congress by reference to the pressures of war.³⁸ Pollard rejects this traditional view and suggests instead:

...a major ideological conversion rather than a series of ad hoc complaints as the real basis of the Co-operative entry into labour politics...³⁹

Accordingly in this view, the 1917 Congress decision was merely a continuation of the alleged pre-war rising trend of support for co-operative direct political activity. While Pollard acknowledges that the war had an impact upon co-operation, the specific grievances occasioned by the government's mistreatment of the movement in wartime cannot, he argued, explain the decision of 1917. It was the emergence of "...a matured ideological and class-based political philosophy..." which, for Pollard, underpinned the conversion of co-operation to political action.⁴⁰

While not denying the existence of some evidence of a pre-war rise in the influence of Labour activists, the traditional emphasis on the impact of war retains great explanatory power. Pollard's interpretation rests heavily upon the evidence of selective quotations from conference

³⁸See, for example, T.F. Carbery, op. cit., pp. 16-22. A. Bonner, op. cit., pp. 133 & 140-43. G.D.H. Cole, 1944, op. cit., pp. 315-6. G. W. Rhodes, op. cit., pp. 14-15.

³⁹Pollard op. cit., p. 207.

⁴⁰Ibid., p. 201.

speeches and co-operative pamphlets. Such views were expressed not by recent converts to the Labour cause, but by individuals long committed to independent working class politics. The wartime co-operative pamphlets quoted by Pollard as evidence of a changing ideological position contained few arguments that were not already common elements of debates over political action before 1914 and so were by no means new to co-operators. Moreover, simply because the Congress supported the resolution on political action it does not necessarily follow that those who voted for it also endorsed all the views expressed by labour activists who spoke in favour of the motion. It would surely be a mistake to imply that those class-based ideas expressed at the conference rostrum, and quoted by Pollard, were shared by all the 1,979 delegates who supported the motion. This view gains further credence from the fact that the 1917 resolution only sought to establish independent co-operative political activity, not a "class-based" alliance with Labour. During the Congress debate Labour activists specifically denied that co-operation would be wedded to the Labour Party.⁴¹ Why if the majority of delegates to the 1917 Congress had undergone a "major ideological conversion", did Labour activists fail to advance a scheme for a class-based political alliance with trade unions and the Labour Party?

The tendency to identify the vocal and committed conference delegate as the authentic voice of the rank and file has been a strong element in much of the work of historians of labour institutions. The

⁴¹Co-operative Congress Report, 1917, pp. 549-69. Not one of the resolution's advocates made any specific reference to an alliance with Labour throughout the debate with the exception of the mover who made the position abundantly clear: "I want to say that in this resolution there is no reference to, and no intention of, any alliance with any political party." Ibid., p. 549.

characterisation of labour leadership as theoretically conservative also pervades such work. In the case of co-operation Pollard draws a parallel with trade union leaderships in highlighting a:

...suspicion among Labour supporters of the political leanings of much of the co-operative leadership...⁴²

As if to confirm the expectations of earlier historians of the Left, the leadership of the Co-operative Union did indeed repeatedly ignore the instructions of the delegate conferences. However, this was done not in order to frustrate left-wing desires for closer links with Labour, but rather to initiate such contacts against the apparent will of the majority of societies. For example, during 1913, it was at the initiative of the leadership and without any mandate from Congress that a conference was held with representatives of the T.U.C. and the Labour Party. The 1913 Congress then instructed the Central Board "...to maintain strictly the neutrality of the Movement in respect of party politics."⁴³ In spite of this instruction, the Central Board organised a further conference with Labour and the T.U.C. to draw up a scheme for a permanent Joint Committee.

It was this initiative which prompted Liberal co-operators to sponsor the much more explicit motion of 1914 (see above: p. 117). Only two months after being instructed "not to join in conferences with political parties" and avoid all contacts with other outside bodies, the Central Board of the Co-operative Union actively participated in the War

⁴²Pollard, *op. cit.*, p. 192. In fact Pollard presents very little evidence for such a claim. A letter to Henderson quoted by him refers not to national leaders, but to those local managers and activists who ran the retail societies.

⁴³Co-operative Congress Reports, 1913, p. 565.

Emergency Workers' National Committee. Moreover, at the 1917 Congress it was a resolution from the Parliamentary Committee which initiated the policy of direct political involvement. Far from being a conservative force the national leadership of the Co-operative Union made repeated attempts to drag a largely indifferent and often hostile membership into closer alliance with Labour and the trade unions.⁴⁴

In order to fully understand the decision of 1917, our focus needs to be shifted away from the conference speech makers and co-operative pamphleteers. Their support for political action was not a new element in the situation. We should rather be concerned with the motives of the majority of ordinary conference delegates and co-operative activists nationwide, who so dramatically reversed their opinion on co-operative political action between 1914 and 1917. The overwhelming concern of these and other non-party political co-operators was with the trading function of the movement. Thus in the pre-war years Liberal activists were able to frustrate Labour aspirations by playing on four widely held beliefs. Firstly, it was feared that political action would endanger the movement's unity, drive away members and damage trade; secondly, that it would be a drain on local society funds; thirdly, that political action was an inferior method of attaining economic and social improvement and was contrary to the co-operative traditions of voluntarism and mutuality; and, lastly, that the pressure group policy of the Co-operative Parliamentary Committee - which relied for the most part on Ministerial lobbying - met all the movement's political needs.

Such long established and firmly held views were undermined by the practical experiences of active co-operators during the war rather than

⁴⁴See Rhodes, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-13.

any mass conversion to Labour consequent upon a re-defined ideology. The war repeatedly brought co-operation into direct conflict with a state drawn into increasing levels of economic intervention, a state, moreover, heavily influenced in its decision making by private traders and business men. The single grievance which most inflamed co-operative opinion was the application of the Excess Profits Duty to co-operative societies' trading surpluses. To acknowledge that co-operatives made profits would not only make them susceptible to other forms of taxation, but would undermine the basic principle of co-operation based on the ideal of trade devoid of profit making. Almost as important in persuading co-operators of the need for direct political involvement was the scant attention paid by government to co-operative protests. The Joint Parliamentary Board reported to the 1917 congress that:

...the co-operative movement carries but little weight, either with the legislature or with administrative departments of the State... in the things that matter most today our influence is practically nil.⁴⁵

Food shortages presented a constant and growing headache to the vast majority of local societies. When food finally became rationed in 1917, co-operative societies were disadvantaged by the government's chosen method, which left societies to share out a fixed ration among a growing number of consumers.⁴⁶ The exclusion of co-operative representatives from the Ministry of Food's local food control committees provoked a storm of protest from co-operators and trade unionists alike.⁴⁷ Other local wartime state bodies often inflamed

⁴⁵Co-operative Congress Report, 1917, p. 137.

⁴⁶See G.D.H. Cole, op. cit., pp. 265, 371.

⁴⁷In November 1917 some 27% of the membership of the local food control
(Footnote continued)

co-operators' sense of grievance. Military Service Tribunals were, according to the following account, particularly anti-co-operative:

One society had 102 men taken out of 104 and, in another instance, the military representative justified the taking of a branch manager on the ground that if the co-operative branch were closed a better living would be left for the village grocer. A private baker, as Chairman of a Tribunal exempted his own foreman baker from military service, and on the same day rejected the appeal of the local co-operative society for its foreman baker. One military representative actually stated that no harm would be done if by the withdrawal of all its male staff the co-operative store were shut down and its unfair competition with honest tradesmen brought to an end.⁴⁸

Attempts to influence the government's wartime regulatory machinery brought co-operators and local labour bodies into active alliance, often for the first time. The experience of the later war years when the labour movement acted as co-operation's sole ally, particularly on the issue of food supply, ensured that the ideological advocates of closer links with the labour movement found greater support for direct political involvement during and after 1917 (see above: pp. 119-122).

For much of the war the co-operative movement considered itself to be under direct attack. In one sense this was not a new situation. The privileged trading position enjoyed by co-operative societies had faced mounting criticism from private traders since the 1890's, when competition between the two had started to bite.⁴⁹ The key factor which

⁴⁷(continued)

committees were either private traders or farmers; only 2.5% were representatives of the co-operative movement. See W. H. Beveridge, *BRITISH FOOD CONTROL*, 1928, pp. 57-58.

⁴⁸Bonner, *op. cit.*, p. 137.

⁴⁹See N. Killingback 'Capitalist Attacks Upon Co-operation', and S. Yeo
(Footnote continued)

prompted the co-operative entry into politics was the greatly expanded political influence wielded - often directly under the Lloyd-George administration - by the private business lobby. A policy of political neutrality and lobbying appeared futile when confronted with a government so completely influenced and infiltrated by opponents of the movement. Many co-operators were deeply angered by the refusal of Lloyd-George to receive a deputation of co-operators during 1917, an episode which further exposed the inadequacies of the old approach. The pre-war advocates of political action seized upon their opportunity and found overwhelming support amongst those co-operators not firmly wedded to either of the traditional political parties.

However, Pollard seeks further support for his view in an examination of co-operators' hopes of what might be gained from direct political intervention. He argues that the creation of a Co-operative political party was unlikely to be seen as a remedy for the short-term grievances which according to earlier authors had spawned it. Pollard states:

...the solution proposed - that of sending Co-operative M.P.'s to Parliament - did not seem to meet the immediate grievances. ... No one could have hoped for much direct representation in war-time, when only by-elections offered an opportunity to test public opinion; but even in the middle-distance of the immediate post-war years, with a general election in the offing, it is not clear what a handful of M.P.'s could have accomplished... Specific short-term grievances alone could not have called such a party into being.⁵⁰

⁴⁹(continued)

'Towards a New View of Co-operatives and Co-operation', in the BULLETIN OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY, Vol. 43, Autumn 1981.

⁵⁰Pollard, op. cit., p. 209.

One is immediately tempted to ask how, if prospects of political success were so remote, activists were expecting to use the new party to create their dream of the co-operative commonwealth which lay at the root of Pollard's "...major ideological conversion"? Certainly Labour activists - that is the minority - wanted something more than the rectification of short-term grievances from their intended political involvement. But the majority of co-operative activists surely had every prospect of creating pressure on the government for the redress of those grievances by the adoption of direct political action. Indeed, Pollard draws attention to the changed attitude within government circles in the aftermath of the Congress decision to adopt political activity: "...by the last quarter of 1917 and early 1918... many of the immediate grievances were in fact being met."⁵¹

A government headed by Liberals had every cause to be concerned about the emergence of a Co-operative Party. It was not necessary for the co-operators to become M.P.'s still less form a government for them to pose a threat to the Liberal Party. An additional competitor for working class votes and a further split within the "progressive" vote could only have helped the Conservatives at the Liberals expense. This was one very good reason why Liberal co-operators had fought so long and hard against direct co-operative political involvement. By early 1918 such considerations may have encouraged Lloyd-George and Lord Rhondda to look more favourably on co-operative representations. It can be argued that it required only the commitment to political action to elicit the more favourable governmental response they required. There appears, then, to be a clear short-term rationale to co-operative political activity without reference to "ideological conversion".

⁵¹Ibid., p. 208.

There is one significant element in the Co-operative U-turn on political activity which is completely ignored by Pollard. That was the lack-lustre and disorganised performance of the Liberals at the 1917 Congress, which had made a substantial contribution to the size of the vote to abandon political neutrality. Disarray amongst Liberal co-operators can be attributed in no small measure to the split in the Liberal Party itself. As Cole suggested over forty years ago:

Had the Liberal Party not been divided into warring factions- Asquithites and Lloyd Georgeites- and in the process of disintegration under the impact of war, the opposition to Co-operative political action would have been much⁵² more formidable than it actually proved to be.

To summarise: the large majority in favour of political action at the 1917 Congress resulted from three main factors: the disarray within the Liberal Party; a growth in support for the co-operative Left; and the intervention of the state into co-operative trading affairs. Of these surely the last was by far the most important. Co-operators under attack from politicians sought to hit their adversaries where it hurt most - at the ballot box. The Congress speeches of Labour activists quoted by Pollard, did not accurately reflect the view of the broader movement or even the Congress itself. The Left gained majority support for political action because in 1917 many apolitical activists viewed it as a necessary response to a wholly new set of circumstances. More co-operators undoubtedly embraced the class-based ideologies of the Left in 1917 than in the pre-war years. Nevertheless, for the majority, it was a pragmatic decision in response to attacks upon co-operative trading.

⁵²G.D.H. Cole, op. cit., p. 268.

(c)

The record of co-operative political activity between 1917 and 1921 serves to highlight the extent to which Pollard overstates the swing to Labour both before and during the war. Far from being resolved, the battle to bring co-operation into closer political alliance with Labour had only entered a new and particularly difficult phase as a result of the 1917 Congress decision. That decision was, after all, only to enter electoral politics, not to form an alliance with Labour. The issue of the relationship between co-operative politics and the Labour Party occupied centre stage at all levels of the co-operative movement between 1918 and 1921. The co-operative movement and its resources became a battlefield for contending political forces. The course of that struggle, outlined below, demonstrates the incompleteness of any "ideological conversion" in 1917, and provides a useful indication of the strength of pro-Labour and anti-Labour (usually Liberal) forces during this important phase of changing political allegiances amongst a significant section of working class opinion.

Initially political activity was greeted with some enthusiasm by societies anxious to fight back against an openly anti-co-operative government. By the end of 1918 563 retail societies (from a total of 1,364) had affiliated to the National Co-operative Representation Committee. Early support, however, turned to outright opposition in several areas when it became clear during the 1918 general election campaign that co-operative societies were acting in a de facto alliance with the Labour Party.⁵³ This naturally angered many co-operators still

⁵³The number of societies affiliated to the N.C.R.C. actually declined during 1919 and 1920. Only 506 societies remained affiliated by the latter date. The decline continued in 1921, when the depression in trade
(Footnote continued)

sympathetic to Liberalism, and when local societies were asked to contribute funds and other resources to Labour election campaigns, active Liberals were presented with an issue around which they could organise and secure support.

Conflict developed in various parts of the country during late 1918. Liberal co-operators were to the fore in organised campaigns to prevent co-operative society involvement in the general election. In December 1918 a meeting of one thousand co-operators in Aberdare voted to rescind an earlier motion which had authorised the society's participation in political contests. Liberals achieved a similar result during 1918 in a dispute within the Stratford Co-operative Society. In March 1919 a "coalition committee" organised a successful coup at the Annual General Meeting of the hitherto socialist-dominated Brightside and Carbrook Co-operative Society of Sheffield. The socialists, however, shortly regained control. Early in the same year members of the Liverpool Co-operative Society rejected an electoral alliance with Labour by a majority of 10 to 1.⁵⁴ Even in industrial centres which might be expected to provide the backbone of any alliance between Labour and Co-operation it appears that the task of "ideological conversion" was far from complete.

Where Labour activists commanded majority support and attempted to enter local politics, there remained a formidable, if somewhat unexpected, obstacle to electoral activity - the Labour Party. Labour

⁵³(continued)
forced a number of societies to tighten their belts. Co-operative Congress Report, 1920, p. 125; 1921, p. 65.

⁵⁴See the Merthyr Express, 12.12.18.; Julia Bush, BEHIND THE LINES. EAST LONDON LABOUR 1914-19, 1984, pp. 224-25; Sheffield Daily Independent, 1.3.19.; and Liverpool Labour Party Minutes, 14.3.19.

Parties and trades councils were very keen to recruit co-operative society finance, full-time organisers, canvassers and press resources to their side in any election campaign. They were significantly less anxious to allow co-operative candidates to stand for either municipal or parliamentary election unless they subjected themselves to Labour Party control over policy and candidate selection. In several areas of the country there were protracted and at times acrimonious negotiations between co-operative societies and the local Labour authorities; these almost invariably left co-operators with less room for political activity than they desired.⁵⁵

In spite of these early difficulties, the course of political experience after 1917 enormously strengthened the supporters of joint Labour-co-operative political action. There were real areas of success. The strongly federal traditions of the co-operative movement allowed local societies to fashion their own political stance. Where Labour was particularly strong, co-operative societies often affiliated directly to the Labour Party - in the 1919 Municipal elections 341 Labour Party candidates campaigned with the active support of an affiliated co-operative society. Furthermore, although the number of societies which had merely affiliated nationally to the Co-operative Party fell, the number of active Co-operative Party Councils in the localities grew steadily from around 130 at the end of 1919 to reach 180 by mid 1921.⁵⁶

An important aspect of early co-operative politics was the

⁵⁵ See, for example, the disputes in Sheffield and Birmingham - Minutes E.C. Sheffield Trades & Labour Council 23 July 1918; 19 November 1918; 9 December 1919; 13 December 1921: Minutes Brightside & Carbrook Co-op. Political Council, 11 & 25 July 1918; 24 October 1918: T. Smith, HISTORY OF THE BIRMINGHAM CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY, 1881-1913, 1931, pp. 200-202.

⁵⁶ Co-operative Congress Report, 1920, p. 126; 1921, p. 65.

considerable activity generated in the local societies where Labour supporters were in the majority. When it was under the control of its socialist directors, the Brightside & Carbrook Society in Sheffield displayed a wholehearted commitment to political activity. The society elected a full-time political organiser and ran an almost continuous series of leafletting exercises, propaganda meetings and door-to-door canvassing during 1919 and 1920.⁵⁷ In post-war Sheffield the Co-operative Political Council was at least as effective as the Labour Party in the establishment of new and active membership groups. The Brightside & Carbrook Society was untypical but not unique. Co-operation and Labour drew together rapidly in many areas after the war. In November 1919 some 852 Municipal candidates enjoyed the support of a local co-operative society which in almost every case resulted from a local agreement with Labour.⁵⁸

Local political activity was by no means confined solely to electioneering. Co-operative societies had traditionally placed great emphasis on education. During the later war years the activities of education committees in the industrial areas increasingly took on a political and Labour character. One Birmingham society established speakers classes and regular weekend schools from 1918; guest speakers included Tom Mann, George Lansbury and Philip Snowden.⁵⁹ In Pontypridd invited speakers included J. R. Macdonald and in November 1920 Neil Maclean M.P.. On the latter occasion it was reported that "...hundreds failed to gain admission..."⁶⁰ Co-operative political activity extended

⁵⁷ Brightside & Carbrook Co-operative Society Political Council Minutes, 25.6.19; 12.11.19; 14.4.20..

⁵⁸ Co-operative Congress Report, 1920, p.129.

⁵⁹ H. M. Vickrage, HISTORY OF THE TEN ACRES AND STIRCHLEY CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY, 1950, pp. 85-90.

⁶⁰ Merthyr Pioneer, 13.3.20; 6.11.20.

beyond those societies affiliated either to the Labour or Co-operative Parties. The Co-operative Guild organisations also became involved in the practice of politics. The rapidly expanding and highly active Co-operative Women's Guild was strongly pro-Labour; its 1919 Congress urged co-operators:

...to join hands with labour forces and stand aside from any party whose programme does not include the replacement of capitalism by the democratic control of industry.⁶¹

At local and national level the Women's and Men's Guilds performed a good deal of their own propaganda and campaigning work, which often had a highly political flavour.

The post-1917 record of co-operative political activity suggests that any "ideological conversion" to support for Labour was very far from complete. Such activity remained patchy and repeatedly constrained by effective internal opposition. However, in many industrial centres the impact of co-operative political intervention was quite substantial. As that intervention gained momentum, so did pressure for closer links between Labour and co-operation. The great majority of societies involved in political activity had established or were negotiating some form of de facto alliance with the Labour Party. Nationally support for such an alliance grew dramatically and in 1921 Congress rejected the proposal by the narrowest of margins.⁶² In 1917 any suggestion of an alliance with Labour was denied even by its supporters; by 1921 the alliance came within a hair's breadth of becoming an accomplished fact.

⁶¹Co-operative Congress Report, 1919, p. 303.

⁶²A resolution endorsing an alliance with Labour was lost by 1,686 to 1,682 votes. Co-operative Congress Report, 1921, p. 496.

The co-operative movement had become a battleground between pro- and anti-Labour forces, and it was clear which side was gaining ground.

Why did co-operators move over such a short time towards a rapprochement with Labour? In most areas where the decision was taken to become involved in local politics the activists who filled the political committees and councils were Labour supporters. This naturally led them to seek an alliance with the Labour Party and to report favourably on Labour's response to co-operative political initiatives. Having opposed co-operative political activity as a diversion for so long, Liberal co-operators were hardly likely to be heavily represented on local political bodies. Regardless of the political affiliation of the membership the Labour activists were able to establish a local link with the Labour Party from an early stage.

However, the shift to the Left in the co-operative politics rested on a good deal more than Labour's ability to pack political committees. Of undoubted importance was co-operators' experience of wartime politics and state intervention. When co-operators sought allies in their struggle over food supplies at local level, the most favourable response usually came from the trades councils. In many towns and cities these bodies, or at least many of their leading figures, were synonymous with the Labour Party. This experience of local collaboration - despite the many problems - allowed Labour activists within the co-operative movement to present the case for an alliance as merely formal recognition of an established fact.⁶³ The sympathetic stance of the

⁶³When proposing the Co-operative-Labour Political Alliance to the 1921 Congress S. F. Perry, Secretary of the Co-operative Party, pointed out that: "There is no constituency in the country where a Co-operative candidate has been put forward without receiving the active and moral support of the Labour Party and the trade unions. There is not a
(Footnote continued)

Labour Party stood in stark contrast to the hostility of the established parties who were often closely wedded to private trading interests.

There is strong evidence to suggest that the growth of support for closer links with Labour amongst significant numbers of co-operators was to a large degree occasioned by post-war developments. In mid-1919 co-operators were still not clear about the shape of post-war politics, apparently remaining unconvinced of the permanence either of Labour's rise or the demise of Liberalism. At the 1919 Congress an attempt to affiliate to the Labour Party was clearly defeated. Even a call to allow candidates for public office to run as 'Co-operative and Labour' was rejected. Co-operators were not yet prepared to abandon their belief in an alliance of progressive forces, and the Congress went on to recommend the initiation of negotiations for a 'United Democratic or People's Party'.⁶⁴

The rise of Labour's currency amongst co-operators was perhaps helped most by the wider political changes in post-war Britain, which in many minds left the movement with a choice between surrender to an antagonistic government and some form of alliance with the Labour Party. The continued division of the Liberal Party and the participation of Lloyd-George and others in what had become a most illiberal administration left the party's supporters in the co-operative movement in an unprecedentedly weakened position. The Co-operative Union Central

⁶³(continued)

municipality in the country where a co-operative candidate has not received the same loyal support. Is there one in this hall this morning, from whatever part, who would go to his society and advocate opposing the trade unions and the Labour Party?" Co-operative Congress Report, 1921, p. 483.

⁶⁴Ibid., 1919, pp. 527-29, & 553-54.

Board to some extent foresaw the impact of post-war re-alignment on co-operative politics in its report to the 1919 Congress:

The gathering together of vested interests under the coalition banner may after all prove to be one of the most effective driving forces towards the formation of a federation of democratic parties, whether in the shape of a Democratic People's Party or a working agreement between sympathetic organisations.⁶⁵

In many localities of course the anti-Labour coalitions were only established in the wake of the 1919 municipal successes for Labour. This breakthrough established the short-term prospect of Labour administrations in many major cities. The establishment of the Labour Party as the official Parliamentary opposition coupled with electoral gains during the early post-war years, re-ordered the co-operative view of Labour as a political ally. The pre-war fears that trade would be lost through an alliance with a relative political minnow were gradually being superseded by a realisation of the potential benefits presented by the prospect of a Labour government. For some time this meant simply the repeal of government imposed penalties, others felt that Labour's commitment to the establishment of a 'Co-operative Commonwealth' offered a new and more readily attained avenue to the realisation of the movement's more grandiose aspirations.⁶⁶

Ideological shifts should not be ignored. Growing numbers of co-operators viewed society and their ability to change it in a different light as a result of the war. As one leading co-operator

⁶⁵Ibid., p. 187.

⁶⁶See, for example, L. Woolf, CO-OPERATION AND THE FUTURE OF INDUSTRY 1918 & SOCIALISM AND CO-OPERATION, 1921. Also the Presidential Address to the 1920 Congress, Co-operative Congress Report, 1920, p. 61.

observed:

By the war, as by a flash of lightning, the whole social horizon was illuminated. The nature of modern society was revealed; the true character of the competitive system of trade and industry became evident; the relation between the exercise of political power and the future development of the co-operative movement was clearly seen.⁶⁷

Furthermore this broadening of horizons, which affected in various degrees the whole labour movement, produced a situation where the Labour and Co-operative Parties shared very similar short term policies and long term goals - most notably of course the establishment of a 'Co-operative Commonwealth'. The number of active co-operators who viewed the re-ordering of society as the principal spur to their activity undoubtedly grew sharply during the war and its aftermath. For almost all of these men and women the Labour Party was a natural ally in a crusade on behalf of working people. However, they remained an active but relatively small minority even during the post-war upheavals.

For the less ideologically motivated co-operator, continued post-war state hostility to co-operative 'privileges' was a particularly important stimulus to the creation of a closer relationship with Labour. Although the government made some attempts to appease co-operative opinion during the closing stages of the war, the movement found itself under renewed attack after the general election of November 1918. The Tory-dominated Coalition responded to a vigorous business agitation by making co-operative surpluses liable to a Corporation Profits Tax introduced in the spring budget of 1920. This measure was the final straw for some societies which had maintained their opposition to political action. In May 1920 leading officials of the Sheffield and

⁶⁷T. W. Mercer, THE CO-OPERATIVE MOVEMENT IN POLITICS, 1920, p. 6.

Ecclesall Society who were long-standing opponents of any political activity, explained that their new found support for a Co-operative and Labour Political Alliance was a direct consequence of the decision to tax co-operative profits. Within weeks the Society's Annual General Meeting voted by a large majority to rescind all earlier resolutions opposing political activity and to support Parliamentary representation through the Co-operative Union and the Labour Party.⁶⁸ It is noteworthy that by 1920 these new converts to political action foresaw little benefit in an independent political stance, but from the outset viewed their political future in terms of an alliance with Labour. A Co-operative Union discussion pamphlet on the proposed Labour and Co-operative Political Alliance highlighted the changed political environment:

The older parties have practically coalesced and are practically supporting the existing social order... When elections take place Conservatives and Liberals unite in order to prevent the election of Labour and Co-operative candidates. Surely, the workers should be equally wise⁶⁹ and present a common front to their opponents.

The political realities had so altered by 1920 that independence had become a distinctly less attractive option.

After the war the Labour view of a society, divided into two camps between the supporters of collectivism and individualism, had become a far more potent image amongst co-operators. The Labour Party, trade unions and Co-operative movement were represented as the forces of collectivism compelled to stand together in opposition to an "...unholy alliance of Liberals, Tories, landlords and capitalists united to make

⁶⁸Sheffield Daily Independent, 20.5.20. and 9.6.20.

⁶⁹Mercer, op. cit., p. 11.

common cause against the workers and uphold the system of plunder and privilege."⁷⁰ Coalition government and the success of the Labour Party effectively removed the prospect of a 'progressive alliance' by the early 1920s. The trend towards a polarisation of politics and society between working class and middle class, between collectivists and individualists, in the years after 1917 encouraged many co-operators to support an alliance with Labour. Where this occurred local co-operative societies provided, to a large degree, a faithful reflection of the shifting political opinions of the working class communities they served. So too did the - very slim - majority of societies which remained unconvinced of Labour's claims to represent working people and which continued to oppose such an alliance.

The timing of the co-operative conversion to Labour coincided closely with the general shifts in Labour's electoral support. Up to the very end of 1918 Labour activists' grip on local societies remained open to challenge by Liberals in all but the most well established Labour strongholds. During 1919 and 1920 Labour's star rose steadily within the co-operative movement. The President of Congress in 1920 suggested that this convergence of Labour, the unions and the co-operative movement was:

...being determined not so much by the will of individuals as by the general march of events. It is the pressure of circumstances that is forcing us to act together...⁷¹

There were three "circumstances" uppermost in the mind of the Congress President and many other co-operators. These were, the continued

⁷⁰Co-operative Congress Report, 1921, p. 488.

⁷¹Co-operative Congress Report, 1920, p. 61. Inaugural address by Rev. G. A. Ramsay.

hostility of the Tory dominated Coalition Government, the prospect of a Labour government, and the apparent growth of the divide between pro- and anti-capitalist camps.

(d)

There can be no doubt of the significance of co-operation for labour historians. The central contention in Pollard's work, that co-operation has been both ignored and undervalued, remains equally valid a decade and a half later. Pollard is also right to suggest that the traditional treatments of the foundation of the Co-operative Party have tended to "...isolate changes in co-operative opinion as if it were not part of working class opinion..."⁷² That it most certainly was. The problem rests with Pollard's attempt to back date the swing to Labour amongst co-operators, and the attribution of the views of Labour activists to co-operators in general. Before the war the Co-operative movement remained a "very bulwark of steadiness and security."⁷³ It was only during the war that significant numbers of co-operators moved to the left. There is no real contradiction in accepting the traditional timetable for co-operative political involvement and Pollard's view that co-operators reflected working class opinion. On the latter's own evidence the growth of support for Labour only really took hold during and after 1917. This was true amongst co-operators and many other working-class groups. It should be added that this shift was limited in extent, particularly before the spring of 1919. An important distinction

⁷²Pollard, op. cit., p. 189.

⁷³Letter from G. N. Barnes - then Minister without portfolio - to Lloyd George 15.9.17., Lloyd-George Papers, F/4/2/11. Barnes noted the recent increase in anti-government feeling amongst co-operators which he felt was "...all the more serious because the co-operative movement has in pre-war days been a very bulwark of steadiness and security."

should also be made between co-operators who were active supporters of Labour and the great bulk of the movement's membership. The latter did not share the ideological concerns of the Labour minority when they made their decision to endorse political activity in 1917.

Alfred Barnes, a Chairman of the Co-operative Party in the 1920's, often quoted by Pollard (but not in this instance) clearly saw the distinction. Of the "necessity" for co-operative political activity in 1917 Barnes later wrote:

The few who had reasoned this out in the past
were now strengthened by those converted through
adversity.⁷⁴

In the wake of the 1917 decision more and more co-operators became committed to the Labour cause, but they apparently remained in a minority throughout the post-war years. In the first instance it had been the practical experience of hostile government intervention that persuaded the bulk of the co-operative movement to enter politics. Similarly in the aftermath of that decision it was the post-1917 experience of an increasingly polarised and class-based politics which suggested to growing numbers of co-operators that an alliance with Labour was now necessary.

⁷⁴A. Barnes, THE POLITICAL ASPECT OF CO-OPERATION, 1926, pp. 26-27.

III. The Structure of the Co-operative Union and Pressures for Reform.

Labour historians have often viewed the Co-operative Union as the most conservative of labour institutions. Weighed down by parochialism and vested interest, co-operation was allegedly very much the tortoise of the British labour movement. The war and early post-war years witnessed major landmarks in labour organisation. For example, the Labour Party introduced an entirely new Constitution in 1918, and the trade unions established the General Council of the T.U.C.. However, on the surface at least, the organisation of the co-operative movement appeared to remain impervious to the winds of change which swept through other sections of the labour movement. In fact the outward impression of calm belies the existence of fierce internal debates over fundamental issues concerning the structure and strategy of the Co-operative Union in reconstruction Britain. At stake was the whole future outlook of the movement. At root the arguments revolved around whether co-operation should enter the post-war world as an aggressive opponent of capitalist organisation or maintain its more passive voluntaristic traditions. A familiar assumption among historians of labour has been that any conservatism within that movement's institutions can best be explained by reference to the role of an entrenched and ossified leadership who manage by a variety of means to resist the reforming zeal of progressive rank and file members. In post-war co-operation this was anything but the case.

This element is in three main parts. The first of these examines the attempts to reform the structure of the Co-operative Union in line with 'progressive' demands for a more combative role for the movement. The second part discusses the reasons for the limited success of the reform movement together with the role of the national leadership in the

process of reform. The final part of this element attempts a broader examination of the issues which divided co-operators in the post-war years together with the lines of affiliation over such issues. Thus the focus of this element is on the relationships between leaders and led, and the attempts to reform the structure of co-operation. The principal strategies of the reformers involved the promotion of increased amalgamation and centralisation within the co-operative movement.

(a)

In pre-war years there had been some support for an overhaul of co-operative organisation. From an early stage 'progressive' reform had been identified with a more centralised structure. A particularly forceful appeal for greater centralisation was made in 1906 by the Union's Secretary J. C. Gray who envisaged the establishment of a single national co-operative retail and wholesale society. The belief was that a national society could reduce dividends to individual members and, by appropriating half of co-operative surpluses for use as development capital, maximise growth to the extent where the realisation of the Co-operative Commonwealth would be within reach. This scheme naturally appealed to the 'progressive', or more idealistic, co-operators on the left of the movement. The first step towards the single national society was a rapidly accelerated amalgamation of existing societies. Amalgamation of local societies, if necessary enforced nationally, and centralisation of power became the central planks of the 'progressive' case for reform in the first part of the twentieth century.

Despite Gray's early work no fundamental review of co-operative structure was discussed until after the war. In a recent study of co-operative development Houlton observed that:

...in the immediate post-First World War period, perhaps sobered by the experience of increasing trade and Government hostility, there seems to have been a new resolution to begin a process of rationalisation with increased centralisation of control.⁷⁵

The reform movement schemes were fully debated at a Special Congress held in February 1920 to discuss a report of the General Co-operative Survey Committee which covered every facet of co-operative activity. Although the Committee was established in 1914, the final report was not fully debated until 1920, largely because the pace of wartime change rendered a series of interim reports outdated.

An oft-repeated theme in the Survey Committee's recommendations was the desire to expand the authority of the central machinery of the Co-operative Union. An early measure was the creation of a national co-operative policy, programme and propaganda scheme in 1917.⁷⁶ In the post-war years Survey Committee proposals included an increase in the power of the Union relative to individual societies, a strengthened Central Board and the establishment of a full-time salaried Executive to function between Board meetings. Each of these centralising measures was strongly identified with the activists on the left of the co-operative movement. This was most clearly demonstrated during a particularly keen debate at a Special Congress in February 1920, over the proposal for a full-time salaried executive. Delegates described as "progressive" from Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield all favoured a full-time executive. They argued that it was necessary in order to improve efficiency. But more than this it was felt that change had come too slowly and that a full-time executive would both speed up progress and enable the movement

⁷⁵B. Houlton, DEMOCRACY AND STRUCTURAL CHANGE, p. 16, 1983.

⁷⁶Co-operative Congress Report, 1917, pp. 592-97.

to act more quickly in times of change. Opponents of the measure feared rising costs and a loss of democratic control. As one delegate declared, "The policy of tomorrow should not be voiced by the representatives of yesterday." The 'progressives' won a card vote at the end of the debate by the impressive margin of 1,554 to 837.⁷⁷

There were other apparent successes for the advocates of reform during 1920. In June Congress carried a resolution which endorsed the policy of one national society without opposition. This degree of unanimity emerged partly from a convergence of interest amongst different wings of the movement. The principle of progressive amalgamation had gained support among the 'practical men' of the co-operative movement as a means of eliminating inefficiencies and combatting competition. The resolution suggested that the single society was now necessary "...in view of the many consolidations that are taking place in the world of capital around us..."⁷⁸ Amongst radical activists it comprised an element of their strategy for a stronger co-operative movement fit to displace capitalism.

However, in the event, neither the scheme for a single national society nor the full-time paid executive were implemented. The former was referred for discussion to the sectional boards and districts, only to remain a conference 'hardy annual' never getting beyond agreement in principle. The strength of support for the more specific terms of the full-time executive was exaggerated by the unrepresentative nature of the February 1920 Special Congress. A Congress called solely to discuss

⁷⁷Report of the First Special Congress Blackpool, 1920, pp. 42 & 48. For the whole debate see pp. 39-48.

⁷⁸Co-operative Congress Report, 1920, p. 554.

reform measures was likely to attract greater interest from those societies, and the activists within them who favour reform. Thus the proposal was dropped at the full Congress during June in the face of opposition from the Co-operative Wholesale Society and many retail societies. The acute trade depression of 1921, which severely cut co-operative society funds, made the proposal for a dramatic increase in central funding untenable.

(b)

Amongst activist Congress delegates the desire for radical reform had reached a peak in the immediate post-war years and yet the movement failed to introduce any major changes. The chief obstacles to change came not from the top but from intermediate layers of the co-operative hierarchy. Local Boards of Directors had a vested interest in obstructing both amalgamation and centralisation. Under any scheme for amalgamation with a neighbouring society Directors stood to lose their seats and thus their influence. Moreover, local managers risked either demotion or unemployment. Since the local Directors and their officers were primarily responsible for initiating mergers it is hardly surprising that progress was slow. This is a problem which the movement has to this day still not fully overcome. Local chauvinism and vested interest similarly limited the growth of centralised power. The societies, or at least their radical Congress delegates, supported a centralising strategy as a point of debating principle. In reality, however, retail societies jealously guarded their independence and remained far more concerned with the development of their trading function than attempts to change society.

It would, therefore, be a mistake to view this organisational

conservatism as a consequence of the outdated and entrenched views of an obstructive leadership. Far from retarding the process of reform the co-operative national leadership actually shared and encouraged the two central policies espoused by the left-wing of the movement. As outlined in the discussion of co-operative links with Labour and the unions, the leadership often either ignored anti-labour Congress instructions or interpreted them in a manner which limited their impact. Throughout, the Central Board supported and advanced the cause of amalgamation and centralisation. There were differences over tactics and timing between the platform and conference delegates; in the main the occasionally more cautious approach of the former was vindicated by the strength of opposition - and apathy - beyond the conference hall.

How did such a supposedly conservative body spawn this relatively 'progressive' leadership? Despite annual elections for all seats on the Central Board there was a low turnover of members particularly during the war years. The move towards 'progressive' policies at the top was not the result of any left-wing takeover. Indeed, unlike in so many trade unions, there was little sense of any struggle for control over the executive bodies of the Co-operative Union; personnel changes resulted almost exclusively from resignation or death. One explanation for the low level of competition was that the Co-operative Union Central Board wielded less real power than trade union or party executives - a function of the Union's federal structure.

The left sympathies of the Central Board appear to have had two main foundations. Firstly, more conservative co-operators were less likely to spend time and energy on a body which they viewed as peripheral to the trading function of the movement. Secondly, members of national committees exhibited a not unnatural tendency to extend, rather

than constrain, central power. Central Board members were thus natural allies of the left's centralising strategy. A leavening of new blood, plus a willingness to respond to external changes and take the broader view of the movements aims, underpinned the co-operative leadership's support for 'progressive' causes during and after World War I. Activist pressure undoubtedly had some influence upon leadership attitudes but the latter repeatedly took initiatives of their own in order to advance policies identified with the Left.

Nonetheless the Central Board was by no means immune to criticism from Labour activists. Many expressed dissatisfaction at the slow pace of change. Such sentiments were most regularly expressed by the younger activists. At the 1917 Congress the Plymouth delegate, who claimed to have been "...sent here to go the whole hog...", highlighted the feeling that a generational divide had developed when he went on to "...appeal to the older men lest they divorce the sentiment and feeling of the younger wing of the movement..."⁷⁹ The most important area of conflict concerned attitudes to Parliament. After the war many of the younger Labour activists favoured a more aggressive approach to Parliamentary lobbying. They argued for the superiority of mass campaigning and demonstrations over the more traditional method of high level deputations to Ministers which was still supported by the Central Board. At the 1919 Congress an exchange between the generations on this issue ended with the platform speaker, one W. J. Dudley, a stalwart of the 'old school', being refused a hearing by a large number of delegates who engaged in a lengthy demonstration.⁸⁰

⁷⁹Ibid., 1917, p. 566-67.

⁸⁰Ibid., 1919, pp. 514-17.

The movement's post-war efforts to resist the application of Corporation Tax to co-operative surpluses established the debate over attitudes to Parliament as an urgent and concrete issue. 'Progressive' activists, frustrated at the refusal of the Central Board to adopt their proposals for demonstrations and protest conferences, established an unofficial 'ginger group' with the intention of conducting a mass campaign. A revised Parliamentary ruling which removed the tax from the mutual trading element of co-operative transactions was hailed as a great victory. Delegates to the 1922 Congress appeared to be in no doubt where the credit lay. Mr. G. Timms of Bletchley asserted that:

Had it not been for the 'Ginger section' and those who supported them we should have been paying the Corporation Profits Tax to this day. As far as the Central Board is concerned we had no instructions from them, no advice from them ... It is the 'Ginger group' solely⁸¹ who are responsible for the removal of the tax.

(c)

The majority of the Co-operative Union Central Board found themselves engaged in a difficult balancing act during the post-war period. The swing to the left in these years was reflected in the volume, vehemence and thoroughgoing nature of activist pressure for change from many of the industrial centres of the country. This move to the left merely widened the gulf between the radical conference delegates and the more conservative sections of the movement such as the Co-operative Wholesale Society and retail societies in the north-east. Neil McLean, Labour M.P. and Central Board member, expressed the leadership's view of the problem in a speech on affiliation to the

⁸¹Ibid., 1922, p. 332. Other delegates also endorsed the view that the 'ginger group' was responsible for the campaigning success, a point not denied in the remainder of the debate.

Labour Party in 1919:

I have believed for the last twenty-five years in the unity of the working classes of this country... But I also recognise that the Co-operative movement today is in exactly the same condition... as the trade union movement was at the time of the Osborne judgement; and I do not want to have at the moment the Labour Party fettered by an organisation that does not know its own mind... We have societies' members taking local action against societies entering into political action even as co-operators, and I want co-operators to understand their position in politics is going to be won by the most severe struggle that those interested are prepared to put up. I want that struggle to be within the co-operative movement. When you are practically unanimous that it is necessary for the movement to work politically as well as commercially, then it will not take a resolution from the floor of a meeting or a Congress to urge us to take action; that resolution will come from the platform.⁸²

The weight of the past, and particularly the strength of local independence, ultimately proved too great an obstacle for the post-war reformers. Labour activists achieved national level endorsement of their ideas but failed to find sufficient support in the regions. The traditional strength of Liberalism continued to be a major obstacle in some areas where the local activists remained steadfastly opposed to the Left's policies. Even where local activists were persuaded by the arguments for reform they often remained wary of going the "whole hog" for fear of dividing the membership.⁸³

Despite these obstacles to change, 'progressive' co-operators had cause for some satisfaction at the results of their agitation. Whilst

⁸²Ibid., 1919, p. 531.

⁸³See, for example, the comments of Mr. V. Swift (Sheffield & Ecclesall) to the 1921 Congress re amalgamation with Labour. Ibid., 1921, p. 490.

the federal structure of the Co-operative Union militated against rapid reform of the entire movement, it also allowed 'progressives' great latitude in societies where they held majority support. Such societies often allocated substantial resources of people and finance to electoral and propaganda activity which made a substantial contribution to the dissemination of anti-capitalist ideas in working class communities. Furthermore, by 1920 the balance of activist opinion clearly favoured the concept of a more vigorous and aggressive co-operative movement. At the level of Congress debate the Left had won the argument. Moreover, the advocates of centralisation achieved some more tangible reward by securing greater resources for the Co-operative Union and in the framing of national propaganda machinery.

IV. Conclusion.

During war and aftermath, despite its distinctive nature as a consumer's movement, co-operation experienced changes similar to those in other wings of the labour movement, four of which have been discussed above. Firstly, there was a widespread - but far from universal - radicalisation of activists. Secondly, inter-generational conflict became more evident particularly between 1917 and 1920. Thirdly, consensus developed which favoured closer links with other wings of the labour movement. By 1921 most co-operators found it increasingly difficult to define their movement except in relation to the trade unions and Labour; co-operation appeared to have arrived as the third wing of the British labour movement. The integration was far from complete but the die was now firmly cast. Fourthly, strategies of amalgamation and centralisation were advocated by reformers who sought to create a movement fit to combat and supercede capitalism. However, unlike some trade unions it is difficult to discern any major rift

between the leadership and reformers. If anything it was the more conservative members of the co-operative movement who had the most cause for concern at the actions of the leadership.

As suggested in the introduction to Section II of this thesis the supposed dichotomous divide between leaders and led appears to bear little resemblance to the detailed reality of early twentieth century labour organisations. In the Co-operative Union that reality was an alliance between the majority of the Central Board and the 'progressive' activists, in opposition to large numbers of the intermediate layers of local officers who continued to resist reform. The strength of the conservative elements lay in support from ordinary rank and file co-operators in their local societies, together with the fear among reformers that to force the pace of change might split the movement. The 'progressives' could also mobilise support amongst the rank and file of their own local societies, but their main strength lay in the control of the Co-operative Congress from 1917. For this the 'progressives' could, in no small measure, thank the good offices of the leadership on the Central Board who shared their central policy aims.

Similarly, the argument that trends towards a growth of centralised power within labour bodies provoked unrest amongst the rank and file conflicts with the evidence from the co-operative movement. Amongst co-operators the reformers on the Left of the movement were the most ardent advocates of greater centralisation. The rank and file opponents of centralisation were on the movement's conservative wing.

A number of similarities have been identified between the trends of change in the co-operative and trade union movements. The following chapters assess whether trade union developments between 1914 and 1921

similarly ran counter to the theories of the 'rank and file-ist' school.

CHAPTER V.THE NATIONAL UNION OF RAILWAYMEN.

Introduction.

Following decades of frustration and more than one false dawn trade unionism on Britain's railways finally came of age during the period of pre-war labour unrest. The traditional paternalism, strict discipline and fiercely anti-union attitude of railway employers contributed in large part to the low levels of unionisation.¹ The eventual change in the situation was largely the result of the successful national rail strike of August 1911. The strike promoted a new sense of self-confidence and a desire to continue collaboration between the various unions. This led to the amalgamation of three rail unions to form the National Union of Railwaymen in March 1913.² Membership of the new union increased rapidly from 141,000 at amalgamation to over 270,000 (44% of the workforce) by the following year.³ One indication of the enhanced status of railway trade unionism was the inclusion of the N.U.R. in the Triple Industrial Alliance. Prior to 1911 the rail unions, particularly the A.S.R.S., were already well established in the forefront of labour's political struggle, on the eve of war they at last

¹P.S. Bagwell, 'Transport', in C.J. Wrigley (ed.), A HISTORY OF BRITISH INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS 1875-1914, Vol. I, 1982, pp. 230-31. Union membership remained below 50% of the railway workforce until the industrial unrest of 1911-13.

²The N.U.R. was formed from the amalgamation of the Amalgamated Society of Railway Servants, the General Railway Workers Union, and the United Pointsmen's and Signalmen's Society. The train drivers (A.S.L.E. & F.) and the clerks (R.C.A.) remained independent of the new amalgamation.

³Bagwell, in Wrigley (ed.), 1982, op. cit., p. 237.

established a considerable national presence in the industrial relations arena.

The full employment of the war years together with the discontent provoked by inflation and extended hours of work combined to push the membership of the N.U.R. to just under half a million by 1919. In the early post-war years the N.U.R. was second only to the Miners' Federation in national trade union affairs. The first round of the widely anticipated post-war clash between the unions and the government involved the N.U.R. in a national strike during September and October of 1919. The union emerged undefeated from this major confrontation with a combination of the state and employers. The N.U.R.'s prominent role in the Triple Alliance placed it at the forefront of the major post-war industrial battles.

It was suggested in the introduction to Section II of this thesis that the industrial militancy of the war and aftermath resulted in pressure for change inside labour organisations. As outlined above the N.U.R. was heavily involved in the unrest and, as a result, experienced substantial internal turmoil. This chapter focuses on those struggles which took place within the N.U.R. between 1914 and 1921. One significant by-product of the elevation of the N.U.R. in the affairs of labour and the nation was the dramatic rise to prominence of J.H. Thomas - the General Secretary of the union from 1916 and Labour M.P. for Derby. According to Bagwell, in his excellent history of the N.U.R., a second "...feature of the period..." was the growth of rank and file organisation and influence within the union.⁴ In essence this chapter

⁴P. S. Bagwell, THE RAILWAYMEN. A HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF RAILWAYMEN, 1963, p. 349.

concerns the conflicts which arose from these two apparently contradictory trends.

Whilst concentrating upon a detailed analysis of internal power struggles two wider themes are also considered. Firstly, as outlined in the introduction to this Section, it has been argued that the changing structure of union government contributed to the increased levels of industrial militancy after 1910. Moreover, it has been suggested that the progressive centralisation of power and authority within the unions resulted in the alienation of workers from the trade union structures which in turn generated discontent concentrated in and around the workplace. It was certainly the case that both centralisation of power and increased militancy were prominent aspects of the affairs of the N.U.R. during these years. Moreover there was sharp internal conflict over the distribution of power which involved confrontation between national leaders and union members in the districts. It would be a gross over simplification, however, to argue that the centralisation of union government in the N.U.R. and the militancy of the 1914-21 period were related in any direct causal fashion. This study attempts to unravel the complexities of the relationship between the militancy of these years and the centralisation of the N.U.R.'s power structure.

A second theme of this chapter is an attempt to provide a fuller understanding of the relationship between leaders and led in trade unions. Hitherto the internal power struggles of the N.U.R. have been analysed largely in terms of a bi-partisan conflict of interests between 'rank and file' and 'leadership'.⁵ The detailed consideration of

⁵Ibid.. And B. Pribicevic, 'The Demand for Workers' Control in the Railway, Mining and Engineering Industries, 1910-22,' Oxford D. Phil. 1957, Chapter 2.

internal conflicts made in the course of this chapter suggest that the assumption of a straightforward dichotomy is misplaced. This chapter reveals a complexity of conflicting strategies which cut across any attempt to categorise individuals, or indeed groups, according to their position in the union hierarchy of power.

The chapter falls into four parts. In the first of these there is an outline of the forms of organisation deployed by activist opponents of the union's official line, and a very brief outline of the scope of that informal organisation between 1914 and 1921. Parts II and III examine the impact of the activist groups upon, firstly, the national pay struggles of the period and, secondly, the structure of the union and the internal distribution of power. The fourth, and final, element considers the character, composition and role of leadership in relationship to the intense pressures for change in these years. The reality of the use of power by the leadership of the N.U.R. contributes to a re-assessment of the theoretical approaches to industrial relations already outlined.

I. Informal Organisation.

This part of the chapter seeks to correct certain misconceptions concerning the radical groups within the N.U.R. and to briefly outline the forms of organisation they employed. The first problem is one of terminology. Those groups involved in attempting to reform the status quo have been typically defined as the 'unofficial movement' or the 'rank and file'. Neither term is accurate when applied to the N.U.R. over these years; those who opposed the leadership did not use solely official or unofficial forms of organisation; and they are far more accurately described as 'activists' than as 'rank and file'. Indeed

participants in the unofficial movement chose to distinguish themselves from the bulk of activists by styling themselves the 'progressive elements'. The title 'progressive activists' is far less grandiose than 'rank and file' and implies a lower status than has been accorded to oppositional elements in the past. However, this changed terminology does not necessarily diminish their importance. As we shall discover in the remaining parts of this chapter this group made a significant impact on the fortunes of the N.U.R. during these years.

There are three further misconceptions about the 'progressives' which require redress. Firstly, most writers on the N.U.R. during these years have recognised the influence of the organised opposition but all have in one way or another underestimated either its scope or its longevity.⁶ Nationwide unofficial organisation is usually seen as flowering briefly in 1917 and 1918 before disappearing quickly and quietly in the post-war years.⁷ In fact 1917 and 1918 only represent the peak years of an agitation which covered the whole of our period. Secondly, the unofficial movement was far more than a transitory ad hoc ginger group. From 1915 to the end of our period a permanent national organisation was established which in certain respects sought to usurp or undermine the established executive structures of the union.⁸ A final common misconception is to assume a unity amongst the opposition - in

⁶ Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., pp. 352-3; B. Pribicevic, 1957, op. cit., pp. 86-92, 95, 126; B.A. Waites, 'The Effects of the First World War on Aspects of the Class Structure of English Society.' Open University D. Phil, p. 353.

⁷ This results partly from a focus upon oppositional movements elsewhere such as the A.S.E.. There are also problems with the coverage given by the Railway Review - the main source for references to such activity - which becomes patchy after the war.

⁸ See, for example, B. Pribicevic, 1957, op. cit., p. 89: "No attempt was made however to evolve a more permanent form of the national rank and file organisation."

reality the 'progressives' advocated a variety of alternative systems of union government. On the critical issues of the distribution of power and union structure, unity often took the form of lowest common denominator opposition to the current system.

How was this internal opposition organised? The basic unit of the union was the Branch, but opposition at this level was fragmented and because of their relatively small numbers the 'progressive activist' often remained isolated. Activists found the District Councils and Vigilance Committees more suited to their needs and ambitions. The former were delegate bodies which brought together branches in a locality or region and were formally recognised components of the union. However, the rule book gave District Councils responsibility only for propaganda and recruitment within their area. Often composed of radical local activists the District Councils, devoid of any negotiating power, were the natural focus for resentment of any perceived failure by the national leadership. The District Councils provided the backbone of organised resistance to the leadership in the N.U.R.. These activities are discussed in greater detail in parts II and III below.

Opposition to the leadership was also co-ordinated through the unofficial Vigilance Committees. These Committees were, according to one of their leading advocates:

...not subservient to the rules and constitution of the union, their hands are [therefore] free and unfettered. The only people to whom they are responsible are their constituents...

Reports in the Railway Review suggest that the Liverpool Vigilance

⁹C. J. Edwards, (Executive Committee member from Liverpool) in Railway Review, 1.3.18.

Committee was by far the most active of these unofficial bodies. It organised railway company employees of all grades within a twenty mile radius of Liverpool. Most Vigilance Committees were based in the larger rail centres and like Liverpool catered for a smaller area than the District Councils. Unrestricted by the rules of union and the attendant organisational minutiae the Vigilance Committees often concentrated on the larger issues. The Liverpool Committee became notorious for its wartime ability to encourage militant activity during pay campaigns and promote reform of the union's structure. Across the country Vigilance Committees involved themselves in a wide range of both local and broader issues. In 1916 the Liverpool Committee complained of its "...ever increasing responsibilities..." which in addition to local issues and the conditions of women's employment also included the "...high cost of living, industrial conscription, imported labour, organisation etc."¹⁰ Vigilance Committees and District Councils occasionally clashed but for the most part their relationship was co-operative. In some areas they amalgamated to form District and Vigilance Committees.

These bodies were not creations of the war. The Liverpool Vigilance Committee was already well established in January 1914 and the District Councils were enshrined in the original constitution of the N.U.R..¹¹ However, the concerted attempt to organise the various local bodies dominated by 'progressive activists' into a co-ordinated national movement did not get under way until early 1915.¹² The Manchester

¹⁰ Railway Review, 1.12.16., p. 6. See Ibid., 24.9.15., p. 4 for a comparison of the respective roles of the Liverpool District and Vigilance Committees as outlined in their reports.

¹¹ Railway Review, 23.1.14. p. 13 - report of Liverpool No.3 Branch.

¹² In 1914 the Sheffield District Council circulated a letter summoning an unofficial conference to discuss "Methods of Organisation". They were fined by the E.C. "...because of the far reaching character of the
(Footnote continued)

District Council issued a circular in the spring which urged the establishment of a 'National Conference of District Councils'.¹³ The first such conference was held under the auspices of the Birmingham District Council on 12th September 1915.¹⁴ One or more national gatherings were held in every year from 1915 to the end of our period.¹⁵ These conferences did not command nationwide support even amongst the District Councils, however, neither were they the work of one or two wholly unrepresentative groups. The Liverpool and London areas were the main sponsors of co-ordinated activity, at various times the Sheffield, Birmingham, Manchester and North Eastern Councils also took the initiative. The effectiveness of their efforts to influence railway trade unionism are examined in detail in parts II and III. Suffice to say that the progressive activists, through the District and Vigilance Committees, posed a continual and substantial challenge to the leadership of J. H. Thomas and others.

¹²(continued)

proposals", however, the circular appeared not to give rise to any nationally co-ordinated movement. See 'General Secretary's Report and Executive Committee Special Meeting', January 22-24th 1915, p. 13; and Agenda and Decisions of the A.G.M. 21-25.6.15. p. 9.

¹³See London and South West D.C. Minute Book, 9.3.15.; Railway Review, 30.7.15.; p. 13 - Report of South Wales and Monmouth D.C.

¹⁴Railway Review, 22.10.15. p. 3.

¹⁵2.10.15. Conference organised by Liverpool Vigilance Committee - N.U.R. E.C. Report p. 102.
 23.7.16. Conference of District Councils at Battersea - London & South West D.C. Minute Book, 24.9.16.
 7.1.17. Conference of District Councils in Nottingham to discuss 'Labour Problems Arising Out of the War' - Railway Review, [henceforth R.R.] 3.11.16. & 8.12.16.
 19.8.17. Conference of District Councils London - R.R., 27.7.17.; 24.8.17.
 27.1.18. Conference of District Councils London - R.R., 25.1.18.; 15.2.18.
 26.1.19. Conference of District Councils - London & South West D.C. Minute Book, 29.12.18.
 24.8.19. Conference of District Councils - R.R., 29.8.19.
 7.9.19. Conference of District Committees in Birmingham -
 (Footnote continued)

II. 'Progressive Activists' and the Pay Campaign.

In the official history of the N.U.R. Philip Bagwell observed that:

The story of the negotiations for increases in the bonus through the war years is one of constant pressure [on the Executive] from the rank and file at Branch and District meetings to wring more concessions from the companies.¹⁶

The purpose of this part of the chapter is to examine the character and effectiveness of that pressure from below on the conduct of pay negotiations through the inflationary years from 1915 to 1920. That pressure was not solely the product of spontaneous outbursts of anger from the rank and file (not to suggest any lack of genuine grievance), but rather a series of highly organised, well co-ordinated and often premeditated campaigns.

During the early months of the war trade union activity amongst rail workers was considerably reduced.¹⁷ However, the rapid increase in

¹⁵(continued)

R.R., 11.7.19.

March 1920 'Rank and File Convention' -

R.R., 26.3.20.

July 1920 'London Conference of Councils' -

R.R., 9.7.20.

29+30.1.21. Conference of District Committees in Sheffield -

R.R., 11.2.21.

At the triennial rules revision conference in 1922 proposals advocated by District Councils were submitted. I have found no reference to any conference which might have drawn up the rule changes but it appears likely one did take place. See 'Proposals for Alterations to Rules 1922' in N.U.R. Proceedings and Reports, 1922.

¹⁶Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., p. 349.

¹⁷R.R. 13.11.14. - reports from District Committees attributed reduced attendances to the war.

food prices had begun to disturb the industrial peace as early as December 1914.¹⁸ By January 1915 the Railway Review reported that:

Never in our experience have so many resolutions reached us upon one topic as those poured in upon us by the branches of the N.U.R. relating to the rise in the price of necessities.¹⁹

There is no clear evidence to suggest that this inundation was co-ordinated in any way. The first wartime wage agitation foreshadowed its successors in one significant respect - the earliest and often most vociferous protests came from Merseyside. In Birkenhead the Great Western Railway Goods Staff implemented an unofficial overtime ban in early February against the express instructions of Executive members despatched to the area to ensure normal working.²⁰ Such action coupled to the widespread discontent being expressed through the pages of the union's journal the Railway Review, encouraged the N.U.R. Executive and the rail companies to reach a speedy settlement in February 1915.²¹

However, 'progressive activists' disappointed with both the settlement and the handling of the entire pay campaign engaged in a series of initiatives which brought them into direct conflict with the union's leadership. The first signs of attempts to establish an organised nationwide opposition emerged immediately after the February settlement. The Manchester District Council issued a circular which outlined a scheme for a 'National Conference of District Councils' to

¹⁸R.R. 11.12.14.; 18.12.14.

¹⁹R.R. 15.1.15. - the article included a list of 98 branches which had sent in motions on the subject during the previous week.

²⁰Executive Committee Report, 8-13.3.15. p. 99.

²¹On 12th February the parties approved the payment of a weekly War Bonus of 3s. to those who earned under 30s. The union had submitted a claim for 5s. extra per week.

co-ordinate pressure on the Executive from activist dominated bodies. In April the Liverpool Vigilance Committee appealed to branches through the Railway Review to support demands for a further increase in the War Bonus.²²

Prices continued to rise throughout the Spring and Summer of 1915. By July 1915 railwaymen's pay had fallen in real terms to a level fifteen points below that of mid-1914.²³ During the summer the Liverpool Vigilance Committee stepped up its campaign by issuing a circular which, according to J. H. Thomas, constituted a:

...cleverly engineered movement... to take the law into the men's own hands unless the Executive agreed to do a certain thing at a certain time.²⁴

Liverpool at this stage attempted to take on the role of an alternative centre of union government. Following a meeting with other areas of the country a second circular was issued to N.U.R. branches summoning representatives to a meeting which would determine action in the absence of a satisfactory pay deal.²⁵ Virtually throughout 1915 the 'progressive activists', led for the most part by the Liverpool Vigilance Committee, successfully orchestrated the discontent over inflation, effectively determining the level at which union pay demands were set, and strongly

²²Re Manchester see London & South West District Council Minute Book, Meeting on 9.3.15.; R.R., 30.7.15. Re Liverpool see R.R., 23.4.15.

²³See J.W.F. Rowe, WAGES IN PRACTICE AND THEORY, 1928, p. 17 & Appendix 1.

²⁴R.R., 10.9.15.

²⁵R.R., 1.10.15. The role of the Review Editor in censoring important parts of the reports from the Liverpool V.C. and distorting the responses of branches to the Liverpool proposals was the subject of bitter complaint during September and October 1915. Liverpoolian activists claimed that the favourable responses to their second circular received by them far outweighed any criticism - the exact reverse of what appeared in the Review. See R.R., 10.9.15.; 15.10.15.

influencing the pace of the negotiations.

A new pay agreement in October 1915 enraged activists because one of its clauses pledged the union not to present or support any claims for improvements in pay or conditions for the remainder of the war. The Railway Review indicated the leadership's determination to implement this aspect of the settlement in a series of front page articles, one of which pointed out that the agreement was:

...binding upon all the branches and members of the union, and the machinery of the union will and must be used to carry it out.²⁶

By undertaking to police their own members the union leadership ensured that during the pendency of the agreement internal conflict would be greatly intensified. Every pay campaign for the remainder of the war was influenced to a greater or lesser extent by the activity of the 'progressives'. The Liverpool Vigilance Committee generally proved to be the most forceful and effective co-ordinating centre for the unofficial movement during the war. However, other groups also played a leading part at various times. Thus, following an unofficially organised National Conference of District Councils in July 1916, South Wales, Birmingham and Manchester all played a part in leading 'progressive' pressure on the Executive for the remainder of that year.²⁷ The London District Council also took its turn as prime mover of the 'progressive' pay campaigns during the summer of 1917.²⁸

²⁶R.R., 5.11.15., p. 1. - see also page 1 of R.R., 29.10.15.; 12.11.15.

²⁷R.R., 4.8.16.; 15.9.16.; Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., pp. 350-51.

²⁸R.R., 20.4.17.; 11.5.17.; 15.6.17..

Nevertheless, it was the Liverpool Vigilance Committee which presented the most far ranging challenge to the official leadership of the union. For example, in the spring of 1916, it assumed the role of alternative Executive Committee in a campaign which set the general pattern for the remainder of the war. It initiated the movement by inviting reports from around the country. Based on these reports Liverpool issued a pay demand and called upon branches to pressurise the official machinery via a series of mass meetings.²⁹ In June the campaign was stepped up and activists were urged to organise special meetings to instruct Annual General Meeting [henceforth A.G.M.] delegates to support the Liverpool demand. The A.G.M. unanimously instructed the Executive to submit a demand for more pay, even though this meant breaking the agreement which prevented further claims during wartime. Faced by such well co-ordinated pressure the Executive agreed to submit a claim for exactly the amount demanded by Liverpool.³⁰

Other campaigns were not always so successful. Nevertheless the conflict between the 'progressives' and the established leadership continued to mount during 1917. The spring campaign of that year, led by Liverpool, was a notable success. The impact was increased by the innovation of making leaflets available to activists up and down the country for distribution to rank and file members. During three weeks in February the Railway Review published messages of support for the Liverpool campaign from over one hundred and eighty branches.³¹ The effectiveness of the campaign was underlined in one of the few branch reports to oppose Liverpool's activities:

²⁹R.R., 14.4.16.; 21.4.16.; 12.5.16.; 19.5.16..

³⁰R.R., 9.6.16.; 30.6.16.; Executive Committee Report, 2-4.8.16..

³¹R.R., 9, 16, 23.2.17..

Some objection was taken to the Liverpool Vigilance Committee setting itself up as the leading light of the N.U.R., and we do not fancy being dragged at the tail of this unofficial body every time.³²

Like it or not it appeared increasingly as if the Executive was being "dragged by the tail" during the first half of 1917.

However, in November 1917 the unofficial movement overreached itself. The continued rising tide of prices, combined with growing war weariness and a long delay in negotiations, emboldened the 'progressives'. In the militant areas explicit threats of unofficial action were common during November 1917.³³ Liverpool and London made separate attempts to lead nationwide industrial action which resulted in the sharpest clash thus far between the official and unofficial movements. The Merseyside men embarked on a 'work to rule' and issued a circular which called upon other areas to follow suit. This action backfired badly when the government and companies refused to negotiate while the 'go slow' was in progress. Thomas blamed Liverpool for the delayed settlement and gained the overwhelming support of the Executive and Special General Meeting [henceforth S.G.M.] in repudiating the Liverpool action. When Merseyside returned to normal working the resumed negotiations resulted in an improved offer from the companies which was accepted by the S.G.M.. During the crisis Thomas had confronted activist delegates with a choice between a union run by Liverpool or the Executive - they overwhelmingly chose the latter.³⁴ When the unofficial

³²R.R., 23.2.17..

³³For example in Cardiff a mass meeting on 18.11.17. resolved to strike if no settlement was reached within seven days. - R.R., 23.11.17..

³⁴R.R., 7.12.17.; Special E.C., 27.11.-1.12.17; Minutes of S.G.M., 28-29.11.17.; Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., p. 354.

movement had made its first tentative step beyond brave words and threats it found the combined influence of union officialdom, government and employers far too strong. This episode significantly reduced the prestige of the unofficial movement, however, their activity was only temporarily interrupted.

In early 1918 the London District Council mounted a campaign to press the government to take effective action to control food prices. In February Liverpool launched another of its agitations for increased pay, on this occasion spurred on by the exclusion of most railway employees from the 12½% award to engineers. By March the large number of branch resolutions had prompted an application for increased wages by the Executive. However, the German 'Spring Offensive' on the Western front cut short any further agitation as railwaymen lost any desire to do anything which might impede the war effort in the new situation.³⁵

It was not until the middle of July, by which time the military situation had eased considerably, that the first signs of renewed activity on pay appeared.³⁶ Once again the Liverpool demand for 10s. was adopted by the negotiators. However, on this occasion unofficial strike activity resulted when the union accepted only 5s.. The strike started in South Wales, always a militant district of the N.U.R. but one that had remained largely on the fringe of the organised unofficial movement. There is no evidence which links this - the largest outbreak of unauthorised industrial action by railwaymen during World War I - with any co-ordinated initiatives by the 'progressives'. The strike appears

³⁵Special meeting of E.C., 8-9.12.18.; R.R., 15.2.18.; 1.3.18.; 22.3.18.; 10.5.18; 31.5.18..

³⁶R.R., 19.7.18..

to have been something of a spontaneous outbreak.

'Progressive' activity on the pay issue cannot be explained as simply a reaction to the wartime industrial truce if only because it continued after the truce had ended. In early 1919 a national 'Conference of District Councils' adopted campaigning methods essentially the same as those employed in wartime to force the pace of negotiations.³⁷ In August the Liverpool Vigilance Committee re-entered the fray and a special Conference of District Councils in Birmingham demanded an additional £1 per week as part of its "new national programme."³⁸ However, less effort was being put into the unofficial pay agitations now that the official structure appeared more responsive to the demands of the 'progressives'. A shift to the left on the Executive Committee and rule alterations achieved what the establishment of normal collective bargaining and the end of the truce had failed to do. Claims were now initiated by an Executive with a left-wing majority and ratified by a conference of lay delegates. C. J. Edwards and other 'progressive activists' now commanded significant support on the Executive, therefore the need for unofficial organisation to "ginger them up" was greatly reduced.³⁹ Unofficial activity continued on the pay issue but the overt national co-ordinated campaigns of earlier years were no longer felt to be necessary. The organised groups of 'progressives' continued their activity during and after 1920, but now, for the most part, as allies of the Executive pitted against leading

³⁷N.U.R. Conference of District Councils Circular, 27.1.19.. Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., p. 377.

³⁸R.R., 1.8.19.; 29.8.19..

³⁹Edwards, Secretary of the Liverpool Vigilance Committee, was now a member of the Executive; the diversion of some of his considerable energy to national level inevitably weakened the Merseyside unofficial organisation.

officials and in particular J. H. Thomas.

The next pay campaign was largely orchestrated from the top. In December 1919 it was the Executive not London or Liverpool who issued the call for mass meetings.⁴⁰ This was the first pay round since before the war in which the unofficial groups did not organise a campaign in order to pressurise the leadership. There were indications that Liverpool and London 'progressives' were involved in a 'work to rule' during May 1920 designed to speed up negotiations. But now Executive members openly supported the action; Thomas, however, remained vociferous in his opposition.⁴¹ The lines of confrontation had changed and the 'progressives' had sufficient access to the union's official machinery to reduce the need for independent pay campaigns.

During these pay campaigns the 'progressive activists' portrayed themselves as the authentic voice of the rank and file. Certainly those in Liverpool in particular appeared to be in closer touch with discontent over rising prices than did the officials and Executive. The wartime truce provided the activists with an issue on which they could easily undermine the authority of the existing leadership and present themselves as genuine representatives of rank and file opinion. Where they clearly remained out of step was in the belief that significant numbers of N.U.R. members would be prepared to jeopardise the war effort by striking to realise their demands. Despite the apparent widespread discontent at declining wage levels and the existence of a highly organised unofficial leadership the 'progressive activists' had been unable to effectively breach the wartime industrial truce on the

⁴⁰R.R., 26.12.19..

⁴¹R.R., 7. & 14.5.20..

railways. They had, however, been at the forefront of campaigns which had significantly influenced the pace of negotiations and in most cases determined the amount claimed by the union. Moreover, the impact of the 'progressives' went far beyond co-ordinated intervention in pay campaigns as outlined in the following parts of this chapter.

III. 'Progressive Activists' and Union Government.

This element focuses on the course of the power struggle within the N.U.R. during and after the war in an attempt to assess to what extent the 'progressives' were able to influence the affairs of the union beyond the issues of pay and conditions, and what factors conditioned their success. Attempts to reform union government almost invariably require at least medium term planning, considerable organisation and co-ordinated effort, because of the complexity and conservatism of union organisation and rule books. Throughout these years 'progressive activists' strove to channel the discontent amongst trade unionists over pay and conditions into their struggle to challenge the incumbent leadership and change the structures of the union. In the N.U.R. - unlike the A.S.E. - the overwhelming majority of 'progressive activists' chose to work to change the structures of the existing union rather than supercede it through the creation of a separate and competitive structure. This did not preclude unofficial organisation. The intent of those active in unofficial organisations was to co-ordinate pressure for reform of the official system. This strategy of reform from within brought some substantial successes as we shall see below.

This part of the chapter is introduced by a brief outline of the salient points of the N.U.R. constitution established in 1913. This is

followed by an examination of the strategies and aims of the 'progressive activists'. The 'progressives' are usually treated as having a common approach to reform. Unfortunately this is too simple a picture, there were fundamental differences amongst the 'progressives' which need to be taken into account. The bulk of the following part of the chapter describes how both the fortunes of the reformers and the strategies they employed fluctuated in response to changing conditions during the war and aftermath.

(a)

Much of 'progressive' activity was organised within the institutions established by the constitution of the N.U.R. in 1913. They realised at an early stage that the structure of the new union posed two major problems. The sheer size of the organisation raised the fear that officials and national leaders would become out of touch with the membership. Secondly, the new amalgamation had to overcome grade divisions and jealousies which threatened to undermine the highly centralised constitution. The N.U.R. rulebook attempted to tackle the first of these problems by the establishment of lay control of the union's governing bodies. Moreover, in an attempt to prevent the accretion of great personal power, one-third of the lay executive members were obliged to retire every year having served a maximum of three years. The Executive remained subject to the Annual (or Special) General Meeting composed of sixty working railwaymen elected from the districts - again these delegates could only serve for three consecutive years. Despite the theoretical superiority of the A.G.M., substantial real power rested in the hands of the Executive which was able to decide the union's stance on a day to day basis. Much of the internal conflict

of these years involved clashes between the A.G.M. and the Executive. Grade divisions were catered for by the allocation of Executive seats to groups of grades. Once elected the grade representatives met in sub-committees designed to deal with their sectional interests. As will become clear both the measures to prevent excessive bureaucratisation and to eliminate grade dissatisfaction met with only limited success over these years. Furthermore, these issues prompted substantial divisions within the ranks of the 'progressives'.

Nevertheless there was general agreement amongst the 'progressives' that the priority was to reduce the power of individual N.U.R. officials and Executive members. For the great majority of activists this meant maintaining faith with an approach widely endorsed on the Left in the British trade union movement which combined the concentration of power with the democratic curtailment of leadership. 'Progressives' found themselves constantly wrestling with the tensions created by this strategy which included elements of both the centralisation and decentralisation of power. They were keen advocates of centralised wage bargaining in the rail industry both because of the extra effectiveness of a national all-grades strike, and on the ideological grounds that a common industry wide campaign would tend to broaden the horizon of railway workers and highlight the division between capital and labour as a class. At its lowest common denominator 'progressive' opinion merely represented an aggressive prosecution of industrial unionism.

For those 'progressives' who supported a centralised union structure, the main problem was how to prevent power being wielded by a conservative leadership. It was the rival solutions to this dilemma that divided the Left during these years. Before the war the authors of the influential Miners' Next Step had advocated local decentralised

bargaining which would be backed up by national centralised strikes. This scheme aimed to retain the combined fighting power of the union while removing the control of negotiations and strikes from the leadership. This strategy received support from some of the most militant local leaders on the Left of the N.U.R. such as C. J. Edwards and C. Watkins - the prominent syndicalist. However, most felt such a system to be inappropriate in the rail industry where regional and company identification and loyalties would make it very difficult to guarantee support across the country for a local grievance. The majority of 'progressives' retained their faith in the formation of a highly centralised national all-grades movement in which the ultimate sanction was an all-out national strike. In this scheme leadership power was to be checked via a twin-pronged approach. This involved, firstly, the promotion of amendments to rule designed to impose greater lay activist control of the union at a national level. Secondly, positions of central power were to be captured by advocates of a militant industrial approach. In the early decades of the twentieth century, therefore, the 'progressives' in the N.U.R. were divided over the fundamental issue of whether, in order to control the leadership, union structures should be centralised or decentralised.

Similarly disagreements emerged over attitudes towards grade autonomy. Centralisers sought to prevent splits between groups of workers by the establishment of an all-grades programme. They therefore strenuously resisted any attempt to introduce separate treatment for individual grades which might weaken the total and absolute centralised unity they desired. However, the all-grades national programme of demands could not completely overcome the deep seated grade jealousies that operated throughout the rail network. After the war the decentralisers were prepared to support moves towards greater grade

autonomy as an important component of their overall scheme for a restructuring of the union based on local autonomy.⁴² This element examines the fortunes of both centralisers and decentralisers in their attempts to mould the N.U.R.'s power structure according to their respective models. However, it should be noted that conflict amongst the 'progressives' over the issues of leadership control and grade autonomy was largely obscured by the war. The system of war bonuses and the common experience of inflation alleviated the pressure for separate grade demands, and the moderate stance of the Executive provided the Left with the common aim of wresting control of pay campaigns from the Executive. For the most part centralisation formed the common sense view of the overwhelming majority of 'progressives' during the war. Although, as will become clear, this was very much less the case after 1918.

(b)

In the chronological survey of 'progressive' activity over the years 1914-21 which follows, the focus is on their efforts to influence the power structure of the N.U.R.. As suggested in part I of this chapter there was unofficial activity before the war but its extent and effectiveness were transformed during the period of militancy from 1915 to 1921. The initial boost to activist discontent was provided by the terms of the first wartime pay settlement which had created substantial dissatisfaction in the more militant areas. Particular criticism was levelled at the Executive who, it was argued, had acted precipitately in accepting the offer of a War Bonus without reference to the rank and file. In fact, however, the agitation which sprung up amongst the

⁴²R.R., 4.6.20.; 1.4.21..

activists was not for membership ratification of proposed settlements but rather:

...that a scheme be formulated to link up the whole of the [District] Councils, so that simultaneous and concerted action can be taken in any emergency, and to offer a medium by which the E.C. can keep in touch with the branches and obtain their sanction before signing any agreement with the railway companies.⁴³

The first step made towards reform of the union structure was thus to attempt to establish a national network of activist committees. The standard image of wartime unofficial activity stresses the later years of the war. In fact in the N.U.R. these 'progressive' committees were highly involved in sponsoring reform during 1915 and 1916. In these years their efforts were concentrated in three main areas: the reduction of Executive power; extension of the responsibilities of the District Councils; and control over the form of a new scheme of conciliation.

A 'Conference of District Councils' held in Birmingham during September 1915 established a committee which drafted a comprehensive set of constitutional amendments destined for the triennial Rules Revision Conference in 1916. The principal aims of the reform package were to enhance the influence of the District Councils and to curtail Executive power. These amendments were printed, duplicated and circulated to branch secretaries with a request for branches to endorse and forward them for inclusion on the Rules Revision Conference agenda.⁴⁴ The timing

⁴³Report of South Wales & Monmouth District Committee, R.R., 30.7.15.. The proposal emanated from the Manchester District Council in March 1915.

⁴⁴A copy of the circular from the Conference of District Councils is held by the Modern Records Centre at the back of Volume 7 of the 'Plebs Magazine' (1915); M.R.C. reference, MSS, S4/PL/4/7.

of the circular could hardly have been more fortuitous. Branches considered the reforms in the immediate aftermath of the October 1915 agreement by which the N.U.R. Executive bound themselves to police their own membership's pay claims for the remainder of the war. Some one-hundred and sixty two branches responded by forwarding the package of proposed rule changes to Head Office.⁴⁵

All this preparation was, however, no guarantee of success at the official conferences held in 1916. The proposals for changes in the rules governing the District Councils found little favour amongst the delegates. The leading spokesmen for the 'progressives' proved unable to rebut the charge that the suggested reforms were the thin end of a wedge leading to greater decentralisation of the union. The rule changes requested by the Conference of District Councils were for what appeared to be very minor extensions of the responsibilities and status of the District Councils.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, despite the strong denials of any imperialistic intent by the supporters of the District Councils all the suggested alterations were defeated. This episode highlighted both a very strong commitment to a system of centralised industrial unionism and the apparent contradiction in the strategy of most 'progressives'. Their spokesmen insisted - in all sincerity - that they favoured a centralised union but the majority of delegates still considered that even the smallest extension of District Council responsibility undermined that centralisation.

⁴⁵ Agenda & Decisions of A.G.M., 1916 pp. 28-37. Many of the alterations to rule advocated by the Conference of District Councils were moved by 'Wolverhampton No.1 and 161 other branches'.

⁴⁶ For example, one proposal was for the District Councils to be granted official permission to issue circulars - something which all sides acknowledged they did anyway outside the rules. Typescript verbatim account of S.G.M., 24.8.16.; M.R.C. reference, MSS, 127/NU/1/4/3C. See also R.R., 1.9.16..

The 'progressives' were much more in tune with majority opinion in their attempts to curtail the power of the Executive Committee. The 1916 Rules Revision Conference formally inserted into the rule book decisions made at the A.G.M.s in 1915 and 1916 which removed the Executive's power to settle negotiations on pay and conditions of service.⁴⁷ The authority to settle claims was now given over to the Annual or Special General Meetings of the union. The Executive lost the power to settle because it had proved insufficiently militant in its handling of the early wartime pay negotiations. Giving that authority to the A.G.M. transferred power from one national body to another, and therefore did not undermine the centralised structure of the union. This was a reform of some significance. In December their new powers allowed the S.G.M. to order the union's negotiators to report directly to them. According to the Executive minutes this "...had the effect of eliminating the E.C. from the negotiations."⁴⁸ The activist dominated delegate bodies had successfully transferred greater power to themselves, thereby reducing the authority of the Executive which was, they believed, more subject to the moderating influence of the full-time officials and therefore "out of touch with the feeling in the country."

The third area of 'progressive' agitation over union structure concerned proposals for a revised scheme of conciliation. Here too the 'progressives' achieved considerable success in influencing union policy. Pre-war syndicalists had been vociferous opponents of early conciliation schemes which by the inclusion of sectional negotiating

⁴⁷ Agenda & Decisions of A.G.M., 1915, p. 12; Bagwell op. cit., p. 350; R.R., 8.9.16..

⁴⁸ H. Clegg, A HISTORY OF THE BRITISH TRADE UNIONS SINCE 1889, VOL. II., 1911-1913, 1985. p. 150.

boards divided the work force by grades and eroded the centralisation they desired. However, support for a centralised negotiating system was not the sole preserve of the syndicalists. Before the war officials such as Richard Bell - General Secretary of the A.S.R.S. from 1897 to 1910 - had worked hard to establish a centralised conciliation system largely in the hope that this would enable officials to prevent locally inspired and often highly costly strikes, such as the Taff Vale dispute.⁴⁹ Thus both union leaders and 'progressives' appeared to favour a common goal for very different reasons. The 1911 conciliation scheme had been terminated at the request of the N.U.R. before the war, but it had proved impossible to agree a new system largely because of disagreements between the N.U.R. and A.S.L.E. & F.

During the war proposals for revised conciliation machinery highlighted the different approaches to centralisation of the Left and the union's officials. There was widespread suspicion amongst activists that the Executive was willing to agree a new procedure with the companies which would fall far short of their aspirations. Therefore attempts were made to restrict Executive freedom at the the Nottingham A.G.M. in June 1915 when prior organisation by 'progressives' resulted in several branches tabling identical motions. The resolutions, each carried by fifty votes to four, sought to prevent the Executive from reaching any agreements with railway companies which in any way divided the union's membership, or to agree to any new negotiating machinery "...until approved by the Annual or Special General Meeting."⁵⁰

⁴⁹P.S. Gupta, 'Railway Trade Unionism in Britain, c 1880-1900', *Economic History Review*, Vol. XIX, No. 1. 1966, p. 151.

⁵⁰Agenda & Decisions of the A.G.M., 21-25.6.15., p. 12.

A new conciliation scheme, negotiated between the companies and union Executives, was put to a special delegate conference in 1916 . The 'progressives' argued that because it retained the sectional boards the scheme "...undermined the very basis of our organisation, namely organisation by industry."⁵¹ The scheme included several improvements on its predecessors and J. H. Thomas and the Executive put all their weight behind it. Yet because it fell short of complete centralisation the delegates were persuaded by the 'progressives' to reject the new conciliation boards. New guidelines for future conciliation machinery were also laid down by the A.G.M. in 1916. According to an editorial in the Railway Review these resolutions had a potentially dramatic impact:

...no... settlement is to be accepted... unless it includes within its scope all the members of the union, whether employed in Ireland or the shops, and it would appear to preclude the possibility not only of any grade or a railway from negotiating a settlement of the conditions as regards that grade, but also any settlement on any one railway until all railways come into line. It is a revolution in the practice of collective bargaining, the developments of which will be watched with interest all over the world. It seeks to make the new method of industrial unionism a reality, and convert the sentiment of solidarity into a concrete fact.⁵²

These successes were not only an indication of the ability of the 'progressives' to frustrate the will of the officials and Executive, but also suggest a continued influence for syndicalist ideas. Syndicalism and industrial unionism were by no means synonymous, the latter not

⁵¹Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., p. 368.

⁵²R.R., 7.7.16. The conference (Rules Revision 1916) also established a committee to draft a new conciliation scheme which was composed of a majority of S.G.M. delegates, furthermore, the timetable for negotiations towards the implementation of a new highly centralised scheme was entrusted to future S.G.M.'s rather than the E.C.. R.R., 8.9.16..

necessarily implying a fundamental challenge to the existing order. However, in the minds of its activist supporters in the N.U.R. industrial unionism was advocated in order to construct a more effective fighting force. For some this meant the use of direct trade union action aimed at a syndicalist style overthrow of capitalism. Others viewed industrial unionism as the most likely method to extract significant improvements in pay and conditions. But from both perspectives the industrial union was a weapon designed to maximise the impact of industrial action. Only a few amongst the Right of the active membership of the N.U.R. believed this was a means of preventing conflict.

The debate within the union, in 1916, over new conciliation machinery also revealed early signs of the division within the Left over the issue of centralisation. A majority, led at the conference by W. J. Abraham of Sheffield, would settle for nothing short of strict industrial unionism and the removal of any vestige of sectionalism. Another group, in which the Liverpool area was prominent, voted in favour of the introduction of the scheme in the hope of reform in the future to remove remaining imperfections.⁵³

In the latter part of 1916 the Executive and officers of the union launched a counter-offensive against the gains of the 'progressives'. J. H. Thomas, the newly elected General Secretary, was prominent in notifying the Executive of alleged breaches of the rules by the District Councils. The debates on the Executive concerning these disciplinary attempts revealed that during 1916 several supporters of the District Council movement had been elected to the Executive - such as Morris

⁵³This split on the left explains in part why the vote to reject the scheme was so close at 32 votes to 28 - although the strength and skill of Thomas's advocacy was also important. See R.R., 14.4.16.

(South Wales) and Marchbank (Glasgow) - and also demonstrated that the District Councils were continuing to extend their sphere of activity. In London the District Council had attempted to influence elections to the Executive by arranging conferences to select preferred candidates amongst the different grade groups. The Council's secretary was fined 10s. for this breach of rule.⁵⁴

The main thrust from the right wing of Executive, led by Thomas, was to introduce their own rule alterations. They firstly resolved to recommend to the A.G.M. in 1917 that the Executive's right to settle a dispute be restored. The A.G.M. was not impressed by Thomas's argument that the 1916 decision had merely given "...60 men instead of 24 the power of settlement...", and voted to retain power in their own hands by 49 to 10.⁵⁵ At the same conference Thomas introduced his own reform package which included proposals for a smaller Executive - largely on the grounds of cost - and the election of A.G.M. delegates for a period of three years, ostensibly to provide delegates with greater experience. The leading 'progressive' District Councils opposed Thomas's reforms, no doubt believing that a smaller Executive would be less easy for the activists in the areas to influence while at the same time easier for Thomas to dominate. Similarly a three year tenure for A.G.M. delegates would make them less responsive to the swift changes in mood and attitude amongst the rank and file foreseen by many activists. Despite attempts by Thomas to appeal over the heads of activists via a circular and questionnaire to the membership, an opposition campaign, led by the District Councils, resulted in the eventual defeat of Thomas' proposals

⁵⁴Decisions of the Executive Committee, 5-10.3.17., p. 83, & 29.5-2.6.17., p. 91.

⁵⁵Decisions of the Executive Committee, 4-9.12.16.; R.R., 29.6.17..

at the A.G.M. in 1918.⁵⁶

The most notable success achieved by the 'progressives' during 1917 was their influence over the contents of the union's National Programme. A National Conference of District Councils and Vigilance Committees in August reached a range of radical decisions one of which included the establishment of a sub-committee to draft a new national programme. Branches submitted proposals to this unofficial committee which, in turn, circulated copies of its conclusions to branches for endorsement. Despite strong opposition from Thomas the bulk of the District Councils' programme was adopted at the S.G.M. in Leicester during November and thus became the official National Programme of the N.U.R..⁵⁷ The August Conference of District Councils and Vigilance Committees was described by the organisers as:

...perhaps the most representative one of the rank and file ever held, and is destined to be the initiatory step towards bringing about a closer working between different parts of the country than has hitherto existed...⁵⁸

The organisation designed to influence the national programme was certainly both extensive and highly effective. During August and

⁵⁶For opposition to Thomas's scheme amongst the District Councils see R.R., 25.1.18.; 15.3.18.. The reforms were first suggested in the General Secretary's Report to the 1917 A.G.M. - see R.R., 22.6.17. - and outlined in full via a 'Circular to Branch Secretaries re the Constitution of the A.G.M. and E.C.' - see Reports and Proceedings 1917 p. 1. Both major proposals were rejected by the A.G.M. in 1918; see Agenda and Decisions of the A.G.M., 17-21.6.18., pp. 7-8.

⁵⁷An excellent account of the Leicester Conference is given in Bagwell, op. cit., pp. 369-71. For details of the District Council activity see R.R., 27.7.17.; 3.5.18. - an article signed by F. Atkins indicates that in considering a programme for the Leicester Conference branches had "...passed stereotyped resolutions received by them on a printed form."

⁵⁸R.R., 24.8.17..

September large numbers of branch reports to the Railway Review indicated great enthusiasm for the resolutions passed at the unofficial conference. Even less militant areas, such as the Eastern District, responded with some zeal to the District Council Conference call by organising 'demonstrations' of railworkers in Grantham, Kings Lynn, Ipswich and Norwich "...so that a thorough explanation of conference decisions could be given to members."⁵⁹ Able to win majority support for its militant stance on pay, and now the future policy of the union, the second half of 1917 saw the unofficial movement at the height of its influence. The Executive, now more evenly balanced between left and right, found it very difficult to do anything other than respond to the lead given them by the activist pressure largely co-ordinated through the District Councils.

During November 1917 the standing of the unofficial movement suffered a severe blow as a result of the 'go slow' organised by the Liverpool Vigilance Committee (see above pp. 181-82). On the eve of the Liverpool action a meeting of the S.G.M. had rejected a resolution condemning the actions of the unofficial movement by a large majority, however, within a week, the same body repudiated the Liverpool action.⁶⁰ The unofficial 'go slow' had resulted in the rail company managers calling off negotiations and Thomas was presented with a stick with which to beat the 'progressives'. At the S.G.M. Thomas posed the issue of power within the union; he asserted that:

Either you have to repudiate Liverpool... or you are going to say that Liverpool is going to run the Society. Either the E.C. and yourselves have

⁵⁹R.R., 28.9.17., & late August and September issues passim.

⁶⁰Decisions of the Special General Meeting, 22-24.11.17., p. 3.

to control our union or there is going to be
chaos.⁶¹

This episode damaged the reputation of the 'progressives' as a whole and Liverpool in particular, the local Vigilance Committee having been the foremost opinion leader within the union was forced to adopt a lower profile from this point on, however, as Bagwell pointed out:

The repudiation of the unconstitutional action... did not mean an end to the agitation, since the economic difficulties in which the discontent was born continued to exist.⁶²

Nevertheless the unofficial movement was now clearly on the defensive. The Conference of District Councils in 1918 considered a resolution which sought "...to overcome the prejudice which is prevalent in some quarters against vigilance and joint committees..."⁶³ However, the growing number of 'progressives' on the Executive prevented the right wing from pressing home the opportunity to curtail unofficial activity during 1918.⁶⁴

The sharp down-turn in trade union activity in 1918 following the success of the German 'Spring Offensive' resulted in a further setback for the unofficial movement. The campaign against the leadership of the union had thrived on the rising tide of militancy engendered among other

⁶¹Bagwell, op. cit., p. 354.

⁶²Ibid..

⁶³R.R., 25.1.18..

⁶⁴When the London District Secretary - W.T.A. Foot - issued an unauthorised call to industrial action over food shortages the Executive, meeting in February 1918, rejected a proposal from the officials to withhold District Council funds for six months and contented themselves with a resolution which deprecated Foot's action but took no disciplinary measures. Special Meeting of E.C., 8 & 9.2.18..

things by inflation, food shortages and intensified work pressure. The threat of military defeat quickly submerged discontent amongst railway workers. However, 'progressive' activity recovered relatively quickly and in June the Liverpool Vigilance Committee summoned a pre-conference meeting of 'progressive' delegates to the 1918 A.G.M.. A similar gathering on the eve of the 1917 A.G.M. had proved an effective method of co-ordinating the Left's intervention at the conference but had not elicited any critical response from the officials. However, at the 1918 A.G.M., Thomas, clearly sensing a swing of opinion against the Left, launched a successful attack on the organisers of the unofficial meeting. A resolution condemning the action of the Liverpool Vigilance Committee was carried by thirty votes to twenty four.⁶⁵

Despite the resurgence of militancy amongst the rank and file on issues of pay and hours there is little evidence of intensive activity by the 'progressives' at a national level during the latter half of 1918. Nevertheless towards the close of the year preparations got underway for a National Conference of District Councils to be held in January 1919. This conference marked a further important step in the development of the unofficial movement. During the war the election of a standing 'Secretary of the Conference of Councils' was the movement's only element of permanent organisation. In 1919 delegates established a formal constitution for a 'Conference of District Councils' with a fixed annual meeting and powers to summon further conferences in case of emergency.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ Agenda and Decisions of the A.G.M., 17-21.6.18.; Bagwell, op. cit., pp. 354-55.

⁶⁶ Minutes of the Quarterly Meeting of the London and South-Western District Council, 29.12.18.. M.R.C. Temporary Registration "N.U.R. Slips No. 41".

The District Councils movement made further advances in 1919, in August they held a second national conference of District Councils which in terms of the scope of the resolutions under debate - resembled a miniature version of the union's A.G.M..⁶⁷ This conference prepared the way for a successful intervention by the 'progressives' at the 1919 Rules Revision Conference held in November. Some ninety five branches endorsed a list of 'progressive' inspired rule changes.⁶⁸ One major problem faced by the unofficial movement during the war was that without a S.G.M. being convened it was impossible for the activists to enforce their policies on a reluctant Executive. Under the pre-1919 constitution the E.C. was only obliged under rule to summon the S.G.M. in response to a call from a majority of the union's branches. In 1919 this was amended to only one third of the branches which made the task of overturning an Executive decision much more feasible. Furthermore, the Executive was now bound by rule to hold such a Special Conference within twenty eight days and to inform branches of the agenda in advance so that delegates could receive instructions. This latter change had a hidden significance. Union officials, particularly Thomas, had been keen to suggest that delegates to past S.G.M.s were incapable of endorsing certain - usually radical - proposals because the delegates had no mandate from their members. Previous conference delegates had complained that it had been impossible for them to secure a mandate in advance of the conference if they had no agenda - the instruction that in future branches should be circulated with an agenda in advance was clearly perceived as another step towards more effective activist control of the

⁶⁷R.R., 29.8.19.. Delegates also drafted proposals for a 'New National Programme'.

⁶⁸'Proposal for Alterations to Rules - 1919', in N.U.R. Proceedings and Reports, 1919.

union.⁶⁹

Activist influence was further extended by the removal of the Executive's position as the 'sole authority' with the power to interpret the union's rules.⁷⁰ Conference went on to increase the size of the A.G.M. from sixty to eighty delegates in order that the conference might be more in touch with the expanded membership of the union. A decision was also made to enforce the retirement of officials at the age of sixty. This latter move resulted in the immediate retirement of recognised right wing officials of the union such as Lowth and Hudson - both Assistant General Secretaries.

It appears likely that political differences played an important part in the decision to part with two of the most prominent right-wing officials, one of whom - Hudson - had been openly rebuked by the left-wing executive early in 1919 over his refusal to give official recognition to the tube strikers. At the very least this decision offered a convenient opportunity for the Left to rid themselves of two well established opponents.

Perhaps the greatest indication of the progress made by the unofficial movement between 1916 and 1919 was the alteration made in the latter year to the rule governing District Councils. The 1916 conference had rejected all attempts, however marginal, to increase the District Council's sphere of activity. As a result of decisions in 1919 the Councils both received head office circulars and, more importantly, were able to submit resolutions to the Annual General Meeting or Executive

⁶⁹N.U.R. Report of the S.G.M. (rules), 6-7.11.19., p. 23.

⁷⁰Ibid., p. 29.

Committee.⁷¹ Although these rule alterations in themselves hardly constituted a major re-ordering of the union's power structure it should be appreciated that the 'progressives' had deliberately set their sights relatively low. This was partly in order to avoid open disagreement amongst themselves and partly in recognition of the widespread satisfaction, on the Left and Right, with the established constitution. Even this minimum programme, however, provided a real fillip to the District Councils whose constitutional standing reached a new high.⁷²

It might be argued that these reforms merely marked the incorporation of the unofficial movement into the formal structure of the union.⁷³ This would be to misunderstand the aims, composition and nature of the unofficial movement. The overwhelming majority of those who described themselves as 'progressive' members of the N.U.R. worked throughout our period both within official and unofficial channels. A central aim was to increase the formal constitutional authority of those bodies which they controlled, such as the District Councils and Vigilance Committees. In the absence of formal authority the activities and influence of these bodies was extended through unofficial means. However, the attainment of greater official recognition for the District Councils did not mean an end to unofficial activity by the 'progressives'. The completely unofficial Conference of District Councils, with its permanent Secretary and independent structure,

⁷¹Ibid., p. 71; R.R., 14.11.19.; 29.10.20..

⁷²R.R., 9.1.20. The Sheffield District Council reported: "Circular sent to all unaffiliated branches urging them to link up with their respective Councils, the importance of which is greater since alteration of rules."

⁷³Pribicevic suggests that what he calls the 'rank and file' movement re-integrated with the official structure in 1919 by which time activists felt there was 'neither need nor room for an independent rank and file organisation'. Pribicevic thesis op. cit., pp. 126-7.

continued to function. The rule changes of 1919 did not represent the incorporation of the unofficial movement but rather an important advance for those who sought to enhance the influence of activists within the union - this was a victory for the strategy of centralisation tempered by activist regulated checks on the national leadership.

Nevertheless, in previous histories of the union the unofficial movement has tended to disappear from view after the war.⁷⁴ It was certainly the case that the unofficial movement maintained a lower profile after the war on some issues. As suggested in part II above, perhaps the most important factor in this change was the continuing shift in the political balance of the Executive. From 1919 a majority on the Executive were now more inclined to support the position of leading 'progressives' such as Edwards and Abraham against the General Secretary. Therefore after the war the unofficial movement was not so involved in either the pay campaigns or the disciplinary conflicts with the Executive which had brought them so much contemporary and historical attention. After 1918 nationally co-ordinated unofficial organisation continued its agitations from a more secure position, largely immune from Executive sanction. Attention was increasingly turned to the sponsorship of a more far reaching reform of union structure. In so doing, however, the splits amongst the 'progressives' were forced on to the agenda and the division of opinion between centralisers and decentralisers was at the top of that list.

The war had produced encouraging developments for both centralisers and decentralisers. The former benefitted enormously from the advent of national level wage bargaining and the inflation which provided all

⁷⁴Bagwell, 1963, op. cit.; Pribicevic, D. Phil. 1957, op. cit..

grades with a common sense of grievance. Advocates of decentralisation thrived on the large number of local grievances, which resulted from the intensified wartime work pressure, and the general increase in militancy. Particularly in the Liverpool area but also elsewhere the supporters of Vigilance Committees, drawing on the reservoir of local discontent, developed a view which brought them into basic disagreement with the majority of the Left. The following key clause from the Liverpool Vigilance Committee's suggested programme of revision to rules illustrates the extent of the divergence:

De-centralisation - (a) That so far as possible a policy of decentralisation shall be established which shall provide for local authorities of the N.U.R. negotiating, managing, and settling grievances and disputes in local areas. (b) That arrangements be made between H.Q. and the local branches to establish a building or buildings in the various localities where the union's business shall be conducted.⁷⁵

The proposed new rules were also to include instructions that would effectively 'black' any work being done by union members from outside any district in dispute. This scheme did not go so far as the Miner's Next Step but the Liverpool activists were clearly strongly influenced by its approach. The principle of decentralised bargaining appeared in both schemes, but while the South Wales miners advocated a national or coalfield strike to support a local dispute the Liverpool railwaymen settled for support through 'blacking'.

A desire to parallel the tradition of the A.S.E. is also evident in the Liverpool scheme. This sprang both from the influence of the ideas of the Shop Steward's movement in the engineering industry and the

⁷⁵R.R., 21.2.19..

competition felt by the N.U.R. amongst its members in the railway engineering shops. The A.S.E. local Institutes were felt to give the craft union an advantage in recruitment and servicing of its members at a local level. The link between the approach of the Vigilance Committee activists and the Shop Steward's movement was explicitly made by C. Watkins of Sheffield, a leading pre-war syndicalist. He observed that such a scheme "...might be made to serve a similar useful purpose as the shop stewards' committee in the engineering industry."⁷⁶

Local 'Station Committees' played an important part in this alternative view. Intended to tackle disputes on the spot, Station Committees were established in several parts of the country on an all-grades work place basis. Liverpool was the centre and main advocate of this method of organisation and there were two national conferences of Station Committees in 1918. The advocates of decentralisation felt their method increased rank and file involvement in the union. C. J. Edwards of Liverpool, a leading supporter of Vigilance and Station Committees attacked the District Councils as being unwieldy and out of touch with the members, he argued that:

The days of the District Councils are over. The organisation has outgrown them. It is crying for new life, new vitality, and closer and more compact organisation in which⁷⁷ is involved the question of decentralisation...

The desire for decentralisation thrived where trade unionists of 'advanced' thinking felt frustrated by the moderation evident in other areas of the country.

⁷⁶R.R., 15.2.18..

⁷⁷R.R., 1.3.18..

The centralisers on the Left continued to support the District Councils. A leading advocate of the District Council movement, who described himself as an 'Industrial unionist and Socialist', indicated that:

The reform I am out for is not to win the power to take direct action for the District Councils... [but that they]... shall be empowered to submit resolutions and other business to the E.C. and A.G.M. for consideration and treatment as the will and mandate of the district...⁷⁸

As was clear from the reforms achieved at the 1919 Rules Revision Conference it was this trend that remained the largest group amongst the 'progressives'.

However, during late 1919 and early 1920 certain events made centralisation less popular among the rank and file. The system of common War Bonus payments to all grades had stored up huge problems for the advocates of centralisation. Flat rate payments across the board resulted in a sharp reduction in the pay differentials between skilled and unskilled. On the eve of war unskilled wages were often little over 50% of skilled rates, by 1920 this figure had reached over 80%.⁷⁹ This created huge discontent amongst the 'skilled' workers in all grades but also amongst whole groups such as the signalmen who were regarded as being amongst the aristocracy of railway workers. Pressure for separate grade conferences had grown at the end of the war as a reaction against

⁷⁸R.R., 15.3.18.; 27.12.18., articles by 'Jack'.

⁷⁹K.G.J.C. Knowles & D. J. Robertson, 'Differences Between the Wages of Skilled and Unskilled Workers, 1880-1950', BULLETIN OF THE OXFORD INSTITUTE OF STATISTICS, 1951, Vol. 3, pp. 109-27. These estimates are based on calculations of the "Time rate of unskilled as percentage of that of skilled" on the railways between 1885 and 1950. The precise figures given for 1913 and 1920 were 51.4% and 81.2% - Table 1, p. 111.

the all-grades programme of the Leicester Conference.⁸⁰ But it was not until after the final settlement of grade standardisation in January 1920 that discontent over relativities and differentials really exploded within the N.U.R.. The agreement merged large numbers of grades into new general categories - for example 53 former grades were grouped under the title 'Porter Grade 1' - and wages were standardised around the average.⁸¹ In the early months of 1920 a plethora of local, district and national grade committees were established. The union's President observed of the 1920 standardisation "...that no settlement ever received such a mixed reception."⁸²

The hiatus of activity amongst the various grades threatened to undo all the work of the centralisers. There were rumours that a separate signalmen's union was being planned. A letter from T. C. Morris, the leader of the South Wales signalmen and former Executive member denied that any breakaway was intended but made a strong plea for "...decentralisation of the machinery of our union... through departmental and grade autonomy..." The agitation was by no means confined to the signalmen, National Grade Committees were established from all the main groups and in May 1920 a 'Conference of National Grade Committees' mounted a campaign to introduce rule changes which would institutionalise "departmental autonomy".⁸³ The speed with which such an extensive and vigorous agitation spread indicates that here was an issue which really touched the hearts of many ordinary railwaymen. Judging

⁸⁰R.R., 20.9.18. - see the report of the national signalmen's conference.

⁸¹In all some 512 grades were merged into 88 new categories. See Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., pp. 415-16.

⁸²A.G.M. Agenda & Decisions, 1920, p. 5.

⁸³R.R., 30.4.20.; 7.5.20..

from the reports to the Railway Review the grade-based Vigilance Committees established locally during 1920 were far more numerous than the all-grade Vigilance Committees had been even during their wartime heyday. The wartime Vigilance Committees had, for the most part, been inspired and led by the Left. The grade committees of 1920 were far too numerous to be anything other than an expression of very broad based discontent. Identification with, and pride in, grade was very strong amongst rail workers. One ex-railwayman, writing in 1913, vividly illustrated the depth of grade divisions:

The goods porter was looked upon as an inferior animal by the shunter. The shunter was tolerated as a necessary evil by the goods guard, who had wild hopes that some time he would be able to look a passenger guard squarely in the eyes as a man and brother of equal rank.⁸⁴

The rapid erosion of the pay differentials which had underpinned the well defined grade hierarchy created a storm within the N.U.R. during 1920 which long time advocates of decentralisation on the Left, such as C. J. Edwards, turned to their advantage. The Conference of District Councils quickly swung behind a new scheme of union organisation developed from the earlier Liverpool plans which sought to introduce a substantial degree of local and regional autonomy. Once again the new scheme drew from the ideas of the 'Shop Stewards and Workers Committee Movement'. The branch structure was to be eliminated and replaced by local 'Grade (or Shop) Stewards' who would be represented in a hierarchy of 'Departmental(Shop)', 'Station(Works)' and 'Town Committees'. The scheme became the central platform of the District Councils during 1920 and 1921 and was designed to circumvent the "...unauthorised sectional and grade movements [which] would become

⁸⁴R. Kenney, MEN AND RAILS, 1913, p. 149.

a thing of the past..." These were to be eliminated not, as previously, by enforcing an all-grades policy through a highly centralised structure, but by the institutionalisation of grade differences "...with the necessary local departmental and divisional autonomy..."⁸⁵

Despite the degree of support for decentralisation evident in the columns of the Railway Review the campaign gained little credence amongst those who mattered in the upper echelons of the union. Support for a centralised system of government remained strong, particularly amongst those on the Left who had been long term advocates of centralisation and were now in a majority on the union's Executive. Nevertheless the strength of grade feeling could not be ignored and in June 1920 the Executive approved machinery "...which will allow the greatest amount of sectional autonomy consistent with the maintenance of our industrial form of organisation." A system of Conferences and Advisory Committees was established which would allow grade representatives from the District Councils to draft a programme of demands. However, strict central control was to remain with the Executive. Wages and hours could not be included in the grade programmes, which, once drawn up by the new sectional committees, "...must then be submitted to the Executive Committee for approval."⁸⁶ This consultative machinery was clearly intended to give a voice for grade grievances, head-off the pressure for grade autonomy and at the same time maintain centralised power in the hands of - a by now left-wing dominated - Executive Committee.

⁸⁵Conference of District Councils, pamphlet, pp. 5 & 10; M.R.C. reference, MSS 127/NU/6 37NU. See also, R.R., 4.6.20.; 1.4.21.

⁸⁶E.C. Minutes, 1920, pp. 126-27.

At the height of the grade discontent the 1920 A.G.M. rejected the scheme for greater decentralisation by thirty-four votes to eighteen. And the attempts of the Conference of District Councils to promote reforms at the 1922 rules revision conference similarly met with failure. Only twenty-three branches endorsed their programme for inclusion on the Agenda compared with one hundred and sixty-two and ninety-five in 1916 and 1919 respectively. The amendments were taken together and defeated in a single vote by fifty-six votes to eighteen.⁸⁷

In summarising part III of this chapter, at first glance it appears that the 'progressives' in the N.U.R. were unsuccessful in their attempts to re-shape the power structure. The Conference of District Councils and the Liverpool Vigilance Committee were spent forces by mid 1921 - no longer able to mobilise widespread and effective pressure on the union leadership and incapable of winning majority support for their schemes of reform. Furthermore, the constitution of the N.U.R. had altered little from its original state by the end of 1922. It had been not so much a failure of the entire Left in the N.U.R., but rather by one section of the Left. It was the decentralisers amongst the 'progressives' which, although gaining increased support during 1920, ultimately experienced failure and defeat.

The majority on the Left, who saw themselves as industrial unionists, socialists and therefore centralisers, can claim to have stamped their imprint firmly on the structure and policy of the N.U.R. during the war and aftermath. They had never believed that major changes in the structure of the union were necessary. In their eyes the main

⁸⁷ Agenda & Decisions of the A.G.M., 1920, pp. 21-22. Agenda & Decisions of the A.G.M., 3-8.7.22., pp. 24-25.

imperfection was that the union was insufficiently responsive to the 'rank and file'. The remedy for the centralisers amongst the 'progressives' lay not in root and branch reform, or in the transfer of authority to the rank and file membership, but rather in the capture of power for themselves. This they achieved with great success, winning majorities both in most meetings of the A.G.M. and, by the end of the war, the Executive itself. The changes made in union structure over these years reflected the influence exerted by this trend. By 1919 it was agreed that the District Councils should have the potential to influence policy directly in the same way that branches did. Power to control movements was not devolved to the Councils. This was not as a result of any resistance by officials but because the majority of 'progressives' themselves did not wish to allow that degree of decentralisation. The 1915 and 1916 decisions to remove the right of the Executive to settle were similarly less motivated by a desire to devolve power than to transfer it from one body, the Executive - which at that time was out of step with activists - to the A.G.M. which was more quickly and easily subject to 'progressive' influence. The centralisers took particular satisfaction from the rejection of the Conciliation Scheme in 1916 against the wishes of the union's leadership and the railway companies, and the establishment of a policy for the union which sought "...to make the new method of industrial unionism a reality..."⁸⁸

A further major success for the advocates of centralisation was their ability to head off any move towards grade autonomy during 1920 and maintain a common all-grades policy including common flat-rate, across the board, pay demands.

What then of the 'unofficial movement'? I have suggested that it

⁸⁸R.R., 7.7.16.

had a much longer time span than has been hitherto suggested. Attempts to create an organised and co-ordinated unofficial movement pre-dated and outlasted the war. In so far as it helped organise the Left while in opposition for a successful bid for power within the established structure the 'unofficial movement' was an unqualified success. It did not cease to function once this aim had been achieved. But, once its prominent members - Edwards, Abraham and Marchbank - had taken seats on the Executive, the movement lost much of the organising energy of its most able leaders and, for many, its chief *raison d'être*.⁸⁹ The internal divisions within the 'unofficial movement' also became more prominent after the war, further reducing the effectiveness of its interventions. At the same time the erstwhile leaders of the unofficial movement had become the leaders of the official structure of the N.U.R.. This did not mean that the 'progressives' had won power in the N.U.R., despite having reformed the constitution and captured control of policy making bodies. There remained a powerful obstacle to the implementation of the Left's policy in the form of the union's officialdom. Having won power in the Executive the conflict within the N.U.R. could no longer be disguised as one between 'rank and file' and 'leadership' but was now quite clearly between 'progressive activists' and a section of the full-time officials led by J. H. Thomas. The course and dynamics of that conflict are discussed in part IV of this chapter.

⁸⁹In 1921 a column in the Railway Review entitled 'Liverpool and District Pars' observed: 'It is now many moons since a report of the local Vigilance Committee appeared in the "Review", yet in days gone by, a regular feature of their activities was the regularity with which these reports appeared.' The author wondered whether the new Secretary who had replaced C. J. Edwards after his election to the E.C. was to blame. R.R., 29.7.21.

IV. Leadership, Activists and Power.

As outlined in the Introduction to Section II of this thesis theorists of trade union management have traditionally been particularly keen to consider the relationship between leaders and their organisation. A central concern has been the trend towards concentration of power and the suggestion that this results in the development of a more conservative stance on the part of the organisation. One of the founders of this tradition was Michels who suggested that trade unions, particularly as they grew larger, tended to become governed along oligarchic lines where officials became almost irremovable and capable of enforcing their own policies upon the union.⁹⁰ It might be argued that the history of the N.U.R. over these years provides a clear vindication of this analysis of trade union leadership. The career of J. H. Thomas provides a most striking example of the alleged predominant influence of leading union officers. As a prominent Labour M.P. and General Secretary of the N.U.R. from 1916, Thomas was able to exert great influence over the running of the union. Thomas was a renowned 'moderate' in union and political affairs. Yet paradoxically his rise to the leadership of the N.U.R. coincided with that of the 'progressives' within the N.U.R.. The history of the union during our period increasingly revolved around the conflict between Thomas and the 'progressives'. In charting the course of that conflict an attempt will be made to evaluate the usefulness of theoretical constructs which posit a naturally conservative leadership and the growth of oligarchic power in large organisations.

⁹⁰R. Michels, *POLITICAL PARTIES*, 1965, pp. 143-46. Michels' ideas continue to influence students of industrial relations. V. L. Allen writing in 1971 referred to "...the inevitable oligarchic control in unions..." V. L. Allen, *THE SOCIOLOGY OF INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS*, 1971, p. 51.

Recently historians of industrial relations have suggested that changes in bargaining structures during the early decades of the twentieth century played a significant part in a transfer of power away from the 'rank and file' into the hands of national officials. With reference to the growing number of conciliation and arbitration boards in British industry on the eve of the First World War, Van Gore has suggested that:

The centralisation of union power acquired monolithic proportions as the internal authority structures of the trade unions were steadily adapted to the new demands of systemized industrial relations, with a consequent loss of accountability and rank and file control.⁹¹

This description would appear to correspond closely to developments in the N.U.R.. The war witnessed the first ever direct national wage bargaining between the unions and rail companies. And the new N.U.R. constitution in 1913 represented a dramatic centralisation of union government. However, there are two central flaws in this argument which will be discussed during the course of this part of the chapter. Firstly, it is not clear that centralisation within the N.U.R. was a direct consequence of changes in the industrial relations system. Secondly, there must also be some doubt about the 'monolithic' nature of trade union leadership even in the case of the N.U.R.

In considering these issues four main points will be discussed: the rise of J. H. Thomas within the N.U.R.; the power struggle between Thomas and the 'progressives' and an assessment of their relative

⁹¹Van Gore, 'Rank-and-File Dissent', in C. J. Wrigley (ed), A HISTORY OF BRITISH INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS, Vol. I: 1875-1914, 1982, p. 66.

strengths; whether in any meaningful sense the officials of the union constituted a monolithic bureaucracy; and finally, a brief consideration of the role of union and employer in the centralisation of industrial relations and union government.

(a)

As a national official of the N.U.R. since 1906 and M.P. for Derby from 1910 'Jimmy' Thomas had established a prominent position within union affairs before World War I. But it was the war years and particularly the latter part which saw him rise to a position of pre-eminence within the union and real prominence in national politics. His position as a member of Parliament was particularly important in a mass union such as the N.U.R. allowing him to gain publicity through the national press and escape what to many non-active union members was the anonymity of head office. Thomas was elected as General Secretary during 1916 by a majority of over three to one. It is worth noting that in this election Thomas gained strong support from the left-wing branches of the union.⁹² This suggests both that Thomas was to the left of his single opponent Mr. A Bellamy, and that the 'progressives' had no candidate of their own amongst the well known national figures in the N.U.R.. The following items in a Branch Report indicate that support for Thomas's candidacy for General Secretary often had little to do with agreement over policy:

⁹²R.R., 16.6.-14.7.16. inclusive. These editions of the Railway Review include a series of reports from left-wing branches - including those from Liverpool - which declare support for Thomas. Thomas defeated Bellamy by 107,333 votes to 32,732.

Mr. J. H. Thomas M.P. was nominated for General Secretary... We do not recognise any truce not having been consulted by the E.C.⁹³

The 'Industrial Truce' was of course vehemently defended by Thomas throughout the war. However, Thomas had secured a large amount of genuine support from all sections of the union and particularly the Left for the strong stand he had taken against conscription in the Autumn of 1915.⁹⁴ The publicity given to his speeches against conscription highlighted the advantage he held as a Member of Parliament. The public prominence of Thomas, now regarded as a national spokesman of labour, provided him with his greatest weapon against the Left - the ability to appeal over the heads of activist or 'progressive' dominated bodies to the rank and file of the union.

Clearly it would be wrong to imply that Thomas imposed his own policies single-handed on an organisation some 400,000 strong. Thomas had allies at all levels of the union and particularly within its upper echelons. Nevertheless, we are justified in concentrating our study on Thomas because it was almost invariably his actions which in a very personal and direct fashion stood between the 'progressives' and the implementation of their policies. Indeed Thomas set himself the task during these years of rebutting those who he described as the "wild men".⁹⁵

⁹³R.R., 16.6.16., Report of Landore Branch.

⁹⁴R.R., September 1915, passim.

⁹⁵G. W. Alcock, RAILWAY TRADE UNIONISM, 1922, p. x.

(b)

As we have seen in parts II and III of this chapter the war and post war years were characterised by sharp conflict within the N.U.R. This element examines the 'progressives' attempts to control and constrain the full-time officers of the N.U.R.. Power struggles between union officials and activists were clearly not simply a creation of the war. In fact disagreement over the extent of official power surfaced on relatively few occasions during the war itself when the 'progressives' concentrated their efforts on an assault upon the lay Executive. It was not until that battle had been won that attention was turned to the union's officers.

Early clashes involved the older right wing officials rather than J. H. Thomas himself. In 1918 the editor of the Railway Review - G. J. Wardle M.P. - was removed from the list of N.U.R. sponsored parliamentary candidates. And in January 1919 Hudson - Acting General Secretary in the absence of Thomas and M.P. for Newcastle - was publicly repudiated by the Executive Committee for failing to give recognition to striking London tube workers.⁹⁶

Almost every major issue during 1919 provoked a clash between Thomas and the now firmly left-wing Executive. The fundamental divide was over the use of the strike weapon. The Executive sought to apply the N.U.R.'s industrial muscle in conflicts with the government over

⁹⁶Pribicevic, D.Phil. 1957, op. cit., pp. 104-05. Wardle was disciplined for his refusal to withdraw from the Coalition Government in line with the Labour Party's decision. R.R., 14.2.19.; G.W. Alcock, op. cit., p. 529.

railwaymen's pay and conditions, conscription, and intervention in Russia and Ireland. Thomas made every possible effort to prevent the union becoming involved in any strike activity but he was particularly opposed to the use of 'direct action' over political issues. The General Secretary used his access to the press and the union's own journal to make public criticisms of Executive decisions. In September Thomas went further and ignored an instruction from his Executive to involve the Triple Alliance in the lead up to the national rail strike.⁹⁷ This use of personal power to frustrate Executive policy during 1919 forced a response from the 'progressives'.

Thomas's popularity amongst the rank and file made it very difficult for the 'progressives' to mount a direct assault on his power within the union. No doubt it was chiefly for this reason that the Executive chose to ignore appeals from a Scottish Branch made in both March and December 1919 that Thomas be prevented from making statements in the press which opposed N.U.R. policy.⁹⁸ However, the 'progressives' on the Executive were not prepared to allow Thomas free reign to subvert their policies. The central thrust of attempts to constrain Thomas's influence involved an attempt to divide the role of General Secretary into two separate posts, one Industrial and the other Political; the two new posts would be placed on an equal footing. By making Thomas Political General Secretary it was hoped to reduce his influence over the union's industrial activities. It was also intended that C. T. Cramp, the left-wing President of the union, whose presidency was coming

⁹⁷R.R., 1.8.19.. Thomas's assault on the E.C. decision to join with the Triple Alliance in strike action received front page, heavy type, prominence in the Railway Review. Minutes of the Special E.C., 25.9.19.. See also, Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., pp. 399-401.

⁹⁸E.C. Decisions 1919, No. 151 (March Quarterly E.C.); No. 823 (December Quarterly E.C.).

to a close, should take on the role of Industrial General Secretary. Even this scheme was carefully couched so as not to appear to be an attack upon Thomas. Constant stress was laid upon the ill health he had experienced during late 1918 and 1919, together with the increased work load as an M.P. in His Majesty's Opposition and leader of a union with now some 480,000 members.

When these plans were revealed by a Sub-Committee established at the A.G.M. in June they drew a great deal of opposition from Thomas and his supporters in the branches. Such was the scale of the outcry that the Sub-Committee and the 'progressive' dominated rules revision conference meeting in November 1919 was forced to modify the proposals. The two posts were created as planned with Thomas in charge of the political work of the union, but he remained head of the union, a position which resided in the person of Thomas rather than the post he now held. Moreover, Thomas was to continue to lead the union in national 'all-grades' movements affecting conditions of employment. Cramp was elected unopposed to the now somewhat emasculated post of Industrial General Secretary. Nevertheless the 'progressives' appeared to reserve their right to take further action by including in the final resolution that:

...the recognised head of the union shall be decided upon by the E.C. and A.G.M. as circumstances warrant upon the qualifications of the two respective secretaries...

The softly softly approach adopted by the majority on the Left was continued into 1920. The A.G.M. in June debated a resolution which catalogued the misdeeds of the General Secretary over the year and

⁹⁹Minutes of the S.G.M., 4-7.11.19.; R.R., 14.11.19.

demanding his resignation. Only ten of the sixty delegates supported this motion. However, the conference did endorse a motion which sought to prevent officials making public statements on union negotiations that were out of step with union policy. The motion did not specifically mention Thomas but the delegates were no doubt influenced by Thomas's recent public attacks on the N.U.R.'s attempts to impose an embargo on goods to Poland during its conflict with Russia.¹⁰⁰ However, during the coal crisis which developed during the late summer of 1920 Thomas again spoke out against the intention of the Executive and S.G.M. to support the miners through a Triple Alliance strike. A public row developed over the validity of strike notices endorsed by C. T. Cramp, the Industrial General Secretary, but which did not bear Thomas's signature. The Executive decided to avoid complications in the future by always appending the name of Thomas to instructions to branches. Later in the same year when Thomas's name was appended to a circular favouring strike action in sympathy with the Triple Alliance he again publicly repudiated the Executive and opposed the strike proposal. Thomas suggested with some justice that the reason the Executive had appended his name was "...because the men would not listen to the appeal unless they saw his name attached to it..."¹⁰¹

Thomas justified his actions on the basis that he was elected by the whole membership - unlike individual Executive members and A.G.M. delegates - and that there was a real division amongst the membership over whether or not to strike. Whatever justification Thomas gave, this was a clear breach of the rules of the union and a direct snub to the union's lay governing bodies.

¹⁰⁰ A.G.M. 1920 Agenda & Decisions, p. 14; R.R., 4. & 11.6.20.

¹⁰¹ R.R., 22.7.21.; 19.11.20.

Not surprisingly in 1921 the 'progressives' re-doubled their efforts to undermine Thomas's power. In the aftermath of Black Friday the Left returned to the tactic of dividing the powers of the two General Secretaries. The Executive endorsed a resolution for consideration by the A.G.M. in June 1921, which sought to place the conduct of all industrial affairs in the hands of the Industrial General Secretary. The resolution had originated from Liverpool No. 5 the most prominent left-wing branch in the union and was carried by the Executive during Thomas's absence in America. On this occasion the conflict became far more personalised and was described by Thomas as an attempt to depose him as head of the union. The Executive appeared to be on firm ground arguing that the confusion during 1920 over the use of Thomas's signature and his public statements would be removed by allowing him to concentrate on the job of Political General Secretary. Nevertheless, the Executive motion was defeated by 17 votes to 61 at the A.G.M..¹⁰²

The post-war conflict between the 'progressives' and Thomas over internal power was influenced throughout by the level of militancy in the industry. During 1919 and the first half of 1920 Thomas's desire to frustrate direct action by the union was out of step with the militant mood of the delegates to A.G.M.s and S.G.M.s. During this period the 'progressives' were able to install C. T. Cramp as Industrial General Secretary and carry policy which should have resulted in Thomas losing one of his most potent weapons - recourse to the press in opposition to union policy. With the first signs of recession, and real doubts about support for the miners in non-militant areas during the autumn and winter of 1920, Thomas found support amongst a growing number of grass

¹⁰²R.R., 22.7.21.

roots railway workers for his resistance to strike action. In November he justified his opposition to the Executive by alleging that the union's policy was being "...dictated by an active minority."¹⁰³ By mid 1921 the change in mood was complete. The Left could no longer command support amongst the majority of delegates to the A.G.M.. By now the wartime position had been reversed and the Executive was to the left of the A.G.M.. As unemployment on the railways mounted after Black Friday strikes over railway worker's own conditions were firmly off the agenda and 'political' direct action was a complete non-starter.

The record outlined above appears to suggest that Thomas ruled the N.U.R. almost single handed. During the early post-war years Thomas successfully frustrated the aspirations of the 'progressives' in the most significant area of policy - the control of industrial action. The N.U.R. engaged in only one national strike during this period and even on that occasion Thomas managed to frustrate 'progressive' hopes for sympathetic action from the Triple Alliance. Moreover, for the most part he proved able to repulse attacks on his almost total freedom of action, despite 'progressive' domination of the Executive and A.G.M. during 1919 and 1920. However, it would be wrong to suggest that Thomas had things entirely his own way. There were many occasions when Thomas found his arguments rejected by delegate bodies and the Executive. What is more, his control of the union's machinery did not give him *carte blanche* to ignore those decisions with which he disagreed. In 1916 Thomas argued long and very hard against a proposal to change the union's bank from the National Provincial to the C.W.S., but he was defeated. The General Secretary was a strong advocate of the introduction of Whitley Councils. The A.G.M. of 1918 rejected the Whitley scheme by 59 votes to 1, which

¹⁰³R.R., 19.11.20.

prevented Thomas from negotiating the introduction of any such system upon the railways.¹⁰⁴ In 1919 any hopes that Thomas may have held that the N.U.R. might play a part in the National Industrial Conference were also dashed by the A.G.M. which declared that "...no useful purpose is served by collusion with the employers through the Government to maintain the existing order of society."¹⁰⁵

The 'progressives' could also point to other successes in their struggle with Thomas. These would include influence over pay demands and the National Programme; the establishment of the post of Industrial General Secretary; the removal of the Executive's right to settle; and the elevated constitutional position of the District Councils. And yet while these impositions were not insignificant it is difficult to deny the overbearing influence of Thomas during these years. He may have been forced to submit pay demands which had been dictated by the left-wing but he retained control of the negotiations. And while some of the initial compromises reached were rejected by the delegate body ultimately he was always able to persuade and cajole enough delegates to oppose strike action, however unhappy they might have been with the settlement. Despite the attempts to undermine his power through the post of Industrial General Secretary, Thomas remained the supreme head of the union. Indeed all the changes made in order to increase activist control of the union ultimately foundered against a combination of Thomas's enormous popularity amongst the ordinary members of the union, his ability to mobilise opinion through the press, and his control over the implementation of policy at Head Office.

¹⁰⁴R.R., 28.6.18.

¹⁰⁵R.R., 27.6.19.

(c)

All this implies that the early development of the N.U.R. provides support for the quotation by Van Gore in the introduction to part IV of this chapter. Thomas's evident authority within the union might be described as an extreme vindication of Van Gore's suggestion that "...the centralisation of union power acquired monolithic proportions..."¹⁰⁶ However, any perspective which viewed the union's leadership as a monolithic block would be greatly misleading. Such an approach immediately runs up against the problem of defining who or what actually constitutes the leadership 'monolith'. The work of Pribicevic and to a lesser extent Bagwell, not unreasonably, include the Executive as part of the union's leadership. However, after the war part of the leadership fell under left wing control and from 1918 it became involved in a protracted and bitter struggle with another part of the 'monolith' in the form of J. H. Thomas. Indeed by 1921 the Executive was far more anxious to undermine Thomas's position than either the majority of activists represented at the A.G.M. or the branch membership.¹⁰⁷

Even if the leadership is defined as the full-time officers of the union rather than elected lay members severe problems remain. Thomas commenced life as a railway employee and had risen through the ranks of the union hierarchy to reach General Secretary in 1916. We might ask at what point he stopped being an activist and became part of the

¹⁰⁶ Van Gore, in Wrigley, 1982, op. cit., p. 66.

¹⁰⁷ At the 1921 A.G.M. it was the Executive who argued that Thomas's role should be confined to political work only, the A.G.M. rejected any such reduction of power. R.R., 22.7.21.

leadership? The answer might reasonably be at the point at which he became a full-time salaried official. However, other union activists who had followed a similar - if less distinguished - path to salaried offices were bitterly opposed to Thomas's personal authority and political approach. The most obvious example was that of C. T. Cramp who was elected Industrial General Secretary at the close of 1919. Cramp claimed to be a "materialist" who was strongly influenced by the teachings of Marx and Engels. During his period as President of the N.U.R. from 1918-1919, Cramp gained great notoriety in press and political circles for his militant stance. In 1918 he predicted a "...trial of strength..." between labour and capital after the war, and declared his greatest pride would "...be in seeing the National Union of Railwaymen in the van of the working class army." In 1919 he rejected the notion that unions "...ought to submit to whatever conditions that may be imposed by Parliament and await an opportunity to obtain a great majority in the House of Commons..." Cramp clearly favoured direct action as an alternative. This stance placed Cramp in direct opposition to Thomas over the fundamental issue facing contemporary trade unionism. In spring 1919 Cramp warned that if labour was "...going to make progress it must mean something in the nature of a social revolution...", something which he strongly supported. In the summer of the same year Cramp was widely attacked in the press for making the allegedly seditious statement in his Presidential address that "...the centre of gravity is passing from the House of Commons to the headquarters of the great Trade Unions."¹⁰⁸

As President of the union Cramp held views almost diametrically

¹⁰⁸R.R., 4.1.18.; R.R., 28.2.19.; A.G.M. 16-20.6.19. p. 7; R.R., 20.6.19.

opposed to those of the General Secretary J. H. Thomas. When the proposals were made to divide the post of General Secretary in late 1919 outside commentators described the episode as a "...duel between Mr. Thomas and Mr. Cramp for the leadership of the National Union of Railwaymen..."¹⁰⁹ Even after Cramp had taken up office as Industrial General Secretary under the supervision of Thomas who remained overall head of the union the two men remained in conflict with one another during 1920. In June and October Cramp's attempts - in line with Executive policy - to engage the N.U.R. in industrial action involved him in bitter struggles with Thomas. In the light of the profound divisions within the leadership - however defined - of the N.U.R. over these years it is surely not possible to describe that group as in any meaningful sense monolithic.

(d)

What then of the contention, that the centralisation of internal union authority was imposed upon unions by "exogenous" changes in the system of industrial relations.¹¹⁰ In this perspective the conciliation schemes which grew rapidly in number and scope during the early decades of the twentieth century came to represent a significant constraint on working class militancy and an element in workers' overall subordination in capitalist society. Thus the process is depicted as an unwanted imposition enforced by a coalition of capital, state and 'incorporated' trade union leaders. Consequently lay trade unionists play a passive role in the growth of centralisation in both industrial relations and union government. Whatever its relevance for other industries such an

¹⁰⁹R.R., 14.11.19.

¹¹⁰See the introduction to Section II.

interpretation seems to be largely inappropriate in the case of the railways and in particular the N.U.R. for the reasons outlined below.

In the railway industry union attitudes during the early part of this century to institutionalised conciliation were largely conditioned by bitterly anti-union employers who had steadfastly refused to grant recognition to trade union representatives. Against this background the main thrust of union aspiration was to secure recognition from the employers, therefore any conciliation scheme which involved negotiation between union representatives and employers was regarded as significant progress for the union. Very far from reacting to exogenous pressures for greater centralisation from an industry with a highly concentrated pattern of ownership it was often the unions who forced the pace towards a more centralised structure. The early conciliation agreements on the railways in 1907 and 1911 were extracted from employers under the pressure of industrial action either threatened or in progress. The state too appears to have played a role in securing concessions designed to ensure social harmony from railway directors who remained reluctant to grant any hint of recognition to the unions.¹¹¹ One of the critical problems faced by the rail unions was their persistent weakness on large sections of the rail network. On both the Caledonian and Irish railways the employers were vigorously anti-union and anxious to resist the application to their companies of national settlements with the unions. This regional weakness was one reason why the unions were so keen to introduce centralised negotiations in order to be able to enforce national agreements in areas where the union had little effective bargaining power. Indeed so far from the employers pressurising unions

¹¹¹See G. Alderman, 'The Railway Companies and the Growth of Trade Unionism in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries', HISTORICAL JOURNAL, Vol. 14, 1971, pp. 129-52.

into centralised bargaining structures it was the unions who had to engage in strike action to enforce the introduction into Ireland and Scotland of the centrally negotiated 1907 conciliation scheme.¹¹²

Certainly it was true that the rail unions, and in particular the N.U.R., were far from satisfied with the 1907 or 1911 schemes. In 1913 the N.U.R. and A.S.L.E. & F. gave notice of their desire to terminate the existing agreement with the companies. However, the intention was to improve and extend the conciliation procedures rather than dismantle them. The N.U.R. sought to eliminate the grade and sectional negotiations by establishing one composite board for each railway, this policy was consistent with their desire to centralise bargaining as far as possible.

Right up to February 1915 employers steadfastly refused to negotiate railworkers' wages directly with union representatives. Once again the state played a prominent role in encouraging employers to make this major concession. Throughout the war and the period of reconstruction the principal concern of the union was to ensure that negotiations continued at a national centralised level. And again when the post-war arrangements were finalised in November 1919 the twin pressures of strike action and the state had been brought to bear on the employers. This is not to argue that some employers did not perceive any advantage in a centralised formal bargaining system. However, the membership of the N.U.R. was far more unanimous and unequivocal than the employers in the belief that such a system contained substantial benefits for them.

¹¹²Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., p. 276.

It would be a mistake to view the N.U.R.'s support for centralised collective bargaining as having been dictated by a leadership anxious to enhance its prestige and authority upon an unwilling or even sceptical 'rank and file'. Even the active syndicalists on the railway did not dismiss formal conciliation out of hand because any step towards recognition was widely regarded as a victory for the union. Charles Watkins, the leading syndicalist in the railway industry, did not oppose the 1907 scheme on any general view that coalition should be rejected out of hand as a compromise with capital, but rather on the specific ground that it resulted in the institutionalisation of grade divisions through sectional negotiating boards.¹¹³

Neither was it the case, as recently argued by Clegg, that the wartime centralisation of bargaining procedures provoked discontent amongst militant sections of the N.U.R.. Clegg suggests that:

One cause of the tension between the executive and the districts was the wartime innovation of national bargaining over pay.¹¹⁴

In fact it was the District Councils movement which pressed for ever greater degrees of centralisation in collective bargaining. The complaint amongst the District Councils was that the union's negotiators adopted an insufficiently militant stance. There was almost no opposition to the idea of a centralised system of national bargaining in any section of the union. When debating a proposed new conciliation scheme in 1915 and 1916 the delegate conferences did not even contemplate any return to bargaining at a company or district level. Rather it was the failure of union negotiators to extract agreements

¹¹³Pribicevic, D. Phil., 1957, op. cit., pp. 144-45.

¹¹⁴H. Clegg, A HISTORY OF BRITISH TRADE UNIONS SINCE 1889, VOLUME II 1911-39, 1985, p. 177.

which were sufficiently centralised that provoked the opposition of the 'progressives' on the District Councils. Union policy, for the most part supported by 'progressives', had for some time favoured the nationalisation of the railways - partly in the hope of achieving standardised conditions for railworkers. Having failed to secure nationalisation by 1921 the N.U.R. executive - still led by the 'progressives' - strongly favoured the retention of a centralised conciliation system, principally because this would allow them to maintain the hard won standard rates of pay.

To what extent was the extensive support for the centralisation of pay bargaining within the N.U.R. merely a response to the progressive concentration of capital? The need to consolidate railway labour organisations against attack from an increasingly smaller number of companies was a case often heard in union circles before World War I. However, viewed from the employers' standpoint the amalgamation of railway companies was advocated in order "...to unite in fighting the demands of labour."¹¹⁵ It is worth considering to what extent consolidation on the union side was a consequence or a cause of railway amalgamation. A brief outline of the timetable of centralisation provides an indication of the line of causation. The N.U.R. was established in 1913 as an attempt to create one union for all railworkers. Although, as Bagwell points out, the N.U.R. was not a creation of syndicalist influence, pre-war militants played a determining role in ensuring that the principle of industrial unionism was enshrined in its constitution.¹¹⁶ While there was some pre-war consolidation on the employers side it hardly compares with that

¹¹⁵Daily Express, 22.9.1908., quoted in Alderman, op. cit., p. 144.

¹¹⁶Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., pp. 327; 330-31; 334.

attempted by the N.U.R.. During the post-war struggles over nationalisation the union favoured a unitary system of ownership while the employers fought to retain the independence of individual companies. Even once nationalisation had been removed from the agenda the N.U.R. continued to press for the amalgamation of rail companies. Eventually the 1921 Railways Act introduced a major restructuring in which four main groups were established bringing together twenty-six 'constituent' companies and almost one hundred 'subsidiary' companies.¹¹⁷ This timetable hardly lends support to the argument that the centralisation amongst and within rail unions was a response to capitalist concentration.

The strategy of centralisation employed by the N.U.R. proved highly effective during this period. Wartime national settlements, and in particular the standardisation agreement of January 1920, established very substantial advances in pay and conditions for rail workers in the regions where the union had been weak. Indeed, far from centralisation being enforced by employers, as soon as control was returned to the companies they set about eroding the gains made under national agreements by the introduction of reductions area by area during the first half of 1921. The most vigorous assaults on wage levels inevitably took place in regions such as Scotland where the unions remained at their weakest.¹¹⁸ Clearly there was every reason for the membership of the N.U.R. to favour a highly centralised system of industrial relations.

¹¹⁷E. A. Pratt, *BRITISH RAILWAYS AND THE GREAT WAR*, Vol. II, 1921, pp. 1150-51.

¹¹⁸Bagwell, 1963, op. cit., pp. 420-21.

In the case of the N.U.R. we might well reverse the contentions made by some historians concerning centralised collective bargaining structures. Rather than unions being pressed by "exogenous" forces into a centralised structure which involved their subordination to employers and/or the state, it was the union which strove to press an often unwilling set of still divided employers to agree to a centralised system. The combination of union and state pressure played a significant part in persuading the rail companies to agree to national pay and conditions negotiations with the unions. The main goal of militants in the N.U.R. was not to destroy or undermine institutionalised conciliation schemes. Instead they sought to extend the degree of centralisation in collective bargaining and their control over decision making within those structures.

V. Conclusion.

What does the record of these years tell us about the roles of the various actors and groups highlighted in the course of this chapter? A central finding has been that a simple dichotomy between rank and file and leaders is inappropriate. Neither of these groups performed in a uniform manner or held a shared view of their own interests as being necessarily opposed to those of the other group. The leadership was deeply divided over critical issues. An Executive which was dominated by the Left from 1919 and an Industrial General Secretary such as C. T. Cramp underlines the limitations of a perspective which treats leadership as a consistent whole with persistently conservative attitudes. As for the 'rank and file' the great bulk of trade unionists who remained largely inactive cannot be described as having possessed a consistent corporate view over this period. Similarly, active N.U.R. members did not have a set of interests, subjective or objective, which

placed them necessarily in opposition to the leadership of the union. On closer study even the 'progressive' activists were found to be divided on fundamental issues of reform.

The policies and activity of the 'progressives' in the N.U.R. have usually been assumed to be those of the 'rank and file' often simply because they opposed the established leadership. In fact the 'progressives', and indeed activists generally, recognised a clear distinction between themselves and the 'rank and file'. This distinction was apparent in 'progressive' attempts to improve accountability, which, although couched in terms of increased rank and file power, were in fact intended to extend their own authority. There were agitations, which sought to introduce membership ballots largely in the hope of increasing membership involvement in union affairs.¹¹⁹ These gained little support amongst the vast bulk of activists worried that a membership influenced by the capitalist press would prove insufficiently militant. The ordinary members were not to be trusted; instead reliance was to be placed on the "live" or "active and intelligent" members who attended union meetings. One local activist reflected the views of a majority of his fellows when he opined:

Frankly, I do not think our membership at the present moment possesses the ability to think clearly and accurately for itself, and that being so, our policy must be shaped by that section or sections that does the thinking for the mass...¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ See, for example, the article by W.T.A. Foot, Secretary of the London District Council, in R.R., 17.5.18.. And the attempt by some South Wales branches to permit the membership to decide settlements by ballot which was rejected at the A.G.M. in 1916 by 47 votes to 3.

¹²⁰ R.R., 21.1.21. Letter from A. Oliver (Chair, Nine Elms Branch of the N.U.R.). Other examples of this attitude can be found in the R.R., 26.11.15. - letter from F. Stevens, Carlisle; R.R., 3.10.19. - Report of the West Midlands District Council; and in P. J. Maguire, 'The Impact of Unofficial Trades Union Movements and Industrial Politics, 1915-22', D. Phil. Sussex, 1984, p. 306.

The traditional image of a 'rank and file' enjoined in battle with the leadership implies that gains for the former might involve a democratisation of the union structures. In fact the attitudes of the 'progressive activists' towards the bulk of inactive members, for the most part, betrayed its own form of elitism. A better way of understanding the 'progressives' would be to view them as an alternative leadership engaged in a struggle to wrest control from Thomas and his 'moderate' allies. The so called 'rank and file' were in reality a group, or groups, of activists engaged in a struggle for the power to introduce their own policies. In essence the N.U.R.'s internal conflict during the war and aftermath more closely resembled a battle between Left and Right for power within the government of the union than a struggle between a universally militant rank and file held in check by a uniformly conservative leadership.

This chapter has also offered some criticisms of certain well established accounts of the growth of centralisation in industrial relations. The picture of employers and union leaders acting in concert to impose a centralised system against the interests of the 'rank and file' is far too simplistic. In the railway industry the lines of affiliation usually conflicted sharply with this pattern. Thus union officials and leading figures from the unofficial movement were in agreement over the potential benefits of a centralised system. For much of the period it was the union, spearheaded by the most militant activists, which attempted to increase the pace of centralisation. Many

employers, on the other hand, sought to resist centralisation in order to retain their autonomy in bargaining over pay and conditions. Furthermore, the attempt to build a unitary structure on the union side, via the establishment of the N.U.R., pre-dates the advent of centralised collective bargaining in the industry. It is difficult therefore to see a centralised union structure as simply a response to changes in the industrial relations system. The union itself and in particular those activists who were strong advocates of centralisation should be accorded a more positive role in any explanation of the changing structure of industrial relations and union government during the first twenty years of this century.

A feature of the period under study was the ability of lay activists to impose their will upon the N.U.R.. For much of the war 'progressives' exercised substantial influence over pay campaigns and the general policy of the union. After the war the leaders of this group had a more direct grip on power having captured control of the Executive. The main strength of the 'progressives' lay in their ability to mobilise support amongst the active layers of the union for elections to conferences and the Executive. The success of these operations was dependent on a variety of factors, the principal ones being the level of militancy and the strength of local or regional informal organisation by the 'progressives'. Winning control over significant sections of the machinery of the union was one thing, securing the N.U.R.'s place in the front rank of an army of labour engaged in an aggressive struggle with capital was quite another. In this aim the 'progressives' were frustrated time and again by J. H. Thomas, who was repeatedly able to frustrate or constrain 'progressive' attempts to extend or initiate strike action. On occasion this involved the use of his bureaucratic powers as General Secretary. During the war Thomas used his powers of

persuasion to head off demands for strike action at a series of delegate conferences. After the war he resorted to appeals to the membership through the press in defiance of the decisions of the union's governing bodies. Thus it would be misleading to suggest that this placed Thomas in opposition to the rank and file of the union. In fact his main strength lay in support amongst broad sections of the union's membership. Thomas combined this personal loyalty with the traditional conservatism of certain districts of the union to undermine 'progressive' control over the Executive and delegate conferences. Hence, despite the responsiveness of the union structure to pressure from the union's left wing, ultimately Thomas was able to employ the power of his office together with his personal prestige and popularity to frustrate the former's central goal. This conclusion lends some credence to the perspective which perceives union leaders, or more specifically their General Secretaries, as oligarchs or 'managers of discontent'. Whether that view can be applied more broadly to other branches of trade unionism will be explored in the following chapters on the Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen and the South Wales Miners' Federation.

CHAPTER VI.THE ASSOCIATED SOCIETY OF LOCOMOTIVE ENGINEERS AND FIREMEN.**Introduction.**

The Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (henceforth A.S.L.E. & F.) organised drivers, firemen and cleaners on all United Kingdom railways. These three groups made up the locomotive grades promotion line. A.S.L.E. & F. made no attempt to recruit among other railway grades such as the signalmen, guards, porters and permanent-way men who were organised exclusively by the N.U.R. after its formation in 1913. As an industrial union the N.U.R. claimed the right to organise all railworkers including the locomotive grades. Thus from 1913 A.S.L.E. & F. faced stiff competition for members from the N.U.R.. Nevertheless membership of A.S.L.E. & F. increased much in line with the general level of railway trade unionism amidst the enthusiasm during the aftermath of the 1911 strike. In 1910 with only 19,800 members A.S.L.E. & F. organised under 30% of workers in the locomotive grades. By 1917 membership had almost doubled to 36,704, however, this still represented under half of those eligible. Membership continued to increase at a dramatic pace up to 1920 by which time A.S.L.E. & F. claimed 75,000 members. The years from 1917 to 1920 witnessed the final triumph of the Associated Society over the N.U.R. in the battle to recruit the locomotive grades. A.S.L.E. & F. had always been very well represented among the best paid drivers on the main trunk lines; by 1920 it had reached a similar position of strength throughout the locomotive

promotion line including among firemen and cleaners.¹

The structure of the Associated Society was broadly similar to many others in the British trade union movement. The basic unit of organisation was the local branch run by lay activists. As will become clear District organisation was not a permanent feature in A.S.L.E. & F. although it was of growing significance during our period. The governing body of the union was the Annual Assembly of Delegates (henceforth A.A.D.) composed of lay delegates elected by groups of branches. A thirteen member lay Executive Committee was charged with the implementation of policy laid down by the A.A.D.. Members of the Executive were elected by membership ballot for a term of three years after which they were forced to stand for re-election. The Executive was also responsible for the supervision of the full-time General and Organising Secretaries at head office. The latter were invariably former lay activists themselves who had risen through the ranks of the union and like the Executive were elected by membership ballot. Salaried officials, however, were not subject to re-election.

This chapter is concerned with the ability of this structure to cope with the pressures imposed firstly by war and subsequently by the industrial unrest between 1918 and 1921. These two periods are considered consecutively in parts one and two of this chapter. These sections have two main concerns. Firstly, did the centralisation of industrial relations meet with the disapproval of the 'rank and file' and lead to alienation from the official structure and the growth of

¹A.S.L.E. & F. Annual Reports 1914-21; Locomotive Journal, August 1922, p. 317. G.D.H. Cole & R. P. Arnot, TRADE UNIONISM ON THE RAILWAYS, 1917, p. 13; J. R. Raynes, ENGINES AND MEN, 1921, p. 282; H. A. Clegg, A HISTORY OF BRITISH TRADE UNIONS SINCE 1889, Vol. II, 1911-33, 1985.

informal organisation? And secondly, how influential were A.S.L.E. & F.'s members in shaping the structure and policy of the union? Throughout the war and post-war years the critical power and policy debates within A.S.L.E. & F. were inextricably linked with the conduct of pay and conditions campaigns. Consequently, debates over union government and pay are discussed in tandem in the first two parts of this chapter. A third and final section assesses to what extent the Executive and General Secretary in A.S.L.E. & F. conform to the stereotype of labour leadership as necessarily conservative.

I. Power, Pay and Activists in A.S.L.E. & F., 1914-18.

During the war years A.S.L.E. & F. members reflected the movements in the tide of militancy experienced elsewhere in the industrial workforce. Protests over long hours, food prices and the inability of wages to keep pace with inflation were a commonplace in the records of the union at every level.² However, amongst many contemporaries A.S.L.E. & F. retained its reputation for moderation well into the war. As late as 1917 G.D.H. Cole and R.P. Arnot emphasised the image of A.S.L.E. & F. as a highly conservative body in the following terms:

...caution is exemplified in its rules, in accordance with which no withdrawal of labour may take place without the consent of four-fifths of the members employed on the railway system in question and of the Executive Committee.³

In fact the growing radicalisation of footplate staff had already led to the alteration of that clause of the constitution at the rules revision

²See for example the Minutes of the Sheffield No.1 Branch of A.S.L.E. & F. 30.7.16.; 10.9.16.; 11.2.17.; 29.7.17.; 19.8.17.; 22.9.18.; 1.12.18.. And Minutes of the Annual Assembly of Delegates, 1915-18, *passim*.

³G.D.H. Cole & R. P. Arnot, *TRADE UNIONISM ON THE RAILWAYS*, 1917, p. 45.

conference of 1915. The new rule reduced the numbers required to endorse the strike to 75% and, more significantly, provided the Executive with the power to initiate a strike without a ballot if invited to do so by the "...general opinion of the branches..."⁴ This placed A.S.L.E. & F. in line with, among others, the N.U.R. by enabling the Executive to call lightning strikes.

The belief that A.S.L.E. & F. was merely a timid and uninfluential junior partner of the giant N.U.R. in railway industrial relations was finally dispelled by A.S.L.E. & F.'s threatened national strike over the demand for an eight hour day during August 1917. Although the N.U.R. had already reached agreement with the government and railway employers A.S.L.E. & F. refused to settle without a concession on the question of hours. The union was villified in the press for endangering the war effort. The strike was declared illegal and the union's leaders were faced with the threat of imprisonment. Nevertheless the union refused to back down until the government was finally persuaded to make the significant concession of a written promise that a reduction in hours would receive the "...immediate and sympathetic consideration of the government..." within one month of the cessation of hostilities.⁵ John Bromley, A.S.L.E. & F.'s General Secretary claimed his union had brought the introduction of the eight hour day forward by ten years.⁶

It is impossible to judge how effective the strike might have been, although the strength of resolve amongst branches and the Special

⁴Minutes of the Annual Assembly of Delegates, 1915, pp. 293-94.

⁵Locomotive Journal, October 1917, p. 329. Letter from Sir Albert Stanley, President of the Board of Trade to John Bromley, General Secretary of A.S.L.E. & F., 21.8.17.

⁶The Times, 21.8.17.

Assembly of Delegates suggests that at least a partial shutdown of the rail network was likely. 'The Times' cited the singing of 'The Red Flag' at the close of the conference which affirmed the strike decision, as evidence that "...some of the younger railwaymen are actuated by revolutionary opinions and would eagerly use the strike as a means of embarrassing the Government."⁷ Whatever the truth of such statements there was no escaping the fact that A.S.L.E. & F. had now to be recognised as a significant and militant force in railway industrial relations.⁸

In essence the wartime pressures on A.S.L.E. & F. were very much the same as those encountered by the N.U.R.. Both unions experienced a rising tide of unrest over pay, hours and conditions amongst the membership at the same time as a rapid centralisation of collective bargaining procedures. As outlined earlier, it has been argued that such a mixture created substantial internal trade union conflict between accomodationist leaders and a radical rank and file.⁹ However, in A.S.L.E. & F. there is little evidence of any increase in internal conflict during the war.

Activists in A.S.L.E. & F. appeared to find little need for informal or independent local organisation. District Councils in A.S.L.E. & F. had been in existence during the early years of the century and had played a prominent part in the pre-war eight hours agitations on the railways. However, their militant stance had brought

⁷The Times, 20.8.17.

⁸The prominent part played by A.S.L.E. & F. members in the unofficial strike in South Wales during September 1918 further underlined the change.

⁹For a fuller discussion see the Introduction to Section II above.

the District Councils into conflict with the - at that time right wing - Executive of the union and they had been disbanded. So that on the outbreak of war in 1914 there was no official District organisation within A.S.L.E. & F.¹⁰ With the exception of the strictly local activity of the 'Conference of South Wales Branches' there was no attempt to revive District organisation until the latter half of 1917. In several areas Councils operated unofficially during 1917 and early 1918 before they were established under rule at the Annual Assembly of Delegates in 1918.¹¹

Even during the later war years there was no sense of any internal struggle over the issue of District Councils and their powers. The union's leadership, including the General Secretary, favoured the reintroduction of District Councils at the 1918 A.A.D.. It is possible that the leadership was motivated by a desire to control district organisation by bringing it within the bounds of the constitution. However, several of A.S.L.E. & F.'s wartime Executive had been prominent pre-war lay supporters of District Councils. Moreover, those who led the wartime district organisations were most anxious to secure official recognition. It seems unlikely therefore that the 1918 decision was aimed at the emasculation of District Councils; in the event the opposite was the case as district organisation thrived in the post-war years.

¹⁰Annual Assembly of Delegates, May 1918, pp. 564-65. Speech by Bromley "Nearly seventeen years ago I formed one [District Council] in the West Midlands District... They failed because of interfering with the policy of the Society and running counter to the Executive Committee."

¹¹The unofficial South Wales organisation issued vigorous verbal protests against the industrial truce in the summer of 1916. However, its activities were restricted to the area of the coalfield. Locomotive Journal, November 1916, p. 468. A.A.D., May 1918, pp. 564-65.

Whatever its motives it was clear that the leadership of A.S.L.E. & F. reacted in a far more sympathetic manner to the activities of their own left wing than did the N.U.R. leadership. Unlike the N.U.R. there were no attempts by the A.S.L.E. & F. Executive to fine or discipline members who were engaged in informal organisation. District Councils although unofficial for most of the war conducted their business unhindered by headquarters and the Executive was apparently quite willing to debate resolutions submitted by informal organisations such as the Conference of South Wales Branches. This contrasts with the long battle by the officially recognised N.U.R. District Councils to have their resolutions considered by the Executive Committee. When District Councils were established in the A.S.L.E. & F. rule book there was no attempt by the Executive to force branches into particular areas - a cause of much disquiet in the N.U.R. - rather branches were given the opportunity to affiliate to whichever District they chose.¹²

The only wartime attempt to restrict activist propaganda concerned a ban on the issue of internal circulars charged to the union's funds without the prior permission of head office. The ban was principally intended to prevent one particular branch - Neasden - which had come under the control of the 'One Union Movement' from distributing N.U.R. propaganda using A.S.L.E. & F. funds. Even though other left wing branches were affected the measure clearly had the support of the overwhelming majority of lay activists in the union who endorsed the ban 'nem con' at the 1917 A.A.D..¹³

¹² A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1918, pp. 564-65: Railway Review, 21.1.16.; 30.6.16.

¹³ A.A.D., 1917, p. 465. See also Executive Minutes, Nos. 65 (May 1916); 67 (Jan 1917).

This low level of internal unofficial organisation in A.S.L.E. & F. cannot be explained without reference to the wider context of wartime bargaining over pay and conditions on the railways. We might expect the special conditions of war to provoke a particularly high level of unrest amongst the footplate grades organised in A.S.L.E. & F.. Longer working hours were a particularly keenly felt grievance among footplate grades as the war economy made ever greater demands on the rail system and the requirements of the armed forces reduced the number of men able to cope with the increased traffic. Longer hours resulted in increasing numbers of A.S.L.E. & F. men regularly being required to lodge away from home. Lodging away became a burning issue during the war amongst drivers and firemen on the long distance routes because of the added difficulty of obtaining food in a strange town during periods of shortage - this was particularly problematic in the industrial centres where railwaymen were most likely to be lodged.¹⁴ More significantly, the 'aristocrats' of railway labour in common with the engineers - that most militant of wartime groups - experienced a rapid erosion of wage differentials. A succession of flat rate war bonus agreements narrowed the pay differential between drivers and all other major grades on the railway very sharply between 1914 and 1920. Thus, while the maximum rate for a porter amounted to only 69% of the driver's maximum in 1914, by 1920 that proportion had risen to 88%.¹⁵

Despite this accumulation of grievances and the wartime constraints upon trade union activity, internal conflict remained at a minimum within A.S.L.E. & F. between 1914 and 1918. This is not to argue that

¹⁴Locomotive Journal, June 1917, p. 189.

¹⁵Calculated from, LABOUR AND CAPITAL ON THE RAILWAYS - STUDIES IN LABOUR AND CAPITAL, No. IV; Labour Research Department, 1923, p. 64.

there were no expressions of discontent or dissatisfaction with the performance of the union's leadership during the war. On the contrary. However, one cannot fail to be struck by the contrasting relationships between leaders and led in the N.U.R. and A.S.L.E. & F.. In large part the lack of internal conflict in A.S.L.E. & F. resulted from the substantially common ground shared by the union's leadership and left wing activists. This was amply demonstrated by the conduct of pay negotiations between 1914 and 1918.

Internally union opinion was divided over pay campaign strategy which resulted in a struggle over the contents of the A.S.L.E. & F. National Programme. The view of traditionalists within A.S.L.E. & F. was that pay claims should be based exclusively upon the craft skill of the locomotive drivers and the responsibility of their position. They aimed to retain or even extend lengthy lines of promotion and steeply graduated pay scales which rewarded drivers' long service. This traditional approach by reinforcing drivers' high wage differential gave little encouragement to the firemen and cleaner grades which were also organised within A.S.L.E. & F.. The union's left wing, however, favoured an alternative strategy. They sought to shift the emphasis of the National Programme away from craft exclusivity towards the 'right' of workers to a living wage. The Left sought to draw the firemen and cleaner grades into a common campaign by submitting flat rate across the board pay claims. This approach had the advantage of combating N.U.R. efforts to lure firemen away from A.S.L.E. & F. by refuting the charge that A.S.L.E. & F. were concerned solely with the interests of the drivers. The propaganda functions of the union's National Programme also led the Left to argue for its simplification. A demand for an increase of a single amount for all grades in A.S.L.E. & F. was designed to galvanise the entire union membership behind a common aim. The

traditional approach involved a lengthy shopping list of demands of differing amounts according to grade and seniority. The content and format of the National Programme lay at the heart of the division between Left and Right within A.S.L.E. & F.. Throughout the years from 1914 to 1918 the Executive and General Secretary sided firmly with the union's left wing - opinion was not divided according to position in the hierarchy of power.

A further prime consideration in setting wage demands was that A.S.L.E. & F. should establish a higher wage bid for the footplate grades than the N.U.R.. For both unions the National Programme became a principal campaigning and recruiting tool. A.S.L.E. & F. therefore included high wage demands in order to prevent the aggressive N.U.R. from making substantial inroads into their membership by attempting to re-establish the differential with the non-footplate grades. The N.U.R.'s ability to submit high wage bids for the footplate grades was limited by their need to retain parity between so many grades. The N.U.R. signalmen in particular resented any attempt to increase drivers' differentials and repeatedly threatened separate 'signalmen's movements' and even secession from the N.U.R..¹⁶ During the war years the Left's strategy found support from all sides within A.S.L.E. & F.. The union's left wing ideally desired maximum unity across all manual railworkers. In 1914 both the A.S.L.E. & F. and N.U.R. conferences agreed a 5s. flat rate demand for all grades.¹⁷ Such unanimity broke down during the war as relationships between the two unions worsened and the flat rate war bonus awards eroded drivers' pay differentials. Thus for much of the war

¹⁶P. Bagwell, *THE RAILWAYMEN*, 1963, pp. 437-40.

¹⁷G.D.H. Cole & R. P. Arnot, 1917, op. cit., p. 37: A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1914, p. 242.

period A.S.L.E. & F. advanced pay claims which aimed at the erosion of differentials between drivers, firemen and cleaners while re-establishing the pay gap between the footplate grades as a whole and other railworkers.¹⁸ This was a strategy favoured by the dominant groups within both the leadership and the left wing of the union.

In the event, of course, A.S.L.E. & F. failed to secure anything other than War Bonus settlements paid on a flat rate basis across all grades of railworkers. Nevertheless, discontent over wartime pay settlements was rarely directed at the A.S.L.E. & F. leadership. Attempts to remove the Executive Committee's power to settle disputes received very little support at annual conferences. In 1917 the A.A.D. carried by 45 votes to 5 a motion which rejected the introduction of a ballot before settlements and included an expression of the "...utmost confidence... in the Executive Committee..." - this was a common phrase in A.S.L.E. & F. branch and conference resolutions during the First World War.¹⁹

These expressions of confidence were earned by the A.S.L.E. & F. Executive largely because they did not set out to police their membership with anything like the vigour of their counterparts in the N.U.R.. For example at the N.U.R. A.G.M. in 1916 Thomas and his allies in the N.U.R. fought hard to frustrate activist pressure for the union

¹⁸In 1914 the Guards' maximum rate stood at 72.9% of the Drivers' maximum. Had the 1917 National Programmes of both unions been implemented Guards' wages would have been only 66.6% of the Drivers'.

¹⁹Minutes of the A.A.D., 1917, p. 468. For other examples see Sheffield No.1 Branch Minutes, 13.5.17.; 9.12.17.; 'Meeting of Liverpool District Branches' in Locomotive Journal November 1916; Resolutions & Decisions of the Executive Committee, No. 71, 31.12.17-24.1.18., p. 35. In 1916 and 1918 similar attempts to substitute a ballot for Executive Committee authority received only 12 and 9 votes respectively. See Minutes of the A.A.D., 1916, p. 305, & 1918, pp. 628-29.

to submit a pay claim and thereby break the October 1915 railway truce agreement. In sharp contrast the A.S.L.E. & F. leadership supported similar demands from their own branches. The General Secretary indicated to the A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D. in 1916 that the Executive no longer felt bound by the terms of the agreement they had signed only seven months before. He said:-

I am in perfect sympathy with Conference and the members generally that while we have given our Pledge... we gave that Pledge at a time when prices were at a certain level. The Government have permitted their Capitalistic friends to bleed the workers of the country, and we can safely say that as circumstances have changed, we must ask for something else as a perfect right...²⁰

This was characteristic of wartime leadership attitudes in A.S.L.E. & F.. Rather than seeking to restrain 'rank and file' desires for strike action during the war the leadership frankly believed that whenever they desired to adopt a more aggressive industrial relations strategy the principal restraint was grass roots patriotism.²¹

The leadership in A.S.L.E. & F. also adopted a far more lenient attitude towards unofficial activity during the war. As already noted, District Councils, although outside the constitution were given a free rein. On those occasions when activists broke the union's rules the Executive Committee confined itself to publishing relatively mild criticism of the perpetrators. The A.S.L.E. & F. Executive Committee did not follow the N.U.R.'s approach of imposing fines on their errant

²⁰ A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1916, pp. 20-21.

²¹ See, for example, A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1917, pp. 136-39, the speech of John Bromley; and also A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1918, Report of the Executive Committee, pp. 32-36, and pp. 619-21.

activists.²² Even when A.S.L.E. & F. members were involved in unofficial strike activity the leadership made no attempt to discipline them. Indeed in 1918 it took an injunction issued by the Board of Trade to prevent A.S.L.E. & F. paying out strike pay.²³ The unofficial strike in South Wales during September 1918, which involved both A.S.L.E. & F. and N.U.R. members, resulted in the temporary resignation of Thomas and a major crisis within the N.U.R..²⁴ The reaction in A.S.L.E. & F. was rather different. The union's President told the 1919 A.A.D. that "...your Executive Committee recognised at the time that it was one of the finest exhibitions of comradeship and fraternity, and showed the adhesion which was in the trade union ranks..."²⁵

The wartime centralisation of industrial relations did not result in a growing conflict between leaders and led in A.S.L.E. & F.. There was no concerted attempt by the union's left wing to transfer power away from the executive and or officers of A.S.L.E. & F. into the hands of activists organised at either district or national level. No doubt there was a degree of unofficial organisation amongst the footplate grades. There were quite possibly a number of informal, unofficial meetings of left wing delegates to national conferences. However, the records leave no trace of such activity. There is little, if any, evidence of a substantial body of activists in A.S.L.E. & F. who believed that their

²²For example, A.S.L.E. & F. Executive Committee Minutes, No. 65, 9-10.5.17., p. 4.

²³Executive Committee Resolutions and Decisions, No. 23, 5-18.7.18.

²⁴G. W. Alcock, RAILWAY TRADE UNIONISM, 1922, p. 515.

²⁵A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1919 p. 114. The A.S.L.E. & F. official history, published in 1921, also reflected leadership opinion when it offered this view:- "That strike of September, 1918, was unconstitutional, spasmodic and irregular, yet magnificent, and it gave great strength to the Executive in their negotiations." See J. R. Raynes, ENGINES AND MEN, 1921, p. 231.

interests were in conflict with those of their national leaders. This suggests that the wartime growth of unofficial organisation was not merely an automatic reaction to external pressures, or that increased power at the centre of a union would naturally lead to dissatisfaction and revolt amongst the 'rank and file'.

What is more, like their counterparts in the N.U.R., activists in A.S.L.E. & F. did not oppose the centralisation of negotiating machinery during the war. During 1917 A.S.L.E. & F. drafted a new scheme for presentation to the railway companies designed to replace the conciliation machinery introduced in 1911. A.S.L.E. & F.'s draft of the New Machinery included provision for the Executive and General Secretary to deal with negotiations over hours, pay and conditions. Under the 1911 scheme these matters had been negotiated by a Conciliation Board for each railway. The employees' side of those Boards were elected directly from the workforce and contained both lay and full-time union men. The revised scheme submitted by A.S.L.E. & F. thus represented a considerable centralisation of the negotiation procedure and an increase of power at the centre within the union. Far from disapproving of such a strategy, delegates to the A.A.D. in 1918 pressed the platform for assurances that any new agreement would acknowledge the union's Executive Committee as the central negotiating body of behalf of locomotive workers on all rail lines. The Executive confirmed that this was their intention and pointed out that the rail companies constituted the main obstacle to agreement by their refusal to endorse centralised machinery beyond the period of government regulation. As in the N.U.R., both activists and leadership in A.S.L.E. & F. shared a desire to centralise the industrial relations system on the railways. Centralisation was not being imposed upon a reluctant 'rank and file', rather it was a united train drivers' union which sought to break down

employer resistance to national negotiations.²⁶

How can we account for the closer relationship between activists and leadership in A.S.L.E. & F.? Certainly the constant challenge posed by the N.U.R. in its attempt to establish one union for all railworkers was a significant influence. Perhaps A.S.L.E. & F. adopted an uncharacteristically militant stance in order to discourage defection to the N.U.R.. We have already noted A.S.L.E. & F.'s need to establish a higher pay bid than the N.U.R.. It was argued in N.U.R. circles that A.S.L.E. & F.'s militant stance during August 1917 which extracted the promise of an eight hour day from the government was little more than an "...attempt to attract publicity and to justify the continued separate existence of a craft union."²⁷ It certainly appears to have been a highly effective propaganda coup - A.S.L.E. & F. claimed there was a dramatic surge of applications for membership in the aftermath of the government offer.²⁸ Perhaps also the external threat tended to damp down any internal criticism of the leadership. The tendency to close ranks and avoid criticism of leaders might have been particularly strong in the aftermath of a successful libel action against officers of A.S.L.E. & F. by J. H. Thomas in April 1917.²⁹

²⁶J. R. Raynes, op. cit., pp. 208-10: A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1918, pp. 705-19.

²⁷P. Bagwell, op. cit., 1963, p. 365. This does not appear to have been a view shared by the author but one that Bagwell attributed to "...the Executive Committee and many members of the N.U.R...".

²⁸A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1918, pp. 32-36.

²⁹Bagwell, 1963, op. cit. p. 364. This cloud hung over relationships between the two unions for much of the war, the libel having occurred in June 1915.

Nevertheless the basic explanation was quite simply that A.S.L.E. & F.'s leadership did not act as a dam to working class aspiration because it shared in large part the aspirations and attitudes of the radical majority of the union's activists. The move to the left amongst activists and leadership alike pre-dated the war and indeed the formation of the N.U.R., being rooted in the impact of the 1911 rail strike. It was the willingness of the leadership to respond to activist demands and tread the thin line between illegality and membership patriotism on the one hand and the demands of left wing activists and the tide of discontent provoked by war conditions on the other which account for the lack of internal revolt against centralised authority in A.S.L.E. & F. up to 1918.

II. Power, Pay and Activists in A.S.L.E. & F., 1919-21.

In the early post war years this atmosphere of mutual respect and trust between leaders and led in A.S.L.E. & F. came under increasing stress. During 1919 the general mood of militancy was fully reflected amongst the Locomen. In early February A.S.L.E. & F. members were involved in a strike which halted the London Tube system and disrupted main line services to the south and south-west of the capital. In July the North Eastern Railway suffered a similar fate in a dispute over eyesight tests. Discontent over pay and conditions rumbled on throughout much of the year as the government dragged out negotiations over the standardisation of railworkers pay and conditions. A settlement of the footplate grades' demands was not reached until the end of August. The most significant confrontation of 1919 was, of course, still to come. Despite having reached agreement on their own demands A.S.L.E. & F. joined the N.U.R. in the all-out national rail strike between the 26th

September and 5th October.³⁰

Activist dissatisfaction with the A.S.L.E. & F. leadership grew markedly during the course of the prolonged standardisation negotiations which stretched from 12th February to 28th August. The union's annual conference held in May rejected a proposed settlement against the advice of the Executive Committee. In the course of debates on the negotiations delegates made repeated references to the ability of the Executive Committee and General Secretary to subvert the will of the conference. For the first time in our period the conference resolved to constrain the Executive's right to settle. The Executive Committee were instructed to enter further negotiation "...when, failing any further offer, the whole position to be laid before our members and a ballot taken as to whether they are prepared to strike on a given date to enforce our demands."³¹ Some left wing branches were further alienated by the Executive Committee's decision to reach agreement in August without taking a ballot. They felt that the settlement fell too far short of A.S.L.E. & F.'s National Programme - despite the concession of standardisation of pay upwards.³² The Executive, having secured further concessions, had not contravened the terms of the A.A.D. motion by reaching agreement without recourse to a ballot. Nevertheless, the Executive Committee was perhaps unwise to leave itself open to the charge of being undemocratic in view of the near certainty that a ballot would have endorsed the settlement and the adverse reaction among many activists on the Left.

³⁰ J. R. Raynes, op. cit., pp. 237-69.

³¹ A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 29th & 30th May 1919.

³² See branch report from Preston in Locomotive Journal, October 1919, and Branch Minutes of A.S.L.E. & F. Sheffield No. 1, 31.8.19., where "much dissatisfaction was expressed" at the settlement.

The national rail strike diverted activist attention away from criticism of the leadership during the late Autumn of 1919. A Special Conference to draft a new National Programme in October made no attempt to constrain Executive Committee control of the impending negotiations. However, as in the N.U.R., the standardisation agreement received a mixed reception among the footplate grades. During late 1919 and early 1920 the letters pages and branch reports in the Locomotive Journal reflected growing anger, particularly amongst drivers, over eroded pay differentials.³³ By 1919 the impact of the War Bonus system had resulted in the renunciation of support for flat-rate pay awards in all quarters of the union. The union's National Programmes in the early post war years were presented as an "...effort to regain the position in the labour world previously held by Locomotivemen viz:- that of being amongst the best paid workers..."³⁴ For many of the more experienced drivers the August settlement did little to restore their pre-war position. While A.S.L.E. & F. secured the full amount claimed for those at the bottom of the driver and fireman ladder the award fell some way short of their demand for those with more experience. The maximum-rated driver actually experienced a cut of 1s. per week as a result of the August agreement.³⁵

³³Locomotive Journal, Sept. 1919 - April 1920, passim. For example, the report of the Liverpool District Council stressed the need for "...adequate payment for responsibility..." in Locomotive Journal, March 1920, p. 116.

³⁴Locomotive Journal, April 1919, Report of Organising Secretary, p. 114.

³⁵Locomotive Journal, September 1919, p. 263. The unions submitted a claim for 12s. per day for minimum rated drivers which was granted. However, the maximum rated men were awarded only 14s., the unions having claimed 16s.. See "Memorandum of meeting 8th August 1919 between Railway Executive Committee, and A.S.L.E. & F. and N.U.R. Delegations" and also "Circular letter No. 1937 from Railway Executive Committee Embodying Agreement of August 1919 re Enginemen's Rates of Pay and Conditions of Service."

The mounting pressure for the full restoration of pay differentials placed the leadership of A.S.L.E. & F. in some difficulty. In the aftermath of the impressive display of inter-union solidarity during the 1919 national strike the Executives of both A.S.L.E. & F. and the N.U.R. were keen to extend their collaboration. However, it proved difficult to combine the establishment of a common front with the N.U.R. together with a pay strategy aimed at the restoration of locomotivemen's differentials. In early 1920 the A.S.L.E. & F. Executive Committee again incurred activist anger by submitting a wage claim based not on the National Programme and the restoration of differentials but on the increased cost of living. Discontent spread more widely after the Executive Committee reached a settlement without membership consultation which entailed a flat rate award in common with the N.U.R. grades tied to a sliding scale based on the cost of living. During the negotiations in March A.S.L.E. & F. members in Sheffield had rejected a motion from local left wingers which proposed to tightly restrict the Executive Committee's freedom of action. Instead the branch voted to give "...them [the Executive Committee] our full support to any measure which they deem to be necessary." Within a month, after the settlement had been announced, the branch's attitude to its leaders was somewhat altered. At their very next meeting the Sheffield men censured the Executive Committee and General Secretary and demanded to know:-

...what excuse our Executive Committee have for not enforcing our National Programme before now and if they are afraid of doing so, advise them to resign 'en bloc', and make way for other men who are ³⁶more alive to what our members desire...

³⁶Sheffield A.S.L.E. & F. No. 1, 21.3.20. & 18.4.20.. There were 55 and 49 members recorded as present at the respective meetings.

The March settlement represented the high water mark of grass roots discontent with leadership in A.S.L.E. & F.. The settlement left the wage differential between drivers and other grades at its lowest level in the entire period from 1880 to 1950.³⁷ As in the N.U.R., by the Spring of 1920 eroded differentials proved to be a most disruptive influence upon internal union relationships. Unlike the N.U.R., A.S.L.E. & F. - as a craft based union - was able to respond swiftly and painlessly to membership demands for a strategy geared to the restoration of pay differentials. In view of the protest from around the country A.S.L.E. & F.'s leadership changed the whole approach of the subsequent pay claim. Throughout their submission to the National Railways Wages Board in May 1920 the leadership were anxious to stress that the General Secretary had "...based the claim for an advance not so much on the cost of living as on the fact that those represented were skilled workmen, with responsible and arduous duties to perform..."³⁸

This swift about turn on pay strategy muted protest against leadership conduct of recent pay campaigns. As a result an annual conference resolution critical of the March settlement which demanded the resignation of the Executive Committee and General Secretary received only one vote in its favour. As in 1919 the Executive argued that they had received no specific instructions to immediately submit the union's National Programme which was, of course, geared to the restoration of pay differentials. However, activists were no longer

³⁷ K.G.C.J. Knowles & D. J. Robertson, 'Differences Between the Wages of Skilled and Unskilled Workers, 1880-1950,' BULLETIN OF THE OXFORD INSTITUTE OF STATISTICS, 13, 1951, p. 111: See also LABOUR AND CAPITAL ON THE RAILWAYS, Studies in Labour and Capital No. IV. Prepared by the Labour Research Department, 1923, p. 64.

³⁸ Report of negotiations with National Railways Wages Board, 17th. May 1920, in Locomotive Journal, June 1920, p. 210.

prepared to give the Executive free rein. The experience of previous negotiations led delegates to issue more explicit instructions to their Executive who were constrained to hold a ballot before signing any settlement which fell short of the full National Programme. This resolution, which was carried by 39 votes to 13, was the clearest indication yet of the waning trust of a growing number of activists in the A.S.L.E. & F. leadership.³⁹

In June 1920 the Executive duly conducted a ballot on the government offer as instructed. However, this only served to fuel the fires of discontent in some quarters. Some activists on the union's Left campaigned for the rejection of the award on the grounds that it fell too far short of the National Programme. Despite strong opposition from left wing districts of the union the offer was endorsed by 19,335 to 7,817. Nevertheless, the Executive was once again strongly criticised for having acted in an undemocratic fashion. On this occasion they incurred activist displeasure for having printed on the ballot paper their recommendation that the offer should be accepted. This, it was argued, "unduly influenced the voting".⁴⁰ The appeal from the most militant sections of A.S.L.E. & F. to reject the offer found an echo in so far as it is seldom the case that union members are entirely satisfied with a deal offered by their employers. However, far fewer were prepared to blame the union's leadership for the outcome. Eastleigh - a prominent branch on the union's left - expressed dissatisfaction with the offer which was "...not in keeping with the responsibility and dignity of our profession." But the branch also thanked and

³⁹ A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., Report of Proceedings 1920, pp. 201-12.

⁴⁰ Locomotive Journal, September 1920, Report of District Council No. 15 (Yorkshire): See also Locomotive Journal, August 1920, pp. 298-99; & Sheffield No. 1 A.S.L.E. & F., 1.8.20.

congratulated the General Secretary and Executive for the manner in which they had submitted the union's case.⁴¹

At the annual conference in May 1921 the Executive Committee's decision to accept the sliding scale agreement reached in March 1920 again came under attack. The more so because from the 1st. April 1921 falling price levels had resulted in wage reductions. However, as in 1920, the majority accepted the Executive's defense of their decision and the critical motion was defeated by 35 votes to 14.⁴² While A.S.L.E. & F. members were clearly unhappy with their lot during 1921 as unemployment mounted and wages fell, by this stage only a very small minority felt that the union's leadership was failing in its duty.

In sum, for much of the period from 1919 to 1921 dissatisfaction with leadership over the conduct of pay and conditions negotiations was more keenly expressed than during the war. Nevertheless only briefly, during the Spring of 1920, was this a widespread phenomenon. Only a minority of the most left wing activists developed a generalised mistrust of and opposition to the Executive over pay during the post-war years. Just as in wartime, the leadership of A.S.L.E. & F. proved very largely responsive to the demands of their membership during the turbulent years from 1919 to 1921.

Neither, in this period, did the leadership attempt to force unwanted centralisation of the negotiating system or union structure on to the 'rank and file'. Activists welcomed those provisions in the new machinery agreed in 1919 and 1922 which gave the Executive Committee

⁴¹Locomotive Journal, July 1920, p. 273.

⁴²A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1921 Report of Proceedings, pp. 535-60.

control of negotiations over pay, hours and conditions. The interim agreement reached in May 1919 caused concern in some areas because it replaced Delegation Boards with local deputations. However, other areas were equally keen to dispense with the Delegation Boards. When a locality expressed a preference for negotiation through a particular avenue - whether it be Conciliation Boards, deputations, or Delegation Boards - it did so very largely because that medium had proved to be most advantageous to the union in their practical experience at a local level. That experience varied greatly from company to company. It is true that there were strong 'rank and file-ist' sentiments expressed in the debate over the abolition of Delegation Boards at the 1919 A.A.D.. However, this reflected the experience of the minority. A full reading of the debate indicates that the division was not one of Left versus Right, militants versus moderates, or 'rank and file' versus leadership. It was much more an issue of varied practical experience than of principle. Those areas which felt they had benefited from the Delegation Boards desired their retention; the majority which had not, whether of Left or Right, did not mourn their passing.⁴³

A.S.L.E. & F.'s activists and leadership shared a number of common aims in the construction of post-war negotiating machinery: of overriding importance was A.S.L.E. & F.'s ability to negotiate on behalf of locomen unhindered by the N.U.R.; secondly, that negotiations over pay, hours and conditions should be controlled by the A.S.L.E. & F.

⁴³A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D. 1919, pp. 266-329. Sheffield No. 1 A.S.L.E. & F. was one of the very few branches which maintained an attack upon the Executive for, in their view, allowing the reduction of local influence by the influence of Delegation Boards. The branch was clearly influenced by the Shop Stewards Movement in Sheffield and believed the Delegation Boards provided an equivalent to shop steward organisation. This view was not shared elsewhere in the country. See Sheffield No.1 Branch Minutes, 18.5.19.; 21.9.19.; 30.5.20.; & 20.6.20. A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1919, pp. 266-67.

Executive Committee; thirdly, that local lay representatives of the union were granted negotiating rights over local issues with management, and that failing agreement locally grievances could be referred to the union's Head Office. The unifying theme of this strategy, agreed at all levels of the union was to concentrate power at the centre. The Executive did face criticism from activists whenever its negotiating efforts produced results which fell short of these aims. However, only a very small minority opposed measures which led to greater centralisation, for the most part activists in A.S.L.E. & F. sought to concentrate authority over negotiations ever further.⁴⁴

Nevertheless, the post-war years did witness an increased level of informal or unofficial activity. This developed on very similar lines to the unofficial activity in the N.U.R. described in Chapter V above. Firstly, there were attempts made to co-ordinate the activity of the District Councils in order to ginger up union policy and act as a counterweight to Executive authority. Progress in this direction was negligible during 1919. Some initial tentative steps were taken in December 1918 by the secretary of the South Wales and Monmouth District Council who issued a request for addresses of District secretaries with a view to future co-operation. However, little was achieved during 1919 and by the end of the year a proposal from Manchester to establish a Conference of District Councils was still only at the discussion stage.⁴⁵ During 1920 an increasing number of activists favoured an extension of the powers of District Councils as dissatisfaction with the

⁴⁴A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1919, pp. 266-329; A.A.D., 1920, p. 260; 275-85; A.A.D., 1922, pp. 91-92. Resolutions and Decisions of the Executive Committee Nos 76, 3.2.19.-3.5.19., p. 31; & 86, August 1921, p. 162. Locomotive Journal, September 1921, p. 338.

⁴⁵Locomotive Journal, February, July and October, 1919.

Executive over pay and differentials increased. A debate developed within the union and eventually a major reorganisation scheme was submitted to the Annual Assembly in 1921 which would, according to its sponsors from South Wales, establish "...the government of the Society through the District Councils..." - the scheme was defeated by 36 votes to 17.⁴⁶

The second area of unofficial activity which developed after the war involved attempts to pressurise the Executive into the adoption of a more vigorous pay campaign by mounting propaganda campaigns among the membership. It was surely no coincidence that these campaigns were prompted, as in the N.U.R., by the Liverpool district. During the national negotiations in the summers of 1919 and 1920 the Liverpool District Council circulated other Councils and branches with a model resolution that established a date for a national strike failing a settlement. Although there was some evidence of widespread support for the Liverpool motion in 1919 the response was rather mixed in 1920.⁴⁷

Thus, while there were post-war attempts to initiate unofficial organisation along very similar lines to that in the N.U.R., such agitations gained very little support beyond left wing strongholds in South Wales, Manchester and Liverpool. With the possible exception of late 1919 to Spring 1920, neither activists nor 'rank and file' in A.S.L.E. & F. felt the need of an alternative power base to pressurise the union's leadership. This was at least partly because the leadership continued to display a tolerant attitude towards unofficial activity.

⁴⁶Locomotive Journal, January 1921, p. 25; A.A.D., 1921, pp. 384-88.

⁴⁷Sheffield No. 1 A.S.L.E. & F., 10.8.19; Locomotive Journal, September 1919, pp. 270; 259; & June 1920, pp. 222-23.

With the war over and the N.U.R. Executive dominated by the Left the two rail unions might have been expected to adopt much the same attitude to unofficial strike action. However, the contrasting stances adopted by the two unions' leaderships during wartime persisted down to 1921. This was amply demonstrated in July 1919 during the course of a strike on the North Eastern Railway over company eyesight tests for guards and locomen. Both Executives were requested by the local strike committee not to interfere in the negotiations between the strikers and the company. While A.S.L.E. & F. accepted, the N.U.R. Executive rejected the strike committee's request and opened negotiations with the company almost immediately. A.S.L.E. & F. branches on the N.E.R. system reported substantial increases in membership as a reaction against the N.U.R.'s "autocratic attitude".⁴⁸ On several occasions during 1919 and 1920 the A.S.L.E. & F. Executive granted union funds to members involved in unauthorised strike action.⁴⁹

In a further instance during the February 1919 London Tube strike when the N.U.R. headquarters at first declared the London Tube strike unofficial, the A.S.L.E. & F. Executive responded in the following fashion:-

...being in agreement with the claims of our members [the Executive] at once made the strike an official one, by calling out our members on the District Railway in support of the Tubes men... Your Executive next decided to call out our steam members on the L.B. & S.C.R. in support of the motormen, and the whole of the L. & S.W.R. members both steam and electric, as an earnest of their determination on the principle... to follow this if necessary with a

⁴⁸Locomotive Journal, September 1919, pp. 276-77. See also J. R. Raynes, op. cit. pp. 256-57.

⁴⁹See, for example, A.S.L.E. & F. Executive Committee Resolutions and Decisions, No. 75, p. 12; & No. 80, p. 45.

national strike of all our 43,000 members.⁵⁰

The Executive was perhaps claiming more credit for spreading the action than was due to them, nevertheless its attitude to a strike started without official sanction was anything but punitive.⁵¹

Moreover, the wartime policy of allowing unofficial organisation and action to continue without disciplinary action was maintained throughout the period. In one extreme example, a South Wales branch threatened to establish a Provisional Executive Committee to take charge of the threatened strike in the Spring of 1919. The only official response was to ask for further explanation of its proposed relationship to the established structure.⁵² Similarly, when the Liverpool District pressed for a strike during the Summer of 1919 the leadership did not condemn their unofficial activities. Rather the Executive used the agitations from the militant districts to demonstrate to the government the likelihood of a national strike.⁵³ While it is clear that the government made concessions to A.S.L.E. & F. partly in order to divide the rail unions there is evidence to suggest that the government heeded these threats and settled partly because they feared the union's industrial muscle.⁵⁴

⁵⁰Locomotive Journal, March 1919, p. 68.

⁵¹The record was put straight at the A.A.D. in May when delegates refuted the Executive's attempts to take credit for the strike pointing out that the strike had started unofficially the day before the Executive meeting. A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1919, p. 122.

⁵²A.S.L.E. & F. Executive Committee Resolutions and Decisions No. 76, p. 38.

⁵³Locomotive Journal, September 1919, p. 259.

⁵⁴The President of the Board of Trade, Sir Albert Stanley, told the Cabinet that he particularly feared a strike by A.S.L.E. & F. believing the union was "...powerful enough to hold up the whole railway system." War Cab. (546) 19 March 1919. CAB. 23/9.

In summary the post war years witnessed some increase in dissatisfaction with the leadership of A.S.L.E. & F.. For the most part this was a reaction against the slow pace of negotiations and growing anger over eroded differentials. Locomen, in common with the guards and signalmen in the N.U.R., were not prepared to continue with their wartime acceptance of flat-rate pay awards. Internal discontent reached a peak in the Spring of 1920 when in signing a further flat-rate pay agreement the A.S.L.E. & F. leadership appeared more concerned to retain a common front with the N.U.R. than to re-establish locomen's differentials. As a result the Executive Committee's freedom to settle negotiations came under attack and was temporarily removed. The discontent over pay also contributed to a growth of unofficial organisation amongst A.S.L.E. & F.'s activists. However, any possibility that those engaged in informal activity would secure more general support among A.S.L.E. & F. members was removed as soon as the leadership demonstrated their willingness to act to restore pay differentials. Anti-leadership feeling was for the most part confined to a small number of activists in the most militant areas.

That unofficial organisation in A.S.L.E. & F. continued to make little impact was not an indication of the weakness of the union's left wing. On the contrary, although their confidence in leadership was severely tested during late 1919 and early 1920, activists on the left in A.S.L.E. & F. could expect their policies to be pursued with some vigour. For the most part the official structure of the union proved responsive to pressure from below. Consequently, the great majority of activists on the left felt no need for anti-leadership unofficial organisation. The leadership's industrial aggression and continued refusal to discipline unofficial activity resulted in only a very limited amount of internal conflict throughout the turmoil of the early

post-war years. It would appear that in the case of A.S.L.E. & F. the centralisation of industrial relations on the railways did not result in any significant 'rank and file' alienation from official trade unionism.

III. A.S.L.E. & F. Leadership: Conservative Oligarchs?

Thus far we have argued that in A.S.L.E. & F. centralisation of the industrial relations system was not opposed by the 'rank and file' and did not coincide with a growth of unofficial organisation. In so doing it was suggested that locomen were largely satisfied with the performance of the leadership of their trade union. This section will focus more closely upon the union's leadership and assess the contentions that trade union leadership in this period was characteristically conservative and comprised a monolithic block. The General Secretary of the N.U.R., 'Jimmy' Thomas, has often been viewed as the archetypal conservative trade union oligarch. This label fits John Bromley - the A.S.L.E. & F. General Secretary - far less well, as will be made clear in the following comparison of the two men's performance. This will be followed by an examination of the relationship between the A.S.L.E. & F. Executive and General Secretary.

The General Secretaries of the two principal rail unions present a very marked contrast. John Bromley had risen through the ranks of union office along a very similar path to that followed by Thomas in the N.U.R.. However, as a lay activist Bromley was a prominent opponent of the leadership and firmly on the left of his union. At his election as paid organiser and later General Secretary, Bromley remained the candidate of the Left. When addressing the A.A.D. in 1917 Bromley openly acknowledged the effect of high office in moderating his actions. He

said:

When I was on the floor of the Conference... I was as fierce as anyone. When I was out as a Branch Secretary... I tackled the Executive Committee and the officers of this Organisation very keenly. When you get on to the Executive Committee, or in a position of trust like myself you find you have to be ballasted against your will. To any man of sanity, realising that any false step of his, or any false or heated advice of his, is making or marring⁵⁵ many thousands of his fellows, it gives pause.

However, Bromley was also keen to demonstrate that he had guarded against some of the moderating pressures on union leadership. In an address to the 1919 conference he argued:

...it is often dangerous to trust the leaders of the workers to co-operate with the Capitalists. We have learnt the bitter lesson of how our own people are bought... The trouble is after they have displayed their price, the rank and file still worship them... What do the rank and file desire of your Trade Unions? They want to see their leaders boosted in the Capitalist Press... When they [the press] begin to praise me you keep your eye on me. The workers want their leaders boosted... That is all they want. So long as the rank and file are Press ridden, you will get those sort of leaders. Let us educate the workers⁵⁶ so that they will eventually get control.

Bromley's performance as General Secretary of A.S.L.E. & F. from 1914 to 1921 seriously undermines any attempt to characterise British trade union leadership as uniformly conservative and at odds with the militant section of their constituency.

There was certainly little similarity between the broad political perspectives of Thomas and Bromley. After almost five years as General Secretary, Bromley's pronouncements continued to display the influence

⁵⁵A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1917, p. 135.

⁵⁶A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1919, pp. 408-09.

of Marxist ideas. In the union Journal of February 1919 Bromley argued that:

The aim and object of any Labour Party worthy the name must be to abolish the whole Capitalist system, which first robs the workers of the country by taking the surplus value of their labour making it impossible for them to buy back that which they produced, or its equivalent in other necessities.⁵⁷

He claimed also to support certain types of revolution. In an article critical of the Triple Alliance Bromley stated:

...without hesitation, that if a real scientifically managed and well thought out revolution was intended against the present unfair system of society, to pull it down and replace it⁵⁸ with a better, I would be with it win or lose...

Bromley was by no means a revolutionary but he retained a "class conscious" militancy which both influenced the policy and performance of A.S.L.E. & F. and contrasted sharply with Thomas's rigid adherence to the proprieties of constitutionalism.

The contrast between the two General Secretaries also extended to more concrete issues. In 1916 Bromley argued that A.S.L.E. & F. should break the agreement, which bore his signature, that bound the rail unions not to submit further pay claims during the remainder of the war.⁵⁹ Within the union the General Secretary supported the pay strategies of his union's left wing throughout the war. In the summer of 1917 when the N.U.R. had already reached a settlement with the

⁵⁷Locomotive Journal, February 1919, p. 44.

⁵⁸Locomotive Journal, August, 1916, p. 13. Bromley together with most A.S.L.E. & F. activists attacked the Triple Alliance principally because they were excluded from its councils at the insistence of the N.U.R..

⁵⁹A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1916, p. 20.

government Bromley continued to press the demand of the A.S.L.E. & F. annual conference for an eight hour day. The all-grades unofficial strike in South Wales in September 1918 provoked Thomas's resignation because of the affront to his authority. Bromley described it as "...one of the most unconstitutional and therefore most unsatisfactory and yet one of the most glorious events in the annals of the society."⁶⁰ In 1921 the 'Mallows Shooting' incident also elicited remarkably different responses from the two leaders. British soldiers shot and killed a number of - on duty - Irish railmen in the course of a "pacification" mission. Thomas's response was to remonstrate with the Government in the House of Commons and demand a Commission of Inquiry. Bromley actively championed A.S.L.E. & F.'s more vigorous course of action. A Special Conference of the union was summoned and the Government was threatened with a national strike in the absence of an Inquiry and an undertaking that such shootings would not recur.⁶¹

On the issue of union government Bromley aligned himself with the most left wing sections of the union. In 1921 he argued:

...that the working people of this country will never get justice until they move above the present sphere of union activity, which is merely an agreement with the Capitalist of sharing the spoil... the first step in this direction should be a more democratic government of our Trade Unions giving greater and more direct control to the rank and file...⁶²

Bromley's scheme was in effect an activist charter to place power in the hands of reorganised District Councils which would send delegates -

⁶⁰Pribicevic, op. cit., p. 101.

⁶¹Ibid., pp. 124-25. See also Locomotive Journal, March 1921, p. 83; & A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1921, pp. 181-99.

⁶²A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1921, p. 385.

subject to recall - to a 'Central National Council' established to replace the Executive Committee.⁶³

The scheme was defeated at the A.A.D. in 1921 partly because of fears that a weakened Executive would strengthen the position of the permanent officials - this would of course include Bromley himself. Even if we discount Bromley's strong denials of any intent to improve his own position and his consistent support for greater powers to District Councils, both as an activist and General Secretary, the episode still demonstrates the limitations of viewing trade union leadership as a monolith. Bromley's scheme was published in the Workers Dreadnought - paper of the Worker's Socialist Federation - and found its strongest support among those A.S.L.E. & F. activists closest to a revolutionary syndicalist standpoint. For Thomas to enter such an alliance in the N.U.R. would have been unthinkable. If we adopt an extremely cynical approach and assume that Bromley was merely using the Left and was solely motivated by the desire to weaken the Executive this implies that 'leadership' in A.S.L.E. & F. was no united monolithic block, that the Executive constituted a threat to the power of the General Secretary, and, furthermore, that the rejection of Bromley's scheme demonstrates that there were constraints on his ability to impose his will on the union. Whether or not Bromley had ulterior motives there is no escaping the fact that a General Secretary had strongly advocated a reform of union government which would have transferred power from the centre to the districts, away from national officers and into the hands of lay activists.

Motivations were mixed on all sides in the debate over reform of

⁶³Locomotive Journal, November 1920, p. 403.

union government. Some left wing lay activists strongly supported Bromley's scheme as a means of increasing their own authority at the expense of the Executive Committee. However, a majority on the union's left stuck to their belief that a strong Executive proved an important counter to permanent officers. This was largely why a lay delegate conference decisively defeated a motion which would have afforded greater activist control of union government. The A.A.D. had consistently rejected attempts to limit Executive Committee member's period of office for the same reason. Delegates on the union's left argued that any restriction would result in a continually inexperienced Executive which opened the union to the danger of domination by permanent officials.⁶⁴ The importance attributed to a strong Executive was underlined in the A.S.L.E. & F. rulebook as revised by the A.A.D. in 1915. The first in a list of "Duties of the General Secretary" was that he "...shall obey all orders and shall be under the control of the Executive Committee". The Executive could discharge or or suspend any permanent official and also had "...power to inaugurate and control all movements in the interests of the members..."⁶⁵

Partly as a consequence of the constitutional strength of the A.S.L.E. & F. Executive there was no conflict with the General Secretary to compare with that which plagued the N.U.R. after 1918. With the General Secretary at the beginning of his period of office the A.S.L.E. & F. Executive was able to fulfil its function in providing an effective lay check on permanent officials. The Executive's task was further eased by Bromley's continued adherence to an aggressive industrial stance and left wing causes between 1914 and 1921. If

⁶⁴A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1918, pp. 315-18; & A.A.D., 1915, pp. 219-20.

⁶⁵A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1915, pp. 210; 224; 229.

anything Bromley favoured more militant strategies than some of the senior members of the Executive in the early war years. As the composition of the Executive changed in the post war period the only significant divergence of opinion occurred over Bromley's scheme for reform of union government.

The relative ease with which the membership of the Executive could be changed proved another important factor in the low level of conflict between leaders and led. While activists favoured a degree of continuity in Executive membership they were also anxious to ensure regular infusions of new blood in order that the Executive would reflect shifts in membership opinion. This blend of continuity and change did indeed characterise this period. Between 1914 and 1921 four members of the Executive remained in post throughout, the remaining nine places were filled by new men.⁶⁶ As argued throughout this chapter the A.S.L.E. & F. Executive did not constitute a conservative block against left wing rank and file aspiration. Rather it remained largely in tune with activist opinion throughout this period. Indeed, on the major issue dividing activists and leadership during our period it was the latter which adopted a strategy more in keeping with the tenets of the Left in the British trade union movement. As outlined earlier, activist discontent with leadership reached a peak during the aftermath of the 1919 rail strike when A.S.L.E. & F. leadership were anxious to continue to build on the solidarity created by the joint action with the N.U.R.. The central issue of conflict concerned suspicions that the leadership had neglected to base pay claims on the issue of craft in order to facilitate some form of merger with the N.U.R.. Such a move towards industrial unionism would have been warmly applauded on the Left of the

⁶⁶A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1914-21.

British labour movement. During early 1920 it would appear that the attempts of a radical leadership to move in the direction of one union for all rail workers were resisted by a conservative 'rank and file' anxious above all else to preserve the advantages of organisation by craft.⁶⁷

IV. Conclusion.

In the course of the second decade of the century A.S.L.E. & F. changed from being an archetypal conservative craft society into a union with a highly militant reputation. In addition to its aggressive industrial stance A.S.L.E. & F. became more involved with the wider labour movement. Affiliation to the T.U.C. and the Labour Party was symptomatic of the emergence amongst locomen of a broader and more overtly political perspective of their position in British society. The traditional explanations of this leftward shift have tended to emphasise two factors: the influence of John Bromley; and the militancy generated by the erosion of pay differentials during the inflationary years from 1914 to 1920.⁶⁸ However, the trend of change was underway before Bromley had been elected and before eroded differentials had become a major grievance. When Bromley assumed office in October 1914 A.S.L.E. & F. had already balloted two to one in favour of the establishment of a political fund.⁶⁹ Moreover, the A.A.D. held in May 1914 had endorsed the left wing's pre-war pay strategy of a flat rate demand for all grades.⁷⁰

⁶⁷Locomotive Journal, March and May 1920; A.S.L.E. & F. Sheffield No. 1 Branch Minutes, 18.4.20.

⁶⁸See, for example, Pribicevic, op. cit., p. 99.

⁶⁹N. McKillop, THE LIGHTED FLAME, 1950, pp. 104-05.

⁷⁰A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1914, p. 242.

Bromley's election victory itself was an indication of the extent of the change already underway pre-war. In 1914 Bromley was only a relatively junior Organising Secretary. Yet in the election for General Secretary he defeated the well established Assistant General Secretary who also had the advantage of being Acting General Secretary for over a year before the election had taken place. This was a clear and important victory for the Left in A.S.L.E. & F. over the union's more traditional elements.

The leftward shift in A.S.L.E. & F. was initially the product of a perceived pre-war increased work load for the locomotive grades. A letter to the Locomotive Journal in February 1914 lamented the reduction of rest and meal breaks and complained that "...the engines and men do nearly double the miles formerly accomplished and with heavier loads and most cases quicker time..." Moreover, with wages allegedly moving behind prices and a host of other detailed complaints concerning changed working practices the author had little difficulty in explaining what he felt was the hitherto unequalled unrest among his fellows.⁷¹ Strikes during the period, in particular that in 1911, also had an important radicalising influence.

Although the process was underway before the war it certainly gathered pace after 1914. During the war A.S.L.E. & F. affiliated to the T.U.C. and the Labour Party. And by its aggressive stance in the eight-hours dispute of 1917 and the national rail strike of 1919 the union established itself in the forefront of the British trade union movement. The election of Bromley and the erosion of differentials were undoubtedly important in the establishment of A.S.L.E. & F.'s

⁷¹Locomotive Journal, February 1914, p. 86, letter signed "Pecksniff".

increasingly militant stance, but even after 1914, the influence of these factors was limited. Bromley's ability to influence union policy was dependent to a large degree upon the existence of a majority in the A.A.D. and the Executive who also considered themselves on the union's left. Moreover, complaints over differentials did not come to the top of the locomotive grades' agenda of grievances until after the war. It should also be remembered that the only national strike that A.S.L.E. & F. engaged in during our period was aimed at, and resulted in, the reduction of the pay differentials between the locomotive and other grades.

As in the years before 1914 the key elements in A.S.L.E. & F.'s shift to the left were similar to those experienced among other groups of industrial workers. During the war the long hours, food shortages and inflation prompted most discontent. From 1919 the emphasis switched to inflation, differentials and a widespread determination to realise a set of expanded goals by the aggressive use of an unprecedented degree of organisation in a near-full labour market.

In summing up the arguments outlined in this chapter four main points should be emphasised. Firstly that the wartime centralisation of industrial relations did not create a widespread adverse reaction among A.S.L.E. & F.'s activists. Similarly this centralisation did not give rise to an anti-leadership unofficial movement within the locomotive workforce during the war. This was largely because activists recognised that the union's leadership shared their opposition to the restrictive aspects of state labour legislation. Both elements also shared a desire to retain and build upon the centralised negotiation of pay and conditions established during the war.

Secondly, activists in A.S.L.E. & F. were, in the main, able to impose their policies upon the union. Their principal concern was with the conduct of pay and conditions negotiations. In this respect activists were broadly satisfied with the performance of their leaders both during and after the war. Although leadership moved away from activist endorsed strategy in the spring of 1920 it responded swiftly to pressure from below and reverted to pay demands based on craft rather than the cost of living. This episode serves to underline our third main conclusion, that the historical record does not conform to the picture of leadership as a conservative block to the radical aspiration of the 'rank and file'. The leadership's pay strategy in early 1920 was designed to strengthen links between A.S.L.E. & F. and the N.U.R.. It would be mistaken to argue that trade union bureaucracy constituted the main obstacle to greater unity between the rail unions. Particularly during the months following the 1919 national rail strike it was the locomen's leadership who favoured continued unity and the rank and file which clung firmly to exclusive craft organisation. Such attitudes were part of everyday working life on the railways. Locomotive workers organised in A.S.L.E. & F. looked down not only on other grades but also their fellows who remained in the N.U.R.. This hostility could lead to pressure - such as being "sent to Coventry" - being placed on locomen in the all-grades union.⁷² The leadership meanwhile sought to build upon the strength created through the unity established in the 1919 strike by the presentation of a common front with the N.U.R. in pay negotiations. The leadership's strategy - which was identified with the Left of the trade union movement - was strenuously resisted by the rank and file in

⁷²Interview with J. E. Berry, A.S.L.E. & F. Branch Secretary, in J. M. Stamatakos, 'The Railwaymen: A Study of Worker Demands and Strike Agitation, November 1918 to October 1919.' Ph. D. Notre Dame, 1983, p. 84.

A.S.L.E. & F..⁷³ In this instance the leadership and 'rank and file' cannot be said to have conformed to their respectively conservative and radical stereotypes.

Beyond the issue of rail union unity, leadership in A.S.L.E. & F. generally adhered to policies favoured by the union's left wing. This was particularly true of the union's General Secretary, John Bromley, who provided a complete contrast during this period with 'Jimmy' Thomas, his counterpart in the N.U.R.. While he was by no means solely responsible for the leftward shift in A.S.L.E. & F. Bromley did a great deal to encourage it. In addition to the regular endorsement of socialist policies from the conference rostrum Bromley attempted to ensure that A.S.L.E. & F. pursued a militant industrial strategy between Annual Assemblies. For example, there was no need, or indeed time, for grass roots pressure to force A.S.L.E. & F.'s entry into the 1919 rail strike; this was a call initiated solely by Bromley and the Executive.

Finally, not only was leadership in A.S.L.E. & F. not a conservative force neither did it constitute a monolithic block. While it was true that Bromley and the lay Executive generally shared similar perspectives their interests did not always coincide. The potential for conflict was best demonstrated by Bromley's attempt to weaken the Executive by the transference of power to the District Councils. His failure - despite an alliance with some influential left wing activists - demonstrated the continued importance attached to lay control of the union. Moreover, it also demonstrated the effectiveness of that control

⁷³The A.S.L.E. & F. Executive Committee's attempts to construct a closer working relationship with the N.U.R. eventually foundered on the latter's insistence upon the 'fusion' of the two unions. Fusion was unacceptable to leadership and rank and file alike in A.S.L.E. & F.. See A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1920, pp. 191-96.

established by a constitution wherein a strong lay Executive Committee was used as a counter-balance against the possibility of an excessively powerful permanent bureaucracy in the day-to-day running of the organisation.

Both Executive and officials were capable of, and did occasionally in fact, abuse their power during this period. However, for the most part the union's activists were satisfied with the performance of both parties. It is noteworthy that when Bromley and the Executive did ignore conference policy it was not necessarily in favour of a conservative option. Leadership in A.S.L.E. & F. was more than capable of performing a radical function.

CHAPTER VIITHE SOUTH WALES MINERS' FEDERATION.

Introduction.

Of the unions studied thus far in this Section the South Wales Miners' Federation (henceforth S.W.M.F.) conforms most nearly to the model of an industrial union. Unlike the N.U.R. (Chapter V above) which could only aspire to the organisation of all railworkers, the S.W.M.F. was able to implement its intention to organise and represent all major grades of workers employed in mining in the South Wales coalfield. Nevertheless, the mining workforce and its union were by no means immune from the influence of craft distinction. There was a definite hierarchy within the workforce which divided surface from underground workers. Both these groups were further sub-divided, the latter principally into hewers, rippers, timberers, and hauliers, each with their own subordinate semi- or unskilled assistants.¹ But it was the enginemen and stokers who posed the greatest sectional threat to the industrial union. Divided from the rest of the mining workforce both spatially and by their craft, the Enginemen and Stokers Association attempted to remain independent of the S.W.M.F.. Although the Association was disbanded and the men joined the S.W.M.F. in 1917 the conflict of interest apparently continued to linger and a separate colliery enginemen's union re-emerged

¹For fuller accounts of the structure of the workforce in the South Wales coalfield see J.W.F. Rowe, *WAGES IN THE COAL INDUSTRY*, 1923, pp. 66-67; M. J. Daunton, 'Labour and Technology in South Wales, 1870-1914,' in C. Baber & L. J. Williams (eds), *MODERN SOUTH WALES: ESSAYS IN ECONOMIC HISTORY*, 1986, p. 145; M. J. Daunton, 'Down the Pit: Work in the Great Northern and South Wales Coalfields, 1870-1914', *ECONOMIC HISTORY REVIEW*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 4, Nov. 1981, pp. 578-597.

after the miners' defeat in the 1921 lockout.²

The organisation of South Wales miners in a single union obscured a reality in which the workforce was far from homogenous. As well as divisions within the workforce by grade at each pit, the diverse geological structure of a coalfield which covered approximately 1,000 square miles meant that from pit to pit and district to district miners experienced widely differing working conditions. That divergence of experience was at its most marked between the remote western anthracite coal district and the bulk of the coalfield which mined a range of steam, gas and coking coals. These different coal types dictated their own working methods and were subject to distinct market conditions. Geology also influenced the size of the employment unit, which was characteristically small in the anthracite district where seams were typically heavily faulted. In the steam coal districts both pit and company size were unusually large by British standards. In 1913 42.25% of the mines in the South Wales coalfield employed less than ten miners. At the other end of the scale almost 30% of the total workforce worked in pits which employed over 2,000 men; for Great Britain as a whole only 16.5% of the workforce was employed in such large pits.³ Even within the same pit mining conditions could differ widely. Partly as a result of differing geological conditions, both within each pit and across the coalfield, rates and systems of payment for the miner were also highly

²See G.D.H. Cole, *LABOUR IN THE COALMINING INDUSTRY*, 1923, pp. 36-37. There were three other unions which organised men in the South Wales coal industry; the Colliery Examiners' Association; the South Wales Colliery Officials' Union; and the Winding Enginemen's Association.

³B. Supple, *THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH COAL INDUSTRY*, Vol 4, 1913-1946, 1987, p. 364.

varied and extremely complex.⁴

There were a number of important further aspects to the heterogeneity of coalminers' experience in South Wales in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Prominent among these was the linguistic and cultural divide between Welsh and English speakers, further complicated by migrants from a number of other nations, notably Spain.⁵ Nevertheless, a most significant unifying force in the experience of South Wales miners, particularly between 1914 and 1921, was the union itself. In their recent history of the S.W.M.F. Hywel Francis and David Smith ably demonstrated the manner in which 'The Fed' penetrated so many facets of life in the valleys.⁶ This chapter will not attempt to re-tell the history of the prominent part played by the S.W.M.F. in the history of the coalfield or indeed the nation. Both these aspects of the history of the coalfield have been told and re-told elsewhere.⁷ Rather we are concerned with three particular aspects of the S.W.M.F.'s history between 1914 and 1921. These are: leadership, opposition groups and unofficial organisation, and, the centralisation of the union and industrial relations in the coalfield.

These three elements were particularly closely interwoven in the case of the S.W.M.F. largely as a result of the pre-war conflict between the old Lib-Lab leaders and the younger radicals who were largely of

⁴For a description of the complexities of payment systems in coalmining see *Ibid.*, pp. 36-38. J.W.F. Rowe, *WAGES IN THE COALMINING INDUSTRY*, 1923, pp. 57-70.

⁵H. Francis & D. Smith, *THE FED*, 1980, pp. 11-13.

⁶*Ibid.*, Chapter 1.

⁷See for example R. P. Arnot, *THE SOUTH WALES MINERS. A HISTORY OF THE SOUTH WALES MINERS' FEDERATION, 1914-26*, 1975; Francis & Smith, *op.cit.*; N. Edwards, *A HISTORY OF THE S.W.M.F.*, 1936.

I.L.P. or syndicalist persuasion. The challenge of the 'progressives' in the S.W.M.F. centred upon the relationship between leaders and led and witnessed attempts at wholesale reorganisation of the union intended to combine centralisation with democratic control.⁸ The syndicalist assault on the established structures, and leadership in particular, was outlined in the Miners' Next Step published in 1912.⁹ This pamphlet and the bitter pre-war struggle between supporters of reform and the established leadership, centred around the year-long strike in the Cambrian Combine, attracted a great deal of contemporary, and subsequently historical, notoriety.¹⁰

After 1914 attention largely turned to the impact of the S.W.M.F. upon national industrial relations. This chapter continues beyond 1914 the analysis of the pressures for reform of the S.W.M.F. which had emerged during the pre-war years. In so doing the following issues, raised in the introduction to this Section, receive consideration and form the five major elements of this chapter. The first three parts of the chapter are concerned with issues related to centralisation. Firstly, was the centralisation of industrial relations imposed by employers and the state upon a reluctant 'rank and file'? Secondly, did this centralisation lead to the growth of oppositional informal organisation, and thirdly, how did internal conflict and external change influence the centralisation of union government itself? The fourth and

⁸As in the rail unions left wing union activists were often dubbed the 'progressives'. See, for example, Francis & Smith, op. cit., p.25.

⁹Extracts are printed in K. Coates & T. Topham, *WORKERS' CONTROL*, 1970, pp. 14-24.

¹⁰For an outline of the extensive pre-war public attention attracted by 'The Miners' Next Step' see R. Page Arnot, *THE SOUTH WALES MINERS 1898-1914*, 1967, p. 327. See also B. Holton, *BRITISH SYNDICALISM*, 1976, p. 86, and the thesis by B. Pribicevic, 1959, op. cit., Chapter V.

fifth parts of the chapter consider the role and place of leadership in the S.W.M.F. and tackle the following issues: did the S.W.M.F. respond to pressure from its membership or was effective control in the hands of a central oligarchy; to what extent was leadership more conservative than membership, and did that leadership constitute a monolithic block?

In common with mining trade unionism in other areas of Britain the union's basic unit in South Wales was the lodge, organised at each pit. Where the S.W.M.F. differed from unions in other coalfields was in the strength of its district organisation. The S.W.M.F. was divided into twenty Districts based principally on geographical location. The Districts varied greatly in size from the giant Rhondda No. 1 which organised some 40,000 members at its peak in 1920 to less than 400 in Saundersfoot in Pembrokeshire.¹¹ Each of these Districts had its own internal government with delegate conferences and executive committees. The Districts also held their own funds completely independent of the centre out of which they maintained a full or part-time Miners' Agent. During the second decade of the twentieth century a further form of decentralised organisation developed in some areas of the coalfield. Combine Committees sought to co-ordinate the industrial strength of all collieries owned by a single employer. As its name suggests the union was essentially a federal structure the Districts being represented by a single representative on a central Executive Council. The Federation maintained its own full time Secretary and policy was determined either by coalfield conferences of representatives from each lodge or by ballots of the membership. The balance of power between District and centre, between Executive and delegate conference forms the subject of much of this chapter.

¹¹R.P. Arnot, 1975. op. cit., p. 14.

I. Centralisation, Employers, the State and the 'Rank and File'.

It is a commonplace among historians of labour that pre-war conciliation machinery was the subject of bitter attacks from younger militants in the South Wales coalfield. Delays in decision making and dissatisfaction with settlements by the Conciliation Boards played a significant part in the coalfield's turbulent pre-war industrial relations. The events of the period 1910 to 1914 in South Wales appeared to vindicate the arguments of Van Gore and Price that remote, centralised conciliation procedures had become cause rather than cure of industrial unrest.¹² As is also well established wartime state intervention in the coal industry resulted in still further centralisation of negotiating machinery. Could it be that a combination of employers, state and union leadership had conspired to impose an unwanted industrial relations system upon the 'rank and file' South Wales miner? An examination of the attitudes of the various parties suggests this was far from the case.

Before the war, employers, organised into the Monmouthshire and South Wales Coal Owners' Association, had resisted the establishment of any centralised negotiating machinery at a coalfield level. The aggressively anti-union South Wales' coal owners were anxious to avoid granting recognition to the S.W.M.F. and were strongly disposed to protect each company's freedom of action in labour relations. When agreements on negotiating procedures were established the coalowners reserved their position by sanctioning only temporary machinery.¹³ On

¹² See above the Introduction to Section II.

¹³ See Arnot, 1975, op. cit., p. 25; & Francis and Smith, op. cit., p. 2.

the other hand from the foundation of the S.W.M.F. the leadership had perceived as a central goal the establishment of coalfield level negotiations with the employers. While the format of conciliation schemes came under severe criticism, particularly from union activists, the centralisation of negotiations at coalfield level did not. Thus for much of the pre-war period it was the workforce and its trade union organisation that was trying to press a reluctant employers' organisation into accepting a centralised negotiating procedure.

There is little to suggest that the attitudes of employers or unions were altered substantially by the onset of war. The employers' reluctance to deal with the S.W.M.F. through established conciliation machinery continued into the war period. Following the expiry of the Conciliation Board Agreement on 31st March 1915 the Chairman of the employers' side informed the union "...that we will not discuss the making of an agreement following the one now terminating."¹⁴ In June, despite government pressure, the employers still refused to meet S.W.M.F. negotiators face to face relying upon Board of Trade officials to communicate between the two sides. During the negotiations government officials' chief role was to attempt to persuade an extremely reluctant group of employers to grant concessions to the men. When the negotiations broke down and the government was faced, in July 1915, with a solid strike by 200,000 Welsh miners, it rejected coercion in favour of imposing its own settlement. The settlement granted the miners almost every one of their demands in full and the government undertook "...to secure the acceptance of these terms by the employers'

¹⁴Arnot, 1975, op. cit., p. 27.

¹⁵Arnot, 1975, op. cit., pp. 37, 58, 66, 83. See also Cole, 1923, op. cit., p. 27. For the story of the strike see, C. J. Wrigley, DAVID LLOYD GEORGE AND THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT, 1976, Ch. VII.

representatives."¹⁵

The state was clearly critical in shaping wartime industrial relations in South Wales. This was quickly recognised by the S.W.M.F., and particularly its left wing, who from an early stage sought to create conditions in which the government would be forced to intervene between themselves and the coalowners. In the spring of 1915 the S.W.M.F. pressed the M.F.G.B. to threaten a nationwide strike, not because they believed a strike would ensue, but in Ablett's words:

...because experience has shown us that the authorities will not move unless you tell them in a definite manner what is going to happen if they do not. The most diplomatic course to take is to convince the Government of the country that we mean business.¹⁶

The S.W.M.F., prompted by its left wing, continued to pursue an aggressive industrial policy in the months after the July strike largely in order to force government intervention. The intense hostility between union and employers in South Wales continued throughout 1915 and into 1916. There remained a constant threat of further disruption to steam coal supplies from the South Wales pits which had become an essential element of the Admiralty's ability to prosecute the war. Government intervention resulted in a series of major concessions to the miners. In March and April 1916 Askwith, for the Board of Trade, played an important part in persuading the employers to concede an agreement which "required" South Wales miners to join a union.¹⁷ In another instance in May the government granted a demand for a 15% wage increase in full

¹⁶Arnot, 1975, op. cit., pp. 33-34.

¹⁷G. R. Askwith, INDUSTRIAL PROBLEMS AND DISPUTES, 1920, pp. 407-08; Arnot, 1975, op. cit., pp. 114-15.

which so angered the employers that at first they refused to pay it. A further industrial relations crisis developed during November 1916 in which the S.W.M.F. rejected independent arbitration, insisting that the government resolve the dispute. The threat of a further strike finally persuaded the government to take direct control of the South Wales coalfield on 1st December 1916.¹⁸ The S.W.M.F. policy had paid off. The government had taken control of the coalfield in order to avert a strike which had profound implications for the war effort. Again the government immediately met the S.W.M.F.'s pay demands in full - an event unlikely in the extreme had the mines remained under private control, the owners being in a far better position to withstand a strike than the government.

Government control does not appear to have emerged at the behest of the coalowners. The Commission of Inquiry into Industrial Unrest for the South Wales District reported that the coalowners were most:

...emphatic in their condemnation of governmental interference...[alleging]... that the chief cause of trouble in the Coalfield has been the 'action of the Government in assisting the men to break their agreements'. They further state that the men collectively never broke their agreements until the Government first 'interfered' in 1915.¹⁹

The reaction on the trade union side was generally far more favourable.

¹⁸At a meeting between the Prime Minister and the M.F.G.B. Lloyd George observed that: "It was the situation in South Wales that first of all forced it [state control of mines] on us." In 'Transcript from Shorthand Notes of M.F.G.B. Deputation to the Prime Minister re Control of Mines on 21.12.16.' p. 8. See also B. Supple, 1987, op. cit., pp. 74-77; G. Holmes, 'The First World War and Government Coal Control,' in C. Baber & L. J. Williams, op. cit., p. 213; & Arnot 1975, op. cit., p. 123. Holmes and Supple argue that the 'wage issue' was the most important factor in the decision to consider control of the South Wales coal industry.

¹⁹Report of the Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest: Wales and Monmouthshire, Parliamentary Papers 1917-18, (Cd. 8668.) See also Holmes in Baber & Williams, 1986, op. cit., pp. 214-15.

The main objection to state control of the coalfields from within South Wales was that the measure had not been extended to all British coalfields. While some militants on the left of the union maintained their theoretical opposition to government interference on the grounds that the state was merely "a capitalist trust" there was a general recognition among activists and prominent left wing figures that wartime government intervention strengthened the union's hand. In July 1917 the South Wales delegates to the M.F.G.B. Annual Conference gave their unanimous backing to a resolution which called for government ownership and control of the industry.²⁰

Before the war, and largely at the insistence of the left wing in South Wales, the establishment of a national conciliation system had become a major policy goal of both the S.W.M.F. and the M.F.G.B.. In view of the intransigent opposition of the employers any realistic hopes of achieving a national system rested upon state intervention. The wartime dependence of government on domestic coal supplies afforded the miners the ideal opportunity to secure that intervention. During the war much of the impetus within the M.F.G.B. for a national system came from the S.W.M.F.. At the Annual M.F.G.B. Conference in 1915 a resolution from South Wales urged that: "...no agreement of a general character be signed in any district unless the same has been discussed by the National Conference..." Winstone, moving the resolution, argued that: "...the Welshmen in bringing forward this resolution desire that the Federation should not only be consolidated in theory, but that they

²⁰Cole, 1923, op. cit., p. 125. For opposition to nationalisation and state control among the Left in the South Wales coalfield see K. O. Morgan, 'Socialism and Syndicalism: The Welsh Miners' Debate', BULLETIN OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY, No. 30, Spring 1975; & Arnot, 1975, op. cit., p. 96.

should also be consolidated in their future policy and practice."²¹ This attempt to centralise the negotiating machinery of the union was defeated in 1915, however, a similar resolution again from South Wales was successful in 1918. The mover suggested that in South Wales:

We are desirous that all local machinery on the general wages question shall be abolished, and this Federation alone shall discuss the question of general wages for all future time.²²

On the other hand coal owners in South Wales and elsewhere had long resisted any move towards nationally negotiated settlements in the coal industry. In May 1915 the Asquith government endorsed the coalowners' view that national settlements were inappropriate given the diverse economic conditions both between and within the British coalfields.²³ However, once the South Wales coalfield had been taken into control it was a relatively short step to the control of all British coalfields. Nationwide state coal control brought with it a centralised financial system and the pooling of profits, which removed both the coalowners' and government's grounds for resistance to the national settlement of miners' wages. The S.W.M.F. was to the forefront of the pressure from a number of Districts to launch a uniform national pay campaign in 1917.²⁴ From the summer of 1917 wage demands were submitted and negotiated at a national level and based largely on changes in the cost of living.

State intervention during the war brought with it a dramatic centralisation of industrial relations systems in the British coal

²¹Annual Conference of the M.F.G.B. 1915., p. 94. See also Arnot, 1975, op. cit., pp. 26-27; 29.

²²Annual Conference of the M.F.G.B., 1918, pp. 128-30.

²³Cole, 1923, op. cit., pp. 22-24, & 60.

²⁴Arnot, 1975, op. cit., p. 146.

industry. However, this centralisation was not the result of employer and state collaboration designed to emasculate labour.²⁵ The coalowners in South Wales and nationally only very reluctantly entered into centralised negotiations whether at a coalfield or a national level. They relinquished their much cherished and bitterly defended freedom of action in industrial relations as a result of state pressure during a period of national emergency. At every turn they insisted that moves towards a more centralised system should only survive for the duration of the war. The state was certainly not perceived by the employers as intervening on their behalf. Wartime governments had not sought to involve themselves with mining industrial relations but were drawn in to settle a series of crises which resulted from the inability of owners to manage the coalfield peacefully. Government's dependence on coal from the Principality led them to place a high value on securing continued production. Thus it was the miners who had everything to gain from state intervention - a reality well understood by the S.W.M.F..

It would appear that the motivations of the various parties can be best summarised as follows. The S.W.M.F. actively sought a more centralised system of industrial relations whether at coalfield or national level. The employers remained opposed but a combination of governmental stick and carrot persuaded them to accept change.²⁶ Government was drawn in against its will but out of necessity in an

²⁵Holmes observes that:- "The minutes of the coalowners' meetings scarcely encourage a belief that wicked coalowners were in league with a government hostile to miners' aspirations." Holmes, in Baber & Williams, op. cit., p. 215.

²⁶Evan Williams observed that during the war the national coalowners organisation (Miners' Association of Great Britain), of which he was the President, had been "forced by the Government to deal collectively with the men on questions relating to conditions of labour within the districts." Quoted in Supple, op. cit., p. 414.

emergency situation. This picture clearly does not conform to that interpretation which seeks to characterise a centralised system of industrial relations as a yoke imposed upon trade unions by state and employers acting in collaboration. Indeed the only group truly anxious to see state intervention and the centralisation of industrial relations were the miners - including the great majority of left wing activists in South Wales.

Undoubtedly there were aspects of state control of the coal industry which caused miners in South Wales and elsewhere considerable concern and dissatisfaction. However, the one feature they continued to support was the centralisation of industrial relations. During the post-war struggles over the future of the coal industry many miners in South Wales favoured nationalisation very largely as a means of continuing the system of unified centralised negotiations over pay and conditions. Even after the nationalisation issue had been lost the S.W.M.F. favoured the retention of a National Wages Board rather than a return to District negotiation.²⁷ A cornerstone of this policy was the retention of some form of profits pool in order that wages could be subsidized in areas where the selling price of coal was low. This desire to retain centralisation was not the policy of a leadership divorced from its rank and file motivated only by the desire to retain power and authority. In the aftermath of the 'datum line' strike of October and November 1920 many on the left of the S.W.M.F. felt themselves betrayed by the M.F.G.B.. However, this did not prompt calls for a return to district or local negotiation. Rather than suggest decentralisation, the Rhondda No. 1 District Committee - one of the most militant bodies in the coalfield - suggested reforms of the procedure of negotiation and

²⁷Cole, 1923, op. cit., p. 128 & 137.

settlement at a national level.²⁸ During the coal crisis in the spring of 1921 the Lady Windsor Lodge - a declared supporter of the Unofficial Reform Committee - issued an instruction to the Executive "...to fight for a National Wages Board as against District Conciliation Boards."²⁹ Militants in South Wales had every reason to continue their support for a centralised industrial relations system. The South Wales men had the most to lose from the break up of the national system with wages set to fall by 40% and more at the end of government subsidy and the return to private control in April 1921.

In contrast to the attitude of the miners, after the war the coalowners remained determined to decentralise the negotiating system and restore district settlements. At first they refused to take back the mines into private control maintaining that they could not afford to meet the massively increased wage bill which had resulted from government concessions to the miners. During the spring of 1919 some owners were even prepared to give tentative support to immediate nationalisation rather than face joint control with the men or the continued decline in the profitability of their undertakings. At the height of their post-war unpopularity, in the wake of the first Sankey Report, the owners also briefly supported a modified profits pooling arrangement of their own.³⁰ However, the end of the post-war economic boom undermined the unions' economic power and the coalowners weathered the demands for nationalisation and re-asserted their political strength. Consequently the owners re-established their traditional

²⁸Minutes of the Rhondda No. 1 District Committee of the S.W.M.F., 15.11.20.

²⁹Minutes of the Lady Windsor Lodge, 15.2.21.; 22.3.21.

³⁰Supple, 1987, op. cit., p. 134-36.

position by restating their insistence upon the decentralisation of industrial relations in the industry. Indeed this was the central core of the employers' case. The Mining Association of Great Britain informed the M.F.G.B. that they:

...would not, in any circumstances, agree to a national settlement of wages; that they could not even think of considering a national pool, or any form of unification of finance in the industry, either nationally or in the districts; that they stood absolutely for individualism in the industry, and for every colliery company to stand or fall by its own results.

Moreover, for the owners, resistance to centralised industrial relations was the "...one point which we ourselves had determined that we were going to fight and to stick to the very last..."³¹

Throughout the years from 1914 to 1921 and beyond the policy of the South Wales coalowners and miners in regard to the centralisation of industrial relations at coalfield and national level was clear - despite the occasional accommodation to temporary tactical considerations. The owners strenuously opposed centralisation, while the S.W.M.F. sought to strengthen it. The state reacted according to changing economic and political imperatives, initially furthering the men's cause by first introducing and later extending centralisation. Later the state assisted employers' interests by rebutting proposals for nationalisation and returning the industry to private hands. Even accounting for temporary shifts in policy, the history of industrial relations in the coal industry between 1914 and 1921 cannot be described as conforming to the

³¹Ibid., p. 158, see also p. 418.

incorporationist view of trade union history. It was not the case that employers and state conspired to ensnare trade union organisation in unwanted centralisation of industrial relations either at coalfield or national level.

II. Centralisation and Unofficial Activity.

But what of the effects of the centralisation of industrial relations between 1914 and 1921? Did it result in an increase in either unofficial industrial action or unofficial organisation? Clearly the patriotism of the South Wales miners led to a marked decline of both unofficial action and organisation in the early war years. In some areas, however, the Combine Committees became important focuses of unofficial organisation as they adopted an increasingly significant role in conflicts over working conditions despite initial opposition from the S.W.M.F. Executive and most miners' agents.³² However, the Combine Committees ceased to be centres of potential unofficial organisation when they were officially recognised in the S.W.M.F. constitution in 1917. There was some recovery of unofficial organisation between 1917 and 1921 with the reconstitution of the Unofficial Reform Committee and the formation of the South Wales Socialist Society in 1919. In his study of 'Rank and File Movements among the Miners of South Wales', Woodhouse argues with considerable justice that unofficial organisation in the S.W.M.F. made little impact during these years.³³ Many activists on the left placed their faith in the official structure attempting to influence policy directly and thereby abandoning unofficial organisation. Given that

³²See, for example, the advances made by the Ocean Coal Combine Committee from 1914 as described in John E. Morgan, *A VILLAGE WORKERS COUNCIL - AND WHAT IT ACCOMPLISHED, BEING A SHORT HISTORY OF THE LADY WINDSOR LODGE, S.W.M.F.*, 1956, p. 42.

³³In Woodhouse's view the unofficial movement "...played no significant agitational role during the miners' campaign for their post-war programme..." Moreover by 1921 "in terms of organisation and policy it [the Unofficial Reform Committee] and the C.P.G.B. had shown themselves incapable of exerting any decisive influence on S.W.M.F. policy or of establishing any strengthened position in the coalfield." M. G. Woodhouse, 'Rank and File Movements Among the Miners of South Wales', 1910-26, Oxford D. Phil., 1969, p. 151; 234.

organised unofficial groups in the S.W.M.F. made a greater impact before 1914 than between 1914 and 1921 it appears there are few grounds for arguing that the wartime centralisation of industrial relations led to an increase in unofficial organisation.

Nevertheless at times during 1918 and 1919, there was a considerable amount of unofficial strike action in the coalfield some of which involved attacks upon the system of conciliation. With the end of the war in view, a number of conflicts developed between coalowners and men on local issues in the closing months of 1918. Coalowners were clearly becoming anxious to reassert their authority, Williams, on behalf of the South Wales employers observed in November 1918 that:

We feel that matters seem to be getting so much out of hand that some drastic action in³⁴ the way of prosecutions will have to take place.

In the course of the rash of unofficial strikes which ensued, the S.W.M.F. Executive Council faced substantial criticism from within their own ranks. A delegate conference in December 1918 debated a call for the Executive Council to be replaced by a 'Business Committee' to deal with a dispute at the Bedwas Colliery.³⁵

During the early months of 1919 the conflict continued to escalate exacerbated by the attempts of the men to enforce the re-employment of miners returning from the armed forces. Five thousand miners at Dowlais near Merthyr became involved in a five week long strike over soldier miners' and washery men's wages during March and April 1919. The employers

³⁴ Minutes of the Joint Standing Disputes Committee, 5.11.18.

³⁵ Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Special Conference, 9.12.18. See also Minutes of the Lewis Merthyr Lodge, 6. & 17.12.18. and Minutes of the Lady Windsor Lodge, 17.12.18. See also Merthyr Express 28.12.18. for unofficial strike action elsewhere in the coalfield.

refused to implement a settlement agreed between the miners and the Coal Controller which threatened a crisis for the established conciliation machinery. A "Conciliation Board Must Go" campaign was launched by the Dowlais men. The Merthyr Pioneer reported that:

Through the coalfield are circulated the leaflets on the betrayal of the Dowlais Miners by that effete organisation, and speakers from the Dowlais district are traversing South Wales ...[calling for a special S.W.M.F. Conference] ...with a view to bring to an ignominious end the inglorious career of the Conciliation Board.³⁶

The campaign secured a Special S.W.M.F. Conference and succeeded in winning official recognition and lock-out pay for the strikers. However, the attack upon the industrial relations system found little support beyond the immediate area of the dispute. Indeed the strike was eventually solved not by the destruction of the conciliation scheme but by a concession by the employers - imposed by the Coal Controller - which allowed the washery men to be included in the Conciliation Board Agreement.³⁷ It was unlikely in the extreme that miners were going to destroy a system of negotiation which had brought them success in so many areas since 1915.

A further major outbreak of unofficial strike activity occurred in the last week of March 1919 when the Government's proposed pay and hours settlement was accepted by the M.F.G.B. Executive. By the 27th March over fifty thousand men were reported to be on strike.³⁸ Here apparently was a widespread rank and file revolt against the decisions reached by a remote leadership in a highly centralised negotiating framework. While

³⁶Merthyr Pioneer, 22.3.19.

³⁷South Wales News, 7.4.19.

³⁸South Wales News, 27.3.19.

there were indeed protests that the men had been let down by the M.F.G.B. Executive this machinery was not beyond the control of the South Wales men. Delegate conferences at a national and coalfield level debated the proposals and agreed to submit them to a ballot of the membership. In South Wales miners approved the proposals by a majority of more than seven to one in a record ninety-five per cent turn out. Paradoxically, although there were reportedly over fifty thousand unofficial strikers against the settlement under twenty thousand men voted against the proposals in the ballot.³⁹

Both the unofficial strike against the government proposals and the Dowlais dispute demonstrate the strong influence of the left wing leadership in the most militant pits and amongst the most politically motivated of the active miners. Noah Ablett, at this stage the most prominent member of the unofficial movement, had played an important role in the leadership of the Dowlais dispute. Moreover, the unofficial strike wave at the end of March was centred on the Cambrian Combine pits of mid-Rhondda the pre-war stronghold of unofficial organisation. However, that support, even in these most militant districts, had significant limitations. The unofficial Left demonstrated an ability to sway mass meetings, picket men out in a crisis and run campaigns with activist support. Nevertheless, majority rank and file support remained with those who advocated conciliation and acceptance of 'jam now' - even in the spring of 1919.

³⁹Ibid., 28.3.19.; 11.4.19.

III. Centralisation and Union Government.

But what of the issue of centralisation within the S.W.M.F. itself? The pre-war turmoil in the coalfield had spawned a strong unofficial movement heavily influenced by syndicalist views and determined to alter the structure of the S.W.M.F.. Prominent figures in the influential Unofficial Reform Committee such as Ablett, Mainwaring and Hay, were keen advocates of a more centralised union. In 1913 Ablett outlined his general approach to the issue. He argued that the most "advanced" and "Militant" section of the S.W.M.F. were "enthusiastic advocates of centralisation" in order "firstly... to obtain power to be a huge massive force."⁴⁰ However, Ablett and his left-wing allies were keenly aware of the problems of bureaucratisation and the consolidation of leadership power associated with greater centralisation. Thus support from the left of the union for greater centralisation was particularly equivocal, hedged by qualifications designed to ensure rank and file control. This led to a great deal of debate both within the Left and throughout the union as to where the appropriate balance between centralisation and democratic control was to be found.⁴¹ Thus the union's left wing, and in particular those close to a syndicalist viewpoint, would strenuously oppose centralising reforms which did not conform to their definition of democratic centralism. The S.W.M.F.'s right-wing generally opposed the re-organisation programme of the Unofficial Reform Committee [henceforth U.R.C.]. This was especially the

⁴⁰N. Ablett, 'Local Autonomy versus Centralisation in Regard to the Making of War and Peace. Report with Special Reference to the Facts Structure and History of the South Wales Miners' Federation.' Paper to the Barrow House Conference, July 1913, on 'The Control of Industry'. The full text of Ablett's paper has been reproduced in Arnot, op. cit., 1975, p. 13.

⁴¹Francis & Smith, op. cit., p. 24.

case whenever attempts were made to undermine District organisation largely because these were the power bases of the miners' Agents who also dominated the Executive Council of the union.

During 1912 and 1913 the U.R.C. were engaged in a major and ultimately unsuccessful struggle to over-ride District authority by centralising the administrative and financial functions of the S.W.M.F..⁴² The defeat of reform schemes by membership ballot and the onset of war put attempts at reform in temporary abeyance. However, the strike of 1915 was followed by attempts to resurrect the reform movement. Although wide ranging and fundamental rule changes were forwarded to the S.W.M.F. Rules Revision conference in 1917 centralisation of union government was no longer the burning issue it had been in the pre-war years. The Left achieved some success. The conference agreed to include the "complete abolition of capitalism" among the union's 'Objects', and a further new aim was to ensure that membership of the Federation became "a condition of employment."⁴³ However, no significant moves towards centralisation were endorsed at the 1917 conference. The only small step in this direction was the establishment by rule of Joint or Combine Committees, which sought to encourage the collaboration of all lodges which shared a common employer.⁴⁴

At the 1920 Rules Revision Conference, held in September, an attempt was made to resurrect the pre-war centralisation proposals. All funds and administration were to be concentrated at the S.W.M.F.

⁴²Ibid., pp. 15-22.

⁴³S.W.M.F. Rules 1917, Rule 3b).

⁴⁴Ibid., Rule 48.

headquarters in Cardiff. The administration was to be performed by one central Executive Council of thirty members, elected triennially by ballot vote. The reformers also proposed that legislative functions should remain with the members through the lodge, conference and ballot vote. Despite a vigorous campaign in favour of the reform proposals by the 'progressives' the centralisation proposals were decisively defeated at a time when the men were in a particularly militant mood.⁴⁵

Despite the S.W.M.F.'s reputation as the most left wing of British labour's official organisations it remained largely unaffected by left wing pressure for greater centralisation of its own internal government. At conferences prepared to sanction a wide range of militant strategies left wing programmes for organisational reform were repeatedly defeated. This apparent paradox has a number of explanations. Firstly, the topography of the South Wales coalfield militated against centralisation, the mountain ranges forming an effective barrier to inter-valley and therefore inter-District communication. Similarly the varied geological conditions and systems of remuneration which linked weekly wages very closely to specific local conditions meant that for many miners their principal need for trade union services was at the local level. This was most often provided by the Agents elected by and working for each District. The close links of dependence between miners and their Agent made many reluctant to centralise the union's funds and administration for fear their representatives became more remote and less able to deal with the complex and detailed negotiations in which local knowledge was at a premium. For these and other reasons local identification was particularly strong amongst the mining communities of

⁴⁵Western Mail, 14.9.20.; Merthyr Pioneer, 18.9.20.

South Wales.⁴⁶ Indeed far from centralisation of the trade union being forced upon the men in order to combat the consolidation of capital, it was the decentralised District system which most accurately reflected the structure of capital in the South Wales coalfield.⁴⁷

That said District organisation had been voted down in a membership ballot in September 1912 - only to be re-affirmed in later pre-war ballots. After 1914 the centralisers never received the level of support they had enjoyed before the war. This was partly because after 1914 much of the struggle for greater centralisation of miners' organisation was being conducted at the national level. Leading left wingers from the S.W.M.F. played a prominent and effective part in the centralisation of the M.F.G.B. during these years. At the 1918 conference of the M.F.G.B. it was a resolution from the S.W.M.F. which committed the miners to national centralised machinery for wage negotiation.⁴⁸ Perhaps more important were the deep divisions on the radical left of the union over the degree and form of centralisation.⁴⁹ To some extent this was a result of the very success of left wing propaganda. For some activists, particularly those influenced by syndicalist ideas, the distrust of leadership was so deep they would not countenance any move to centralisation which fell short of their full reform programme for the

⁴⁶Francis & Smith, op. cit., pp. 4; 7-8.

⁴⁷In 1924 after what D. J. Williams described as "the rapid [post-war] consolidation of interests among the coalowners" there were still 89 separate companies which employed over 500 miners. D. J. Williams, CAPITALIST COMBINATION IN THE COAL INDUSTRY, 1924. Supple, op. cit., p. 370.

⁴⁸Clegg, op. cit., p. 212.

⁴⁹Both during the original drafting of the Miners' Next Step in 1911 and in 1915 when the unofficial movement was being re-established the precise form centralisation was to take provoked division among the 'progressives'. W. H. Mainwaring M.S.S., Notes of Meetings of the Unofficial Reform Committee, 15.10.11. & Notebook for 1915.

destruction of leadership. Other left wingers were prepared to attempt to capture the leadership and attempt piecemeal constitutional reform. But for many South Wales miners, of all shades of opinion, loyalty to leadership was very strong. For some it was precisely because the centralisation proposals were linked to an attack on leadership that they were so vehemently opposed. Attitudes to leadership amongst the miners of South Wales were a complex aspect of industrial relations in the coalfield as will be explored more fully in the following part of this chapter.

IV. Leadership and Oligarchy.

The role of trade union leadership in South Wales was more widely and intensely debated than in any other sector of the British labour movement in the years before the First World War. The established leadership of the S.W.M.F. had become caught between aggressively anti-union employers and a new generation of militants impatient for change. To the S.W.M.F. 'old guard' the right to negotiate on nominally equal terms with employers who had steadfastly refused to recognise the union had become almost the entire goal of trade union organisation. Their support for the basic tenets of conciliation was to place them fundamentally at odds with the union's Left which railed against compromise between capital and labour. From the syndicalists' viewpoint conciliation placed leaders in a special and elevated relationship with the employer and bestowed a wider personal prestige. According to the authors of the Miners' Next Step in order to defend that authority, union leaders would defend the status quo and resist "progress".⁵⁰ It was argued that this was a trait of leadership in general and not solely a feature of those individuals currently in power. Therefore, for the pre-war syndicalists the aim was to destroy leadership rather than merely replace old leaders with new. Ablett argued that the "most advanced" section of the S.W.M.F. aimed "...to kill leadership by destroying petty leaders, and to replace the functions of the great leaders into that of mere servants by transferring their power into the organisation..."⁵¹ In 1911 one activist was to opine "...if the worker is to come into his own he must get rid of this present day 'oligarchy'

⁵⁰Miners' Next Step, 1912, pp. 8-9.

⁵¹Ablett, 1913, op. cit., p. 1.

manifested by his accredited leaders."⁵²

Despite the view expressed in the 'Miners Next Step' that "...the remedy is not new leaders..." after the defeat of the pre-war reorganisation proposals the great majority of left activists returned to the more traditional methods of attempting to replace the old leadership with representatives of the Left. Attacks on leadership also took the form of attempts to restrict leadership press statements to ensure compliance with union policy, and pressure for the resignation of individual leaders. The Left did not, however, entirely forsake reform of the organisation as a method of constraining leadership's independence from lay control. There were three main strands of this latter strategy which were as follows: the Executive Committee to be composed of lay members only - M.P.s, miners' Agents, and permanent officials were, therefore, to be excluded; no member of the Executive Committee to sit for longer than three years; paid officers of the union to be prevented from simultaneously being Members of Parliament.

Thus, in what follows, the relationships between leaders and led in the S.W.M.F. between 1914 and 1921 will be assessed through an examination of the fortunes of this range of left wing strategies. These were, firstly, attempts to capture leadership positions, secondly, the imposition of constraints upon the established leadership, and thirdly, constitutional reform.

During the war years supporters of the Left made little progress in their attempts to displace or replace the S.W.M.F.'s right wing

⁵²Reproduced in Francis & Smith, op. cit., p. 16. The quotation was by Mark Harcombe, a man who was "to dominate Rhondda Labour Party politics for decades", Ibid., p. 16.

leadership. Despite winning a number of seats during the later war years the Left remained a small minority on the Executive Committee.⁵³ This was largely because Executive seats were filled by election at the District level where the Agents proved very difficult to defeat. During the war Agents filled over 80% of places on the S.W.M.F. Executive Committee.⁵⁴ However, candidates of the Left fared far better when the entire coalfield voted as a single constituency. In the final weeks of the war the S.W.M.F. membership was balloted to decide the coalfield's nominations for the new permanent posts of M.F.G.B. Secretary and Treasurer. In the election for Secretary, Hodges - who was closely identified with the ideas of the Left - and Ablett headed the poll, Hodges finally winning by 31,189 votes to 26,176 after four less radical candidates had been defeated on earlier counts. In the election for Treasurer, Hartshorn defeated Onions on the sixth count by 31,133 to 26,825. Though neither of these candidates was in any way allied to the 'progressives', Hartshorn, as a moderate member of the I.L.P., was more broadly identified with the Left than the Lib-Lab Onions.⁵⁵

The S.W.M.F., unlike many other trade unions - including the N.U.R. and A.S.L.E. & F. - did not allow its Executive members to settle strikes without a ballot vote of the members.⁵⁶ The Left would not press forward any reform to transfer this right to settle to the centre, particularly while the Executive Committee remained in the hands of right wing Agents. As a result this specific reform which had been so

⁵³Woodhouse, op. cit., pp.46-47.

⁵⁴Arnot, 1975, op. cit., p. 70.

⁵⁵Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Executive Council Meeting, 2.11.18.

⁵⁶The requirement for a ballot was passed at a Special Conference in July 1912 held to discuss reorganisation. Francis & Smith, op. cit., p. 18.

significant amongst the rail unions was not pursued by the Left in the South Wales mining industry.

Activists attempted to impose their will on the union through the lay delegate conferences which were, theoretically, the supreme authority of the union. Organised on a coalfield basis these conferences were composed of representatives of the lodges. Delegation size was related to lodge membership, moreover, when issues were closely contested provision was also made for a card vote whereby the delegation cast a vote equal to the total membership of their lodge. Whenever the 'progressives' found themselves in disagreement over key issues with the rulings of the Executive Council they sought to overturn them at Special Conferences. During the war the Left successfully reversed executive council policy on a number of occasions, notably during the crisis in 1915 when a series of coalfield conferences repeatedly overturned recommendations of the executive, voting to press forward with strike action and reject proposed settlements.⁵⁷

At the 1917 Rules Revision Conference the Left launched a major assault on the organisational supports of the established leadership. A series of resolutions sought to exclude Miners' Agents from membership of the Executive Council. Attempts were also made to have the Executive Council elected by the annual delegate conference. However, all these resolutions were defeated by "overwhelming" majorities.⁵⁸ Thus attempts

⁵⁷ Arnot, op. cit., pp. 60; 61; 72. See also S.W.M.F. Minutes of Special Conference, 7.12.18., for a further example of Executive defeat at the hands of conference over the handling of an industrial dispute.

⁵⁸ South Wales Daily News, 14.6.17. Vernon Hartshorn M.P. paid tribute to the conference for "so emphatically 'turning down' the hare brained amendments which were put forward from a few quarters." Ibid., 15.6.17. See also Francis & Smith, op. cit., pp. 25-26.

to constrain leadership power were defeated at the same lay delegate conference which had voted to make the ending of capitalism a constitutional goal of the S.W.M.F.. Throughout much of the war a leadership which supported the industrial truce and strove to avoid strike action at all costs remained largely immune from attempts at either de-selection or reform.

However, as the war drew to a close the fortunes of the Left improved. Following the rejection of their reform programme in 1917 the 'progressives' appear to have increased their efforts to influence the S.W.M.F. by securing election to positions of power within the official structure. This strategy met with some success in some traditionally militant Districts which had hitherto elected right wing leaders.⁵⁹ Despite this evidence of increased support for the Left there was to be no swift change in the officerships of the union. The right-wing leadership continued to wield significant influence. In February 1919 the S.W.M.F. General Secretary, Tom Richards, used the press in an attempt to persuade the men to vote against a strike recommendation and thereby publicly defied Federation policy.⁶⁰ Richards' intervention had a clear impact. Although South Wales endorsed the strike call, uncharacteristically the coalfield returned one of the lowest pro-strike percentages in the country.⁶¹ Some of the more militant areas of the Federation attempted to force Richards' resignation but there was

⁵⁹For example, Ablett was elected miners' Agent for Merthyr, and S. O. Davies, another prominent 'progressive', secured the Agent's post at Dowlais in October 1918.

⁶⁰South Wales Daily News, 18.12.19. Asked which way he advised men to vote Richards replied: "most emphatically I say they should vote against a strike."

⁶¹South Wales voted by a majority of three to one in favour of a strike, in Yorkshire it was nearer ten to one and elsewhere higher still. See Arnot, op. cit., p. 164.

insufficient pressure to force the Executive - still dominated by allies of the General Secretary - to either call a coalfield conference or sanction the resignation calls.⁶² Later in the spring crisis, upon the announcement of a proposed settlement as a result of the first Sankey Report, leading officials of the S.W.M.F. again opposed conference policy and urged the men to endorse the settlement. This time the S.W.M.F. Vice-President, Vernon Hartshorn, was to the fore in using the press to oppose activist policy.⁶³

Not surprisingly the Annual Conference in June 1919 debated a series of resolutions related to leadership influence through the press. Some lodges demanded that no official should deviate from agreed S.W.M.F. policy in their dealings with the press. A few urged resignation for those who continued to transgress. Specific demands were made for the resignation of Richards and one resolution again attempted to bar Agents and full-time officials from membership of the Executive Council. However, none of these motions critical of leadership was successful. The Left could, however, take some small solace from the decision to ask the Daily Herald to produce a South Wales edition. The successful motion urged that "...the South Wales leaders be requested to transfer their services from capitalist to workers' press."⁶⁴

The 1919 Annual Conference demonstrated that the established leadership retained significant support even among the activists during this period of great unrest. The 'progressives' stood a slate of

⁶²Ibid., p. 165.

⁶³South Wales News, 2.4.19.; Woodhouse, op. cit., p. 166.

⁶⁴S.W.M.F. Final Conference Agenda 1919: S.W.M.F. Minutes of Annual Conference, 1919.

candidates against the incumbent S.W.M.F. officers. Brace defeated Mairwaring for the Presidency by 177 votes to 61, and Onions defeated Tromans for the Treasurership by 173 votes to 71. The greatest margin of defeat was reserved for A. J. Cook in his contest with James Winstone the sitting Vice President. Cook lost to Winstone by more than nine to one.⁶⁵ The depth of support for the establishment in 1919 was further underlined at a Special Conference in November. Richards informed the conference that because of the excessive workload he intended to relinquish either the General Secretaryship of the union or his seat in the House of Commons. Despite his actions earlier in the year the delegates voted unanimously to request that Richards retain his trade union post.⁶⁶

The Left appeared to have learned their lesson and no attempt was made to challenge the officers at the Annual Conference in 1920.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, attempts to reform the structure of the union were renewed at the Rules Revision Conference in September. The 'progressives' made some significant advances. The effectiveness of the delegate conference as an activist check upon leadership was strengthened by a rule amendment which forced the General Secretary to call a Special Conference if requested to do so by a minimum of twenty lodges. The influence of the 'progressives' was also in evidence in two changes to the 'Objects' of the union. Firstly, a further step towards industrial unionism was taken by the inclusion of colliery officials into the groups of workers to be organised by the S.W.M.F.. Secondly, the

⁶⁵ However, it should be noted that Winstone was himself described in The Times "as one of the extremists in the South Wales coalfield." The Times, 28.7.21.. S.W.M.F. Annual Conference Report, 1919.

⁶⁶ S.W.M.F. Minutes Special Conference, 8.11.19.

⁶⁷ Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Annual Conference, 1920.

industrial might of the S.W.M.F. was to be employed in what had hitherto been seen as political campaigns. In 1917 the union had aimed "To secure by legislation [sic] a working day of eight hours..." In 1920 this was amended to six hours to be obtained by "industrial and legislative action."⁶⁸ However, once again attempts to exclude Agents, permanent officials and M.P.s from the Executive Council proved the least popular element of the Left's reform programme. Each of the attempts to alter the role of leadership through constitutional reform was heavily defeated.⁶⁹

The Lib-Lab politics and conciliatory approach to industrial relations of the established officers of the S.W.M.F. was inevitably placed under some strain in the turbulent post-war years. It might be expected that the Lib-Labs were by 1919 yesterday's men with views now out of tune with the new climate of industrial warfare. Nevertheless, Richards, Brace, Hartshorn and Onions came through the first eighteen months of peace with their support amongst the rank and file very largely intact.⁷⁰ However, the conflict between their conciliatory instincts and the heightened militancy of the post-war years eventually led to a major crisis for the right-wing officers of the S.W.M.F. during the autumn of 1920.

⁶⁸S.W.M.F. Rules 1919 & 1920.

⁶⁹The Merthyr Pioneer, 18.9.20., reported that the proposals were "strongly negatived". See also Western Mail, 14.9.20.

⁷⁰Hartshorn - the pre-war radical - had apparently "...fairly quickly evolved into a moderate, pragmatic leader...", taking a patriotic line during the war and becoming a steadfast opponent of the 'progressives'. See 'Vernon Hartshorn', in THE DICTIONARY OF LABOUR BIOGRAPHY, Vol. I 1972, J. Bellamy & J. Saville (eds), p. 151. See also P. Stead, 'Vernon Hartshorn: Miners' Agent and Cabinet Minister,' THE GLAMORGAN HISTORIAN, Vol. VI, 1969, pp. 83-94.

The continued rise in the cost of living during the summer of 1920 led to pressure from mining districts for a further wage increase. Brace and Hartshorn, both prominent spokesmen for the miners in the House of Commons and members of the M.F.G.B. Executive, were anxious to avoid conflict between the miners and the government over the wage claim. The South Wales delegates to the M.F.G.B. Annual Conference in July had adopted an aggressive stance from the outset favouring a high wage claim.⁷¹ This militant attitude continued through the long negotiations stretching well into the autumn. Within the Executive of the S.W.M.F. a "fierce struggle" developed between moderates and militants over the tactics to be pursued by the union.⁷² The moderate position of Brace and Hartshorn was defeated at union conferences and within the S.W.M.F. Executive Council. As a result the former resorted to the press and the floor of the House of Commons. Here they publicly opposed S.W.M.F. policy with endorsements of the principle of relating pay to output and denouncements of the suggested removal of safety men during the strike.⁷³ A proposed settlement, strongly favoured by Brace and Hartshorn, was rejected by the South Wales men by almost two to one on the advice of their Executive Council. Having lost their struggle both inside the Executive and among the membership Brace and Hartshorn resigned their positions. A contemporary observer sympathetic to these "level-headed" leaders believed Brace and Hartshorn had been "hounded out" by the "revolutionaries" in South Wales. Their resignations left the Presidency of the S.W.M.F., two seats on the Executive of the S.W.M.F. and

⁷¹Cole, 1923, op. cit., p. 142.

⁷²Arnot, 1975, op. cit., p. 196.

⁷³Minutes of the Lewis Merthyr Joint Committee, 23.10.20: Western Mail, 19.10.20; The Times, 19 & 20.10.20.

M.F.G.B., and one Parliamentary seat, all vacant.⁷⁴ Although 'progressives' did not immediately fill all these positions this was nevertheless an important defeat for the Right signifying that during industrial disputes the rank and file South Wales miner was by late 1920 prepared to support the tactics of the 'progressives'.

These defeats for the Right within the leadership were tangible reward for the Left's attempts to influence the Executive from within. The influence of the post-war militancy and the effective promptings of Ablett and Cook (both of whom were also now Agents) witnessed a discernible swing to the left in Executive policy from the middle of 1920 - Cook became a member of the Executive in January of that year.⁷⁵ Ablett's and Cook's ability to shape Executive policy altered the relationship between delegate conferences and the Executive. Left wing delegates now found they could support the platform which was offering a more radical lead. Thus at a Special Conference in June 1920 Executive recommendations on a range of issues were accepted unanimously by the delegates.⁷⁶ During the 'datum line' strike in October the Executive Council adopted a campaigning approach recommending a vote against the proposed offer and issuing a manifesto to that effect.⁷⁷ The Executive

⁷⁴S.W.M.F. Minutes of Special Conference, 22. & 30.10.20: Minutes of S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 13.11.20; 'Anon', 'The Coal Strike', in ROUND TABLE, No. 41, December 1920, pp.133-34. Arnot, 1975, op. cit., pp. 193-7.

⁷⁵Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 16.1.20. Once on the Executive Cook's influence grew rapidly. Within a year the Executive elevated him to the National Committee of the M.F.G.B. - see Minutes of S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 8.1.21.

⁷⁶Among the unanimously adopted resolutions was a proposal that the M.F.G.B. submit a wage demand "...commensurate with the ascertained surplus profits of the industry." This policy of absorbing profits was a longstanding strategy of the syndicalists in the coalfield intended to drive capital out of the industry. Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Special Conference, 5.6.20.

⁷⁷Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 4.10.20.

also counselled an aggressive prosecution of the strike very much in line with the wishes of the 'progressives'. At a Special Conference the Executive recommended the withdrawal of all men from the collieries including the safety men, thereby jeopardising the future of the pits. The conference backed the Executive call by a majority of around four to one.⁷⁸

It was surely more than a coincidence that this dramatic shift in Executive policy and strategy occurred in the months following Cook's election. In an article which outlined his policy upon election Cook lamented the "continuous loss of powers" by the Federal organisation. This he attributed to:

The policy of the Executive... of thrusting back all inconvenient questions upon Districts, Lodges and individuals... To all intents and purposes the S.W.M.F. has become a non-effective body in its corporate capacity... This process has been a gradual one, but its effect has been to destroy all unified action...

Cook wanted the Executive Council to offer a firm direction and leadership to the South Wales miners. Cook and his allies on the Executive succeeded not only in ensuring the miners were offered a strong lead but also ensured that any leadership provided conformed very closely to 'progressive' policy.

The union's response to the changed economic environment of 1921

⁷⁸The Unofficial Reform Committee met in Pontypridd on the eve of the strike and debated policies aimed at taking control of the pits and the withdrawal of safety men. Woodhouse, op. cit., p. 205. See also Minutes of the Lady Windsor Lodge, 21.10.20.; Lewis Merthyr Lodge Minute Book (Bertic & Trefor), 19.10.20.; and Minutes of S.W.M.F. Special Conference, 22.10.20.

⁷⁹Merthyr Pioneer, 24.1.20.

provided further indications of 'progressive' influence amongst the leadership. As unemployment rose dramatically in the coalfield the S.W.M.F. Executive Council recommended the following policy to a coalfield conference:

...in the event of the government refusing to put into operation the policy of the Labour Party on Unemployment, we take measures to bring the whole labour movement to take drastic action to enforce this policy.

The conference endorsed the Executive's resolution adding a fourteen day deadline for its implementation.⁸⁰ Three days later the representatives from the S.W.M.F. Executive Council to the M.F.G.B. Special Conference argued with force and conviction in favour of a general strike to force the Government's hand. The militant policy was advocated by George Barker and A. J. Cook recently elected to replace Brace and Hartshorn on the M.F.G.B. Executive. Moreover, Winstone, who succeeded Brace to the Presidency of the S.W.M.F. moved the contentious motion on behalf of South Wales - a resolution which Brace would almost certainly have publicly opposed. Although the South Wales motion was rejected by the M.F.G.B. the episode demonstrated the resolve of the leadership to pursue a militant strategy, to offer an aggressive lead to the activists from the Executive Council, and to stand by the policy dictated by conference decisions.⁸¹

The great test of mining trade union leadership emerged during the conflict over wages following de-control of the industry. As an exporting district the South Wales coalfield faced heavy redundancies

⁸⁰Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 18.2.21:. Minutes of the Special Conference, 19.2.21.

⁸¹Arnot, 1975, op. cit., pp.202-03. R. P. Arnot, THE MINERS: YEARS OF STRUGGLE, 1953, pp. 281-83. Tom Richards was the only exception, declaring his opposition to the strike policy.

and significant wage reductions with the removal of the state subsidy.⁸² For the South Wales men a system which allowed some 'pooling' of profits between districts to ensure the continuation of national wage rates had become a priority. In March the national leadership of Hodges and Smith, anxious to avoid a strike, argued for a temporary abandonment of the miners' demand for a 'National Pool'. Again the South Wales Executive proved to be in step with their membership when they recommended the rejection of the national leadership's policy. A South Wales delegate conference gave unanimous backing to their Executive's stand. On this occasion the South Wales policy was endorsed by the M.F.G.B. and the national officers were defeated.⁸³

Once the lockout was underway the South Wales leadership was faced with far more complex and contentious issues to resolve. Perhaps the most pressing of these concerned the removal of the safety men from the pits. The threat posed to the future working of the mines by the removal of safety men constituted the one strong card held by the union. The Government's strenuous efforts during the early days of the lockout to force the return of the safety men underlined the significance attached to safety work.⁸⁴ During the 'datum line' strike this issue had been an important element of the split between Left and Right within the S.W.M.F. leadership. But in the lockout of 1921 the South Wales leaders stood firm in their support for the removal of the safety men. However, under pressure from the Government and the Triple Alliance the M.F.G.B. Executive reluctantly agreed to recommend the safety men's return on

⁸²In fact miners' earnings in the South Wales coalfield fell by around 50% between March and November 1921. Supple, op. cit., pp. 163-64.

⁸³Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 21.3.21., Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Special Conference, 23.3.21., Arnot, 1975, op. cit., p. 205.

⁸⁴See Arnot, 1953, op. cit., pp. 302-11.

April 9th. An uneasy truce ensued for the rest of the week while it appeared that the Triple Alliance might come to the miners' aid. Such hopes were not realised.⁸⁵

Meeting on April 18th to review tactics for the continuing miners' strike in the aftermath of 'Black Friday' and the collapse of the Triple Alliance the S.W.M.F. Executive Council, prompted by Cook and Ablett, returned to its militant stance and recommended that all safety men be withdrawn. The policy was again readily endorsed by a coalfield conference two days later.⁸⁶ However, the M.F.G.B. Conference was not of the same opinion and, despite the efforts of Ablett, the policy was not re-introduced.⁸⁷

As the strike wore on it became clear that there was little or no prospect of a miners' victory. The union's leadership found itself torn between the evidence of increasing hardship in the mining villages and their reluctance to accept a major reduction in the miners' pay. At the end of May the S.W.M.F. Executive refused to recommend a vote either for or against a proposed settlement drawn up by the Government and the coalowners. The membership, however, were clear what they thought of the proposals which were rejected by more than two to one in South Wales. However, after another month had passed by and the miners' situation had substantially worsened, the M.F.G.B. officers arranged a further settlement. Despite their outrage at the unauthorised action of the

⁸⁵Miners at Abercarn voted to reject the instruction to abandon safety work. However, elsewhere although there was substantial tension between the strikers and the police the men largely complied with the instruction. Western Mail, 12-15.4.21.

⁸⁶Western Mail, 18.4.21: Minutes of S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 18.4.21; Minutes of the Special Conference, 20.4.21.

⁸⁷Western Mail, 23.4.21: Arnot, 1975, op. cit., p. 211.

national leaders, Ablett and Cook felt they had no alternative other than to recommend a return to work. Their position was accepted by the S.W.M.F. Executive and, narrowly, by a Special Conference.⁸⁸

Both Black Friday and the eventual defeat of the M.F.G.B. in June were inevitably followed by a round of recriminations. During the dispute the bulk of activist criticism was levelled against the M.F.G.B. officers and Hodges in particular. As a result of the events surrounding 'Black Friday', Hodges faced calls for his resignation, including one from the South Wales Executive itself.⁸⁹ However, Cook and Ablett - who had been involved in the negotiations as S.W.M.F. representatives on the M.F.G.B. Executive - adopted a different stance. They criticised Hodges for his actions but rejected calls for his resignation. Cook and Ablett saw the railway union leadership as the principal villains of the piece. Their first concern was to ensure a vigorous and successful prosecution of the strike, chiefly through the removal of the safety men. The miners remained on strike for a further two and a half months. An internal struggle over Hodges' position would hardly have helped their cause.⁹⁰

After the strike had ended calls were made for the resignation of the officers of the M.F.G.B. and the S.W.M.F. representatives on the

⁸⁸The South Wales Conference voted to endorse the settlement by 112 to 109. Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 29.6.21. South Wales News, 30.6.21. and 1.7.21.

⁸⁹Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 18.4.21.. Western Mail, 19.4.21.. Meeting on 18th April, a coalfield conference voted to defer consideration of demands for Hodges' resignation by 183 votes to 91. Minutes of S.W.M.F. Special Conference, 20.4.21. & Arnot, 1953, op. cit., p. 320. However, it was reported that "Mr.Hodges' critics appeared to be appreciably more numerous than his supporters." Western Mail, 21.4.21.

⁹⁰Western Mail, 18.4.21.; Minutes of the Lewis Merthyr Joint Committee, 1.5.21. (Mass Meeting at Caemawr Field).

national Executive because of the part they had played in reaching a settlement.⁹¹ Just as in the aftermath of 'Black Friday' it was largely thanks to the efforts of left wing leaders that the demands for "a thorough spring clean" made little progress. In his own Rhondda power base Cook's eloquent defence dissuaded mass meetings from pressing for any resignations. He "...denounced the opposition which was made in some quarters to Herbert Smith, Hodges and Robson [M.F.G.B. Officers]. Still some people shouted 'Hosanna' one day, and cried 'crucify him' the next. They should give the leaders named fairplay and before condemning them ask them to visit the district and explain their position."⁹² Cook of course knew full well there was little prospect of the M.F.G.B. leadership coming to the Rhondda to plead their case, nevertheless such arguments served to deflate the opposition.

Cook's position in defence of the M.F.G.B. leadership appears difficult to explain in the light of his comments following the first ballot in mid-June which had decisively rejected a settlement. At a meeting on the 18th June Cook argued:

Certainly no leader, whatever his opinions are, can ignore the men's decision. It will be his duty to carry out the decision or resign his position. It would be more than his job is worth to attempt to negotiate under present conditions any settlement which does not include a national wages board and a national pool.⁹³

⁹¹On 6th July the South Wales Executive received several letters demanding the resignation of the Officers of the M.F.G.B. and the four South Wales representatives to the M.F.G.B. Executive - Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 6.7.21. The Merthyr Pioneer of 9.7.21. reported that Ablett had addressed a mass meeting of miners in Merthyr which had demanded the resignation of the Officers of the M.F.G.B. - but not its Executive of which Ablett was a member.

⁹²South Wales News, 4.7.21: Minutes of the Lewis Merthyr Employees Joint Committee, 1.7.21.

⁹³The Times, 20.6.21.

By the end of June Cook and other leading left wingers such as Ablett were in a difficult position in view of the growing realisation that there was no prospect of victory. While they disapproved of the secretive and unauthorised methods employed by the officers to reach a settlement at this stage they could not honestly endorse an activist call for the strike to continue. It was their belief that the miners had nothing to gain by any further continuation of the dispute which risked dire consequences for the future of mining trade unionism. As a result of their endorsement of the settlement Cook and Ablett were themselves the subjects of resignation calls.⁹⁴

Nevertheless, overall the reputations of left wing leaders were enhanced by their activity during the strike. Both Cook and Ablett had been to the fore in attempts to intensify the strike by the withdrawal of the safety men. Cook in particular gained nationwide prominence for his part in the leadership of the strike.⁹⁵ Moreover, Cook had been repeatedly the subject of police investigation for alleged revolutionary activities during the strike, for which he was imprisoned for two months on 29th July.⁹⁶ Had there been any significant groundswell of opposition to the S.W.M.F. leadership as a result of their conduct during the dispute it was likely to have manifested itself at the Annual Conference held some three weeks after the strike had ended. In the event the

⁹⁴Rhondda No. 1 District Minutes, 25.7.21.. Ablett and Cook were included in the resignation calls submitted to the South Wales Executive on 6.7.21. as two of the four South Wales representatives to the M.F.G.B. Executive. Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 6.7.21.

⁹⁵The Western Mail reported on 30.4.21. "...that many papers throughout the land were blaming him [Cook] for the strike and for the stand the Executive had made."

⁹⁶The Times, 1.6.21. & 16.6.21.. South Wales News, 30.7.21. J. Bellamy & J. Saville (eds) THE DICTIONARY OF LABOUR BIOGRAPHY, Vol III, 1976, p. 39.

officers and the South Wales representatives to the M.F.G.B. Executive were all re-elected.⁹⁷

How significant were the changes in the leadership of the S.W.M.F. during the early post-war years? A combination of misfortune and the struggle over the conduct of the 'datum line' dispute had resulted in substantial personnel changes in the S.W.M.F. leadership. The resignations of Brace and Hartshorn from their posts in the S.W.M.F. in 1920 and the death of Alfred Onions (S.W.M.F. Treasurer) on 5th July 1921 left Richards isolated as the last of the 'old guard' among the officers of the union. Richards was similarly isolated in the South Wales delegation to the M.F.G.B. Executive. The representatives of 1920 had all gone. Hartshorn and Brace also resigned from the M.F.G.B. over the 'datum line' strike, and Barker stood down in January 1921 on being elected a Member of Parliament. In 1921 Richards was joined by Ablett, Cook and Morrell on the M.F.G.B. Executive. Important though these changes were, established figures on the right of the union retained substantial support and influence. This was exemplified by the swift return to prominence of Vernon Hartshorn. Having resigned all his positions in November 1920, Hartshorn was first re-elected on to the S.W.M.F. Executive Council in March 1921 and subsequently regained the Presidency of the S.W.M.F. in December 1921 following the death of Winstone.⁹⁸

⁹⁷The normal membership ballot was abandoned because the cost would have proved prohibitive in the aftermath of the lockout. The conference voted to re-elect the sitting representatives. An unlikely outcome had there been strong opposition to this course.

⁹⁸There are some indications that Hartshorn had moved to the left - for a while at least - as a result of the experience of the 1921 lockout. At a May Day rally in 1922 Hartshorn announced that "...he had been right always when he had been fighting and wrong always when he had been trying to bring about a spirit of conciliation." Arnot, 1975, op. cit., p. 216. Minutes of the S.W.M.F. Executive Council, 21.3.21.. Bellamy & (Footnote continued)

What impact had the 'progressives' made upon the leadership of the S.W.M.F. between 1914 and 1921? They could claim some significant progress in the election of their own alternative leadership in the place of more conservative figures. From the end of 1918 changes in personnel led to the Left being able to wield increasing influence on the South Wales Executive. From the middle of 1920 'progressive' strategies repeatedly won support at Executive level. However, the stormy industrial relations of the post-war years did not significantly erode the support for prominent figures among the established leadership. Tom Richards remained General Secretary until his death in 1931, and his pronouncements continued to carry substantial weight amongst the rank and file. Similarly Hartshorn retained significant influence as an M.P., regular columnist in the South Wales News on coalfield affairs and as President from the end of 1921. The key officerships of the S.W.M.F., for the most part, remained in the hands of trade unionists with views at odds with those of the 'progressives'.

How can the resilience of support for right wing leaders, among reputedly the most politically 'advanced' and industrially militant section of the British labour movement be accounted for? Again why was it that attempts to change the relationship between leaders and led via organisational reform similarly came to nought? The coalfield had been the melting pot for such schemes of structural reform before 1914. Nevertheless, even in this respect the forward march of the 'progressives' seems also rather sluggish. Lay delegate conference control of policy was formalised in 1917 and dissident lodges could now

⁹⁸(continued)

Saville, 1972, op. cit., p. 151. The Times, 5.12.21.

more easily summon a Special Conference. Yet apart from this there were no reforms which altered the balance of power between leaders and led between 1914 and 1921. Such an outcome requires some explanation.

There have been two main strands of explanation for the failure of the 'progressives' to transform leadership in South Wales. Firstly it has been argued that because the S.W.M.F. was so responsive to rank and file demands opposition to individual leaders or structures rarely spread beyond the most militant areas of the coalfield such as the Rhondda. Secondly, in contrast to this emphasis on a democratic tradition labour historians of the Left have argued that the S.W.M.F. was a highly ossified organisation unable to change because of the dead weight of entrenched bureaucratic power. In this view the local power of the Miners' Agents proved the barrier to reform.

In a recent comparison of British trade union structures Clegg concluded that in mining "the members exerted a greater authority over national decisions than did the members of any other great union."⁹⁹ Despite the deep divisions within the M.F.G.B. and the keen mistrust of leadership felt in some quarters nevertheless contemporaries generally agreed that the union was responsive to internal pressure for change. At a conference held in 1919 between 'progressives' from the mining, rail and engineering industries J. T. Murphy discovered that the miners placed great reliance in their organisation. Both the miners and the railwaymen rejected any move to supplement or replace their trade union structures by unofficial workplace organisation: "Their representatives argued that they could change the structure and the leadership of their unions through the ordinary machinery of the unions..."¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹Clegg, op. cit., p. 279.

¹⁰⁰J. T. Murphy, PREPARING FOR POWER, 1972, p. 156.

At a regional level there was little doubt that even the advocates of reform had great respect for the democratic structures of the S.W.M.F.. Thus in 1915 Noah Rees, a co-author of the 'Miner's Next Step', observed:

...in no other union is the opinion of the rank and file so fully felt and so quickly exercised and registered in any agitation...¹⁰¹

This view was, if anything, strengthened by the experience of the war and post-war unrest. In the middle of the 1921 lockout Noah Ablett told a mass meeting in Merthyr that:

...he felt the miners could honestly claim to have their leaders under control. From the unofficial movement among the miners, they had made the official movement democratic.¹⁰²

The structure of the S.W.M.F. enabled strong activist controls over policy making through lodge meetings which mandated delegates to coalfield conferences. These conferences were regular features of the decision making process both in setting a programme of demands and during disputes to determine the union's course of action. The rank and file could feel that they too controlled union policy in important areas through the requirement for a membership ballot before a strike could be called or a settlement reached. Clearly, such an arrangement imposed a severe constraint on leadership's freedom of action. The urge to mount reform programmes and depose leaders was much reduced by the feeling that structures and leaders alike could be made to reflect 'rank and file opinion'.

¹⁰¹Justice, 12.8.15., p. 2. Quoted in Arnot, 1975, op. cit., pp.95-96.

¹⁰²Merthyr Pioneer, 23.4.21.

In our second main strand of explanation for the structural conservatism of the S.W.M.F. some historians have emphasised the enormous power of officialdom and its ability to frustrate reform. Thus, in his history of the South Wales miners Robin Page Arnot argued that:

...officials, once elected, were in practice irremovable. Hence it was impossible, with an Executive made up of miners' agents, for Ablett or S. O. Davies to realise their dream of a centralised democracy in the coalfield.¹⁰³

Other historians have stressed the pressures which inclined miners' agents towards a conservative outlook. Francis and Smith suggest that:

Their style of life was more that of a professional man, a white collar worker, than it was that of a collier. The position was of considerable responsibility and had commensurate power and influence.

The agents are likened to "American political bosses" their qualities being:

...those of moderation, of financial acumen, pragmatism and administrative skill; not a recipe for a zealot. [Moreover]... their removal from office was not easy nor could their right to take unilateral decisions be challenged to much effect.¹⁰⁴

These "Czars" of the S.W.M.F. and the power they wielded within their local district were seen as the major obstacle to any reform which might re-order the relationship between leaders and led in the union.

In this approach figures such as Mabon, Hartshorn, Stanton, and Hodges are evinced as epitomes of the conservatism of Agents. If they did not start their trade union careers on the right the implication is

¹⁰³Arnot, 1975, op. cit., p. 165.

¹⁰⁴Francis & Smith, op. cit., pp. 4-5.

clearly that power corrupts and the Agent would naturally move in that direction. Such accounts rarely draw attention to the election of Cook, Ablett, S. O. Davies and others as miners' Agents during our period. These men remained at the forefront of 'progressive' activity in South Wales even after their election as Agents. It would appear that the strategy of leading figures on the left had altered since the defeat of the Miners' Next Step. Rather than destroy the power of the Agents they now set out to capture it for themselves. After the war those schemes of reform which echoed the Miners' Next Step and attempted to dislodge the Agents from the Executive by rule received little support among the broad layers of activists. This was partly in order to avoid 'shooting themselves in the foot' by undermining the influence of Agents such as Cook and Ablett. But perhaps more significant was the widespread belief that Agents fulfilled an important function on the Executive. Opposition to the syndicalist view was not based purely upon a mixture of conservatism and a blind faith in leadership. The Merthyr Pioneer reporting on the 1920 S.W.M.F. Rules Conference which had rejected a proposal to exclude M.P.s and Agents from the Executive expressed the view that:

...it is difficult to all how an Executive that excluded the men who in the various districts handle every string of Federation policy and programme, could function so well as a central controlling body that included them.¹⁰⁵

Attacks on the Agents' position within the upper echelons of the S.W.M.F. attracted little support during the post-war years.

It is not difficult to understand why leading figures on the Left should make this apparent volte face and become officials. Employers

¹⁰⁵Merthyr Pioneer, 18.9.20.

were increasingly using the blacklist to weed out militants and keep them apart from the men in the large combines where the militants had built their reputations. In his autobiography W. J. Edwards described how he was hounded out by the managers in the local Combine and could only find employment in a smaller independent colliery. He bemoaned the fact that:

...my banishment from all the Combine pits, by cutting me off from the ten thousand miners employed in them, seriously affected my propaganda value... my hatred for the Combine and all its works could not affect my desire to work in a Combine pit.¹⁰⁶

His only route back to the workforce in the Combine was to become elected either agent or checkweigher and enter the men's employ. Edwards became a checkweigher in 1916 - the solution of more prominent figures was to seek election as agents.¹⁰⁷ While figures such as Ablett and Cook were in the employ of the Combine their ability to agitate and propagandise may well have been constrained by threats from management.¹⁰⁸ Hence an agency offered a position of much needed security. Viewed in this way employment as a miners' agent, far from breeding conservatism, may have allowed militants to adopt a more vigorous public stance free from the fear of victimisation.

It would appear that explanations of continuity in the government of the S.W.M.F. which emphasise its democratic nature and responsiveness are better founded than those which stress bureaucratic obstacles. The

¹⁰⁶W. J. Edwards, FROM THE VALLEY I CAME, 1956, p. 237.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., pp. 239-40.

¹⁰⁸The Lewis Merthyr Combine threatened Cook with dismissal and eviction from a company owned house in 1914 because of his militant activities. P. Davies, 'The Making of A. J. Cook', in LLAFFUR, Vol. 2. No. 3, Summer 1978, p 46.

conservatism which permitted Richards and Brace to remain leading officers of the union for so long was located among the rank and file miners themselves rather than in the constitution of their organisation. Any slowness to change the structures of personnel and leadership in the S.W.M.F. had little to do with the rigidities imposed by a right wing dominated bureaucratic machine. Two further factors appear to have been of far greater significance. Firstly, a tradition of rank and file loyalty to leaders who were viewed as tried and tested, whether they were of the Left or Right. And secondly, a generally held belief that the structures of the union were democratic and enabled the voice of the membership to be heard. This was borne out as much by the rank and file endorsement of the Sankey pay proposals in 1919 - against the advice of the Left - as it was by the victory of Cook and Ablett over Brace and Hartshorn during the 'datum line' dispute in 1920. This democratic structure also led the Left to believe that leaders had far less influence in the S.W.M.F. than in other unions.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, the Left were less concerned with the removal of figures such as Richards. The division between Left and Right in the S.W.M.F. was at least as great as elsewhere in British trade unionism. However, the South Wales 'progressives' believed that those officials who did not share their viewpoint could be made to do their bidding.

¹⁰⁹Noah Rees argued that from the viewpoint of the South Wales miner: "The opposition that he has to fear to concerted action in future is that of the official element in other unions, who wield more power than that wielded by his own leaders." Justice, 12.8.15.

V. Leadership in the S.W.M.F. - a Conservative Monolith?

It remains to consider to what extent leadership in the S.W.M.F. can be regarded as theoretically conservative and monolithic in character. Given the entry of such prominent figures from the Left into the leadership of the union it might be assumed that both suggestions can be immediately rejected. However, it has been argued that differences between the Left and Right were considerably reduced in practice once the former had become embroiled in the machinery of professional trade unionism. In describing the element of continuity amongst leadership in South Wales, Stead observed that:

Above all... the whole body of conventions governing collective bargaining restricted the degree of manoeuvre of all trade union leaders.¹¹⁰

And the Miners' Next Step had after all warned that: "The possession of power invariably leads to corruption... in spite of good intentions."¹¹¹ The careers of South Wales leaders such as Stanton and Hodges certainly provide some support to such an interpretation. Both men moved to the right having risen to prominence as left wing critics of the S.W.M.F. establishment.

Even so, there seem to be few grounds for suggesting that incorporation within the machinery of conciliation inevitably resulted in the moderation of all left wing leaders in South Wales. For example, it has been argued that Cook:

...attempted the impossible. He was the successful firebrand on the platform at the weekends. He tried to be the conciliatory negotiator during mid-week. But his language was

¹¹⁰ Stead, 1973, op. cit., p. 343.

¹¹¹ Quoted in B. Holton, 1976, op. cit., p. 85.

so extreme on the platform that he was not able to overcome the prejudices it created in the minds of those who met him across the table.¹¹²

Whether or not Cook adopted the role of the "conciliatory negotiator" his approach to the place of trade union activity in the struggle of class against class was not fundamentally altered by involvement in the machinery of conciliation. Cook, along with other professional South Wales trade unionists such as Ablett and S. O. Davies, were still regarded by the Special Branch as dangerous revolutionaries for some years to come.¹¹³ It is true that on occasion Cook and Ablett attempted to persuade miners against strike action and, as in 1921, joined right wing figures in efforts to foreshorten strikes.¹¹⁴ However, this was not because they had dedicated themselves to seeking the middle road but rather because they were attempting to carefully husband the resources of the union so that they might be harnessed for larger struggles rather than being frittered away in continuous sporadic and unco-ordinated strike action.

The leading 'official' left wingers, for the most part remained convinced that the miners would only realise lasting improvement by employing the industrial strength of their own organisation in a class struggle against the coalowners, the state and the capitalist system. During the 'datum line' strike Agents such as Cook and Ablett supported

¹¹²E. P. Harries, in H. Tracey (ed), THE BRITISH LABOUR PARTY, 1943, p. 248, quoted in Stead, 1973, op. cit., p. 353.

¹¹³K. O. Morgan, 1987, op. cit., p. 75.

¹¹⁴See, for example, Minutes of the Lewis Merthyr Employees Joint Committee, 11.2.21. where Cook advised the men against taking strike action to force the re-instatement of men sacked for filling 'dirty coal'.

the 'progressives' campaign for a seizure of the mines.¹¹⁵ Even though the central aim of their activity remained the destruction of 'capital' in the coal industry this did not prevent them seeking accommodations with employers through the established machinery of conciliation. A central criticism against the right wing leadership was that their reluctance to resort to industrial action limited the concessions made by the coalowners. As negotiating officials the Left believed they had the opportunity to prove the superiority of a policy of confrontation. This did not necessitate resorting to strike action at every opportunity. It was felt that the threat was often enough to persuade management to grant concessions more readily. The Left leadership remained willing to pursue aggressive industrial action and to prosecute that action with vigour as was demonstrated by Ablett and Cook's part in the 'datum line' strike and the 1921 lock-out. Moreover, while their position did on occasion result in conflict with some sections of the Left they continued to actively support 'progressive' unofficial activity including their attempts at fundamental reform of the union. Ablett and Cook were to play a prominent role in building the Minority Movement in the South Wales coalfield in the aftermath of the defeat of 1921.¹¹⁶ It seems difficult in the light of the record of such figures to argue that leadership in South Wales was a theoretically conservative construct.

Having established that the Left leadership did not conform to a conservative consensus after election to positions of responsibility there seems little reason to describe leadership in the S.W.M.F. as monolithic. However, it is true that leadership in the coalfield largely

¹¹⁵ Davies, 1978, op. cit., p. 51.

¹¹⁶ Woodhouse, op. cit., p. 235; Morgan, 1987, op. cit., p. 75.

shared a common social experience and career hierarchy.¹¹⁷ As one commentator observed:

Mabon, Tom Richards, William Brace, Vernon Hartshorn, A. J. Cook and Frank Hodges... had all worked as boys in the mine, were products of Sunday Schools, local preachers, more deeply steeped in the Christian doctrine of the human value of personality than in any economic theory...¹¹⁸

Leadership of Left and Right also shared an active involvement in the wider social institutions which characterised working class life in the coalfield.¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, despite these cultural and social similarities leadership in the S.W.M.F. became bitterly divided in the post-war years. Their differences were often of a critical nature and very public as in the spring of 1919 and the 'datum line' strike. The struggle between widely divergent approaches to trade unionism was not confined to these notable episodes; the debate between figures such as Hartshorn and Cook was ongoing and fundamental despite their membership of the same Executive Council.¹²⁰ While Cook and Ablett advocated the establishment of soviets in South Wales, Hartshorn campaigned vigorously against revolution arguing that miners needed to exhibit "...all

¹¹⁷See Stead, 1973, op. cit., passim.

¹¹⁸Thomas Jones, WELSH BROTH, 1951, p. 143, quoted in Francis & Smith, op. cit., p. 39. He might also have included other Left figures such as Ablett in such a list.

¹¹⁹For example, in 1919 Cook was a member of the Rhondda District Council and the Pensions Committee. Pontypridd Observer, 13.12.19.

¹²⁰See, for example, Cook's outline of his policy upon election to the S.W.M.F. Executive Council in which he re-affirmed his support for the Miners' Next Step and advocated "Not 'more production' but 'less production' until we bring the tottering edifice of Capitalism to the ground." Merthyr Pioneer, 24.1.20.. Hartshorn reportedly described Cook as "the biggest fool in the coalfield." Quoted in P. Stead, 1969, op. cit.. See also R. H. Desmarais, 'Charisma and Conciliation: A Sympathetic Look at A. J. Cook', SOCIETAS, Winter, 1973, pp. 45-60, where it is argued that Cook maintained his militant stance beyond 1926, as demonstrated by his strong opposition to Mondism.

possible wisdom and tact, forbearance and understanding to avert it."¹²¹ With the resurgence of support for the Left in the later war years and the election of individual left-wingers to official positions it was no longer possible to describe the leadership of the S.W.M.F. as in any sense monolithic.

VI. Conclusion.

Before 1914 the South Wales Unofficial Reform Committee had been by far the most prominent and influential 'rank and file' opposition in Britain. In part this was a reaction against the pre-war system of conciliation. The spread of conciliation and the centralisation of industrial relations continued apace after 1914. According to the interpretation of the 'rank and file-ist' school those developments would be expected to result in the continued growth of unofficial organisation. In fact, of course, almost the opposite was the case. The period of highly centralised national negotiations between 1915 and 1921 coincided with the nadir of post-1910 unofficial organisation. It was not until after the 1921 lock-out and the destruction of that centralised network - at the behest of the employers - that informal organisation, in the form of the Miners' Minority Movement, recovered its pre-war levels of influence. Far from being the cause of increased internal union conflict the centralisation of industrial relations between 1915 and 1921 contributed to the relative decline of unofficial organisation because activists on the Left themselves both advocated and worked to create a centralised system.

¹²¹Merthyr Pioneer, 3.5.19. & 16.8.19.. See also P. Stead, 1969, op. cit., who contrasts the "wild irresponsible demagogue" Charles Stanton - miners' Agent and M.P. for Aberdare - with Ablett the "highly theoretical Marxist." Both men were of the same generation of South Wales miners leaders.

With regard to the centralisation of trade union government the majority of activists and rank and file in the S.W.M.F. remained wedded to a decentralised structure. The desire to retain a significant degree of control at the District level was particularly strong in the valleys of South Wales. However, contrary to the 'rank and file-ist' interpretation, support for decentralisation was associated strongly with conservative forces both within the rank and file and the leadership. Centralisation - with qualifications - remained the policy of the 'progressives' on the Left of the union.

The reform strategies of the Miners' Next Step, including their advocacy of greater centralisation, have perhaps received too much historical attention. The belief that the S.W.M.F. was undemocratic and unresponsive and that its structures were in need of fundamental change found little support outside a relatively small circle of the most militant activists. This focus on the Miners' Next Step is largely the result of the revolutionary nature of its programme and the substantial pre-war support for some of the document's policy prescriptions. After 1914 the latter justification simply did not apply. A further significant factor in the high profile accorded the Miners' Next Step was the prominence and influence of its leading advocates. However, at a coalfield level these leaders were very largely overshadowed by established figures of the right and the centre even during the stormy post-war years. The 1919 S.W.M.F. Conference provided an indication of the extent of support for the syndicalists in South Wales. There Winstone, with the support of the I.L.P., defeated A. J. Cook by 227 votes to 24 in the election for S.W.M.F. Vice-President.¹²² At the same

¹²² Minutes of S.W.M.F. Annual Conference, June 1919.

Conference two 'progressive' candidates who were unopposed by an I.L.P. member polled 61 and 71 votes respectively. This suggests that support for syndicalists - indicated by Cook's total of 24 votes - only constituted approximately one third of total 'progressive' strength. The majority remained aligned with the radical wing of the I.L.P.. It should be remembered that these lodge votes were generally determined by activists who attended union meetings - a constituency which might be expected to produce strong support for the more militant candidates.

The currency of the Left remained at a generally low ebb while the state displayed a willingness to grant concessions to the miners during the first fifteen months of peace. However, as the state substituted confrontation for concession on miners' pay during 1920, the South Wales miners increasingly switched their support from the conciliators to the militants. The 'progressives' seized the opportunity to extend their influence beyond their local strongholds into new areas. By the third quarter of 1920 it was clear that the 'progressives' had won the argument and their advocacy of an aggressive stance in negotiations with the government accorded with majority opinion across the coalfield. The S.W.M.F. proved to be responsive to the changing opinions of its rank and file. The change of direction in Executive policy during 1920 did not lag significantly behind the mood of the membership itself. From late 1920 it appears that the industrial policy of the union was decided very largely by the 'progressives'. Their strategies were adopted first by the Executive Council and then upon the latter's recommendation endorsed by coalfield conferences.

This is not to suggest, however, that the full range of 'progressive' strategies were now accepted by activists or rank and file. Rather the 'progressives' selected from their range of policies

those which they knew would be acceptable to the rank and file. While these were undoubtedly more aggressively militant strategies than those favoured by the right, the 'progressives' were little nearer gaining general support for their syndicalist policies. Even during the course of bitterly contested strikes the most militant sections of the union failed to do so much as consider the syndicalist strategy of making inroads into capitalist ownership of the pits via 'encroaching control'.¹²³

Although Cook and Ablett gained the headlines for their aggressive industrial stance they continued to find little support for the implementation of the Miners' Next Step. Indeed, it was only by abandoning that document's prescriptions that the 'progressives' were able to make a decisive impact on the S.W.M.F.. In order to be effective the 'progressives' were forced to shelve their principles and seek to capture leadership from within rather than destroying it from without. The leading 'progressives' continued to publicly advocate the policies of the Miners' Next Step but made little or no progress towards the practical implementation of its policies. The composition and certain policies of leadership in the S.W.M.F. had been substantially altered by 1921 - without any major reform of the organisational structures of the union.

¹²³ Minutes of the Rhondda No. 1 District Committee, and Minutes of the Lewis Merthyr Combine Employees Committee, (the stronghold of A. J. Cook) September-November 1920 & April-June 1921, *passim*.

SECTION II - CONCLUSION

This summary draws together the findings of the chapters in this Section by considering four central areas on the theme of government and power in labour organisation. The first of these concerns the centralisation of both collective bargaining and trade union government. A recapitulation of the attitudes of activists to those processes enquires whether centralisation resulted in an increase in unofficial trade union organisation. In a second area relationships between leaders and led are considered along with an assessment of the stereotypical roles apportioned to them by the 'rank and file-ist' school. Thirdly, there is a summary of the assessments made in our case studies concerning the responsiveness of labour organisations to the pressures from their lay membership. The fourth and final area of discussions involves an examination of certain theories of trade union government in an attempt to account for the different performances of the organisations studied in the course of this Section. An overview of the issues raised is offered in conclusion.

I

The centralisation of both trade union structures and collective bargaining systems during the first part of the twentieth century have often been explained almost entirely as passive responses to broader forces exogenous to trade unionism itself. The critical forces adduced in such accounts have typically been the consolidation of capital and state intervention. On the question of the role of capital, a factor which attracted a good deal of contemporary attention, Hinton,

paraphrasing contemporary syndicalist thought, suggested:

The centralisation of trade unionism, whether it be in the Miners' Federation, the Triple Alliance or the putative General Council of the T.U.C., had proceeded in response to the concentration of the forces of capitalism.¹

It has been argued during the course of this Section that such a picture is in need of some qualification. The discussions of rail and mining industrial relations, in Chapters V, VI, and VII above, indicated that the unions forced the pace of centralisation against the wishes of employers who were anxious to retain freedom of action at company or district level. It was also argued that the centralisation and consolidation of labour organisation was similarly not a passive response to like changes in the organisation of capital. Thus, for example, in mining the M.F.G.B. established full-time national officers in 1918 - a vital step in the erosion of District authority and the creation of a single centralised machine.² The mine owners' association, far from forcing the pace, actually followed the example of the M.F.G.B. during the winter of 1919 by establishing its own post of full-time national secretary.³

Despite contemporary claims that trade union consolidation was required as a purely defensive response to prior centralisation by employers, in rail and mining, at least, there appears to be little evidence to sustain such an argument. Indeed the continued fragmentation of ownership is now a noted feature of broad sections of British

¹J. Hinton, THE FIRST SHOP STEWARDS MOVEMENT, 1973, p. 313.

²M.F.G.B. Annual Conference, 1918, p. 32.

³B. Supple, 1987, op. cit., p. 147.

industry among economic historians.⁴ Small scale, often family based, enterprises remained characteristic of the British firm in most major industries up to and beyond the First World War. This was certainly the case in engineering, coal mining, ship building, iron and steel and the cotton industry. It is therefore difficult to conceive of the centralisation of trade unions, or indeed industrial relations systems, as a response to the rise of monopoly capitalism.

How then can we account for the centralisation of industrial relations and union government if these were not simply responses to the consolidation of capital? The studies of the rail and mining industries above suggest that collective bargaining systems became centralised as a result of two main factors. Firstly, the attempts by trade unions to establish a single national standard for pay and conditions. And secondly, as a result of the state's urgent need to maintain high and constant output during the war. In some sectors of industry the precise pressures were rather different. Thus in cotton, rather than high output, the government's concern was to restrict production so as to alleviate the pressure on shipping space imposed by imports of raw cotton while at the same time preventing the emergence of high unemployment and associated social unrest. Nevertheless the stimulus to centralise collective bargaining was the same - government regulation of the industry.⁵

The increased centralisation of trade union machinery after 1914 occurred largely in tandem with the emergence of national bargaining

⁴See, for a recent example, B. Elbaum & W. Lazonick, (eds.) *THE DECLINE OF THE BRITISH ECONOMY*, 1986, especially the editors' introduction.

⁵A. Fowler, 'War and Labour Unrest', in A. Fowler & T. Wyke, (eds.), *THE BAREFOOT ARISTOCRATS*, 1987, p. 150.

systems. While it is true, therefore, that to some extent the centralisation of union structures was a response to outside changes it is certainly not the case that these were imposed by employers. In mining, rail and on the docks it was the unions who displayed the strongest desire for centralisation while the employers merely acquiesced to the introduction of national collective bargaining under pressure from the state during the war emergency.⁶ Trade union desires for national bargaining were not the only, or even always the main, factors leading to the centralisation of collective bargaining and union government in all industries. However, in the rail and coal industries, trade unions played an important and sometimes underestimated role in those twin processes.

Some historians of labour organisation have argued that the centralisation of trade union structures was not necessarily associated with the growth of collective bargaining.⁷ Even so, during the second decade of the twentieth century there can be little doubt that a strong relationship existed between the development of national collective bargaining and centralisation of trade union structures. Some unions, such as the N.U.R., centralised partly in order to be better able to force national bargaining upon their employers. Others, for example the M.F.G.B., centralised largely as a response to the advent of national pay bargaining. A number of other unions responded in like fashion. Perhaps the most extreme example was the Workers' Union which

⁶For the opposition of port employers to centralisation see, R. Bean, 'The Port of Liverpool: Employers and industrial relations, 1919-39', in B. L. Anderson & P.J.M. Storey, (eds.) *COMMERCE, INDUSTRY AND TRANSPORT. STUDIES IN ECONOMIC CHANGE ON MERSEYSIDE*, 1983, pp. 95-120.

⁷H. A. Turner, *TRADE UNION GROWTH STRUCTURE AND POLICY*, 1962, p. 226. A. Reid, 'The Division Of Labour and Politics in Britain, 1880-1920', in W. J. Mommsen & H. Husung, (eds.), *THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE UNIONISM IN GREAT BRITAIN AND GERMANY 1880-1914*, 1985, p. 155.

dramatically strengthened the scope and authority of its Executive in 1919 as a response to the extension of national collective bargaining into new areas.⁸ With the essential negotiating functions of trade unions increasingly accruing to the national level it was hardly surprising to find decision making and power being similarly centralised. It should be re-emphasised that in most cases the centralisation of collective bargaining was initiated by the unions. In addition to the railway and mining unions Clegg has indicated that trade unions led the way in the building, docks and engineering industries.⁹

All this is not to suggest that the development of national collective bargaining and the centralisation of trade union government were unrelated, but rather that the centralisation of both were not unwanted external impositions. Trade union organisations played a positive role in the wartime centralisation of industrial relations. Moreover, the studies in this Section have shown that centralisation was not a strategy imposed by a power hungry national leadership upon an unwilling rank and file. Activists in both rail unions strongly advocated a centralised national bargaining system for two main reasons. Firstly, they were anxious to improve the wages and conditions of their colleagues employed by the least well organised companies via national standardisation. And secondly they were acutely aware of the need for swift and co-ordinated industrial action in an industry vulnerable to blacklegging. In the S.W.M.F. the most 'advanced' radicals in the coalfield were, similarly, strong supporters of national bargaining. They also advocated some measures of centralisation of union structures both at national and coalfield level. Even in the co-operative movement

⁸R. Hyman, *THE WORKERS' UNION*, 1971, pp. 113-15.

⁹Clegg, 1985, op. cit., pp. 167; 204; 206; 256.

there was a strong movement among the most radical activists towards greater consolidation of forces and the development of a more centralised national structure. In all these cases the principal motivation was greater power and effectiveness in the struggle with capital.

Nevertheless it would be wrong to imply that there was unanimity within the organisations studied over the centralisation of the machinery of internal government. Indeed there was considerable confusion and disagreement amongst contemporaries over whether or not such centralisation constituted a desirable trend. A particular concern amongst militants was the growth of bureaucracy and the powers of individual leaders. As Holton has explained, the authors of the Miners' Next Step wrestled with this issue:

While the pamphlet called for one united industrial union... this should not be equated with a desire for centralised control over policy. Central administration was to be retained simply for routine administration... What the syndicalists wanted was decentralised control by the rank and file coupled with unity in action...¹⁰

The conflict between activist desires for greater centralisation and their mistrust of leadership was a constant theme of the struggle over power and authority within trade unions between 1914 and 1921. Indeed in A.S.L.E. & F., the N.U.R. and the S.W.M.F. some of those activists who maintained a professedly revolutionary approach to their trade union activity advocated schemes of union government designed to decentralise power in an attempt to undermine leadership. Nevertheless,

¹⁰B. Holton, BRITISH SYNDICALISM 1900-1914: MYTHS AND REALITIES, 1976, p. 86.

despite the contemporary attention given to these blueprints for reform the 'progressives' never successfully resolved the conflict between their desire for centralisation and 'rank and file' control. Holton correctly argues that the proposals of the Miners' Next Step should not be confused with the centralisation of union power structures. This also applies to the post-war reform proposals of the District Council movements in A.S.L.E. & F. and the N.U.R.. However, in practice these more radical 'progressives' repeatedly gave their support to centralisation. They did so because of the high priority 'progressives' attached to the centralisation of the union's 'fighting power'. Their scheme for major structural reform, designed to counteract the growth of leadership authority, gained little support, partly no doubt because of conservatism, but largely because even the majority of left inclined activists in each union favoured a more centralised system. This majority chose to constrain leadership through constitutional checks which strengthened lay power within a centralised system. They rejected any formal steps towards decentralisation and argued that centralisation should be pursued to the utmost in order to ensure in Tom Mann's words "...greater power and more effective solidarity."¹¹

There remains one further conclusion to be drawn from our study of the impact of centralisation. Despite the assertions of Price and others to the contrary, there was no straightforward relationship between the centralisation of union government and the growth of unofficial organisation. Indeed in the S.W.M.F., the centre of unofficial organisation in the mining industry, such movements as the Unofficial Reform Committee and the Miners' Minority Movement were at their height during the years of decentralised negotiations before 1914 and after

¹¹T. Mann, TOM MANN'S MEMOIRS, 1923, p. 120.

1921. However, between those years when both union government and bargaining structures became increasingly centralised unofficial organisation in the S.W.M.F. reached a low ebb.

In the N.U.R. there was undoubtedly a marked upsurge in unofficial organisation through the District Councils movement during the war years. However, it is difficult to see that movement as a reaction against excessive centralisation when one of its main priorities was a still greater degree of centralisation. The struggle was principally one for power. Accordingly once leading figures from the District Councils movement had gained positions of real influence on the Executive that movement went into decline. In A.S.L.E. & F. the history of opposition to national leadership based around district organisation followed a completely different timetable to that of its counterpart in the N.U.R.. In the latter such opposition made a significant impact from 1915 and started to decline and fracture from early in 1920. In A.S.L.E. & F., attempts to co-ordinate the districts did not commence until after the war. District organisation subsequently increased its influence into the post-war trade depression. It is difficult therefore to see these movements as straightforward reactions to changes in railway industrial relations which of course both unions experienced over a common timetable.¹²

The only wartime unofficial organisation of any consequence which

¹²Of course in both unions the District Councils were officially recognised bodies. Although the District Councils in A.S.L.E. & F. only gained official recognition from 1917 it was only in its official guise that the movement gained any strength. Nevertheless, in so far as they co-ordinated activist opposition at the local and national level, a function well outside their constitutional role, the District Council movements in the N.U.R. and A.S.L.E. & F. warrant inclusion as unofficial organisation.

was truly independent of the official structures emerged in the engineering industry in the form of the Shop Stewards and Workers' Committee Movement (S.S. & W.C.M.). Yet even in engineering the unofficial movement was a far from universal phenomenon.¹³ Moreover, although the S.S. & W.C.M. lingered on throughout the post-war period its influence declined rapidly and dramatically after the end of hostilities. Hinton accounted for the eclipse of the S.S. & W.C.M. by reference to the defeat of the 'Forty Hours' strikes in January 1919 and the weeding out of militants from the workshops against a background of high unemployment.¹⁴ However, there was no resurgence of influence for the S.S. & W.C.M. once employment levels had recovered by mid 1919. Unofficial organisation played little or no part in the record levels of strike activity in the engineering industry during 1919 and 1920 even though the Shop Stewards Movement had retained resources of committed activists and press.¹⁵ Moreover, as suggested above the A.S.E., and subsequently the A.E.U., centralised their internal structures after the war and continued to press for national bargaining. Despite all these factors the S.S. & W.C.M. did not recover. The broad support for the Movement between 1916 and 1918 would appear to have been a response to the specific pressures of war upon the engineering industry rather than any generalised reaction against the centralisation of union structures.

¹³A. Reid, 'Dilution, trade unionism and the state in Britain during the First World War', in S. Tolliday & J. Zeitlin, (eds.) SHOP FLOOR BARGAINING AND THE STATE: HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES, 1985, p. 66-67.

¹⁴Hinton, 1973, op. cit., p. 271.

¹⁵The numbers of working days lost due to industrial disputes in the metal, engineering and shipbuilding industries totalled 12,248,000 in 1919 and 3,402,000 in 1920. During the height of the unofficial wartime unrest, in 1917, the number of days lost only reached 3,063,000. Source, C. J. Wrigley, (ed.) A HISTORY OF BRITISH INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS, Vol. II: 1914-1939, 1987, p. 15.

During the First World War many unions - but not all, witness the S.W.M.F. and A.S.L.E. & F. - experienced a marked increase in what can broadly be defined as unofficial activity. However, this activity does not appear to have been a rebellion against the centralisation of industrial relations and union government as such. Rather where unofficial organisation occurred outside engineering it was for the most part an attempt to gain control of those centralised structures. Those who accepted the theoretical critiques of officialdom and collective bargaining constituted only a small minority even during the war. Their unofficial movements only gained mass support - in engineering and within the N.U.R. - for their militant and aggressive stance over the specifics of pay and conditions. After the war even that support began to dwindle as the official structure adopted a more militant stance and the erstwhile unofficial leaders were elected to positions of power within the official structures. It is to the issue of leadership which we must now turn.

II

In the second main area of discussion - the relationships between leaders and led - we are concerned with whether 'leadership' and 'rank and file' conformed to the stereotypical roles apportioned to them by the 'rank and file-ist' school. The more specific issue of whether leadership acted as a block to radical aspiration during the unrest will be considered in the concluding chapter which follows. As outlined in the introduction to this Section the interpretation of the 'rank and file-ist' school relies heavily on the analysis of leadership provided by Michels. He argued that, within the labour movement, organisation itself necessarily resulted in the domination of the led by their leaders. Moreover, the nature of organisation meant that even reforming

leaderships of radical intent inevitably came to adopt a more moderate stance than the membership at large. For Michels "...power is always conservative."¹⁶ Such an approach to leadership was also shared by British syndicalists during the second decade of the twentieth century. J. T. Murphy linked leadership moderation to the constraining and compromising influence of the routine activity of trade unionism. He argued that:

When it is remembered that trade unions are limited, constitutionally, to narrow channels of activity, it is only to be expected that the official leaders are essentially conservative in outlook and character.¹⁷

More recently a number of labour historians such as Hinton, Price and Burgess have extended this analysis into a generalised approach which, in addition to viewing leadership as conservative, treats the 'rank and file' as theoretically militant.¹⁸ This approach has permeated much of post-World War II institutional labour history including studies of the N.U.R., S.W.M.F. and A.S.L.E. & F..¹⁹

However, the chapters in this Section have indicated some important limitations in the approach of the 'rank and file-ist' school. A major problem resides in the limitations of the terminology employed in this

¹⁶R. Michels, *POLITICAL PARTIES*, 1965, p. 366. For a fuller discussion of Michels work see R. Hyman, *MARXISM AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF TRADE UNIONISM*, 1971, p. 14-16.

¹⁷*THE SOCIALIST*, 18.12.19., quoted in Hinton, 1973, op. cit., p. 313.

¹⁸Hinton, 1973, op. cit.,; R. Price, *MASTERS UNIONS AND MEN*, 1980, and *LABOUR IN BRITISH SOCIETY*, 1986; K. Burgess, *THE ORIGINS OF BRITISH INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS*, 1975.

¹⁹See, for example, P. S. Bagwell, *THE RAILWAYMEN*, 1963, chs. XIV, XV & XVI passim; B. Pribicevic, 'The Demand for Workers' Control in the Railway, Mining and Engineering Industries,' Oxford D. Phil. 1957; R. P. Arnot, *THE SOUTH WALES MINERS' FEDERATION 1914-1926*, 1976.

approach. Generally neither the 'rank and file' nor the 'leadership' is afforded any precise definition. 'Leadership' may be used to refer to the Executive Committee, the paid officers of the union, the General Secretary or any combination of these elements. There are obvious problems in assuming any community of interest between regularly elected lay Executive members and paid officers of the union. This point was amply demonstrated by the feud between the N.U.R. Executive and Thomas after the war, and to a lesser extent the differences between the S.W.M.F. Executive and Brace and Hartshorn in 1920.

Yet problems remain even if 'leadership' is defined more simply as the permanent paid officials. Powerful trade union officerships were not filled by a formally-educated professional salariat with distinct skills which set them apart from the lay members. Rather, office was acquired by ascending a hierarchy of posts which extended from branch, lodge or society level to the General Secretaryship itself. It was not possible in any of the organisations studied to gain election as a member of the Executive or as a paid official without having served a lengthy apprenticeship as a union activist. It is no easy task to determine at what point in the hierarchy an activist ceased to be a member of the 'rank and file' and became part of the 'leadership'.

If anything the problems of definition associated with the widely used term 'rank and file' are even greater. Generally institutional labour historians have relied on the views of an active minority of trade unionists based on the formal records of the organisation. Yet this is seldom explicitly admitted or recognised and it has become a commonplace to find any internal opposition to the established leadership automatically described as having emanated from the 'rank and file'. It cannot be assumed that a resolution passed at a delegate

conference affords an accurate representation of 'rank and file' attitudes. The traditional image of a 'rank and file' enjoined in battle with the leadership implies that gains for the former would result in a democratisation of the union structures. In fact the attitudes of the 'progressive activists' towards the bulk of inactive members, particularly outside South Wales, portrayed its own form of elitism. Most activists recognised a clear distinction between themselves and less active trade unionists. This realisation underpinned the strong preference for decision making at delegate conferences rather than by membership ballot.

Internal opposition can also be interpreted not as the 'rank and file' in its naturally militant state, but rather as an alternative leadership engaged in a struggle to wrest control from those in office. In essence the conflicts within the N.U.R. and the S.W.M.F. during and after the war amounted to a struggle between Left and Right within the government of the union and not the frustration of a universally militant rank and file by a uniformly conservative leadership. In both organisations the General Secretary was indeed far more conservative than his 'progressive' opponents. However, in the S.W.M.F. Tom Richards' freedom of action was severely constrained by left wing majorities on the Executive and the democratic checks provided by delegate conferences and membership ballots. This was much less true of Thomas in the N.U.R., his role will be explored in more detail later.

The performance of leadership in A.S.L.E. & F. and the co-operative movement provide a more serious challenge to the 'rank and file-ist' school. As General Secretary of A.S.L.E. & F. John Bromley played a significant part in the radicalisation of that union between 1914 and 1921. He was elected General Secretary as the candidate of the Left, and

he continued to advocate policies in line with those of the majority of left activists in his union throughout the war and post-war unrest. Indeed Bromley was willing to go further in the direction of industrial unionism and constitutional reform than the majority of union activists. Similarly the Central Board of the Co-operative Union regularly adopted a stance which in co-operative terms was to the left of centre. Whenever the Central Board was accused of defying conference policy it was in a radical rather than a conservative direction. In these two organisations leadership cannot be described as having interests theoretically at odds with their membership nor of having adopted a distinctly more conservative stance than its membership.²⁰

III

In their rejection of the 'rank and file-ist' interpretation of leadership the studies in this Section have stressed the ability of activists to impose their policies upon the trade union machine. In the S.W.M.F. all shades of opinion could be quoted in support of the view that rank and file opinion was accurately reflected through the established machinery of the union. Regular delegate conferences allowed activists a substantial voice in the establishment of policy, while membership ballots afforded the entire lay membership the final say in wage settlements and strike policy. Similarly in the N.U.R. 'progressives' were able to impose their policy by co-ordinated activity which applied direct pressure to the official machinery. During the war lay delegate conferences proved to be an effective power base for the 'progressives'. In 1916 such a conference removed the power of the

²⁰ Similar conclusions have been reached by Reid in his observations on relationships between leaders and led in the shipbuilding industry. Reid, in Tolliday & Zeitlin, 1985, op. cit., pp. 57-59.

Executive Committee to settle disputes, this authority was transferred to Annual or Special Delegate Meetings of lay delegates.²¹ From then on the majority of activists remained largely satisfied with the governmental structures of the N.U.R. as amended. After the war the 'progressives' extended their influence over the union by gaining effective control of the union's Executive Committee. Although many activists remained frustrated by their inability to control the actions of the union's General Secretary J. H. Thomas, they wielded significant power in the determination of policy and strategy for much of the period. Dissatisfaction was directed chiefly against the individual leader rather than the governing structures of the union.

In A.S.L.E. & F. activists did not find it necessary to institute further democratic checks upon leadership during our period. The leadership only once pursued an unpopular strategy - during the spring of 1920 and even on that occasion it quickly changed course to bring itself in line with the policy determined by lay conference.²² Likewise in the co-operative movement the majority of even active co-operators were not yet prepared to relinquish local autonomy, hence the limited success of the advocates of centralisation.

However, elsewhere in the labour movement those who sought to reform from within also achieved real success between 1914 and 1921. Before the war activists in the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (A.S.E.) had attempted to constrain the power of officialdom. These efforts foundered largely due to the Executive's ability to secure support amongst the membership over the heads of existing delegate

²¹Railway Review, 8.9.16.

²²Locomotive Journal, March and May, 1920.

bodies. In 1918, however, a lay policy-making National committee was authorised by rule. And largely in response to pressure from activists an amalgamation movement among the unions in engineering culminated in the formation of the Amalgamated Engineering Union (A.E.U.) in 1921. The constitution of the new amalgamation marked a further success for the advocates of accountability. The union's rules were based on plans approved by lay delegates at the 1919 conference of the A.S.E.. Formulation of trade policy was now firmly entrusted to the centre, and the Executive held considerable power. However, it was the National Committee composed entirely of lay members which controlled policy formulation and rules revision. Furthermore, the union's Final Appeal Court, to which even the Executive was subordinate, was also a rank and file body elected from the districts.²³ Even if, as Hinton has alleged, these measures did not provide a solution "to the problem of democracy" inside the union, they were clearly seen by the majority of Shop Stewards and other lay activists as creating a combative body which rendered shop organisation independent of the union unnecessary.²⁴

It would be foolish to pretend that trade union members were universally satisfied with the performance of the union machinery between 1914 and 1921. It would be equally remiss to suggest that the trade union rank and file experienced widespread alienation from the official machinery. In the case studies examined in this Section lay and particularly left wing activist influence within mainstream labour organisation increased substantially over the period. For the most part

²³A.S.E. Annual Report & Delegate Meeting, 9.6.-8.8.19, *passim*: See also, J. D. Edelstein & M. Warner, *COMPARATIVE UNION DEMOCRACY: ORGANISATION AND OPPOSITION IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN UNIONS*, 1975, pp. 299-300, and J. B. Jefferys, *THE STORY OF THE ENGINEERS*, 1946, pp. 189-94.

²⁴Hinton, 1973, *op. cit.*, pp. 85-86.

activists were satisfied, rightly or wrongly, that the established structures allowed them adequate power and influence over the rapidly centralising official organisations.

IV

Thus far the responsiveness of labour organisations to pressure from below has been emphasised. However, the ability of Thomas as General Secretary of the N.U.R. to flout the decisions reached by lay dominated governing bodies of the union runs counter to the experience of other organisations. There have been many attempts to establish systematic models of trade union government which have focused upon the power of officials and lay members. Two such theoretical approaches are now to be considered to see whether they contribute to a clearer understanding of the contrasting distribution of power in, on the one hand, the N.U.R., and on the other, the S.W.M.F. and A.S.L.E. & F.. The models employed are those advanced by Turner and Martin.²⁵

Martin's analysis appears particularly relevant to the development of union government in the above case studies because of his emphasis on the importance of opposition factions as the critical constraint upon the power of leadership and as a guardian of union democracy. He argues that:

Union democracies exist when union executives are unable to prevent opposition factions distributing propaganda and mobilising electoral support... The survival of faction limits Executive ability to disregard rank and file

²⁵See H. A. Turner, *TRADE UNION STRUCTURE, POLICY AND GROWTH*, 1962, and R. Martin, 'Union Democracy: An Explanatory Framework', *SOCIOLOGY*, II, No. 2, 1968, pp. 205-20.

opinion by²⁶ providing the potential means for its overthrow.

Martin provides a list of some fourteen factors which determine the effectiveness of union opposition to leadership power. These include, occupational homogeneity, industrial heterogeneity, craft technology, a highly educated membership with a high degree of identification with the craft and the union, membership commitment to local autonomy and the preservation of customary rights, and a decentralised union structure with substructural autonomy.²⁷ These democratising influences might be said to have been more in evidence in A.S.L.E. & F. and the S.W.M.F. than in the N.U.R..

In Martin's model these factors lead to greater democracy because they establish the conditions for growth of strong factional opposition to leadership. However, in our three case studies faction was least well developed in A.S.L.E. & F. - particularly as an oppositional force to the General Secretary. Moreover, while there was a strong factional opposition in the S.W.M.F. it was undoubtedly most highly developed within the N.U.R. where leadership proved most able to defy activist policy. There seems little grounds therefore for treating faction as the critical variable in determining the degree of democracy in union government.

²⁶ Martin, op. cit., p. 207.

²⁷ However, there are a number of other factors in Martin's list which cannot be said to distinguish the N.U.R. from the other unions, and particularly its industrial partner A.S.L.E. & F.. These include, decentralised collective bargaining, a low level of ownership concentration, disagreement between predominantly friendly employers, rapid technological change, workshop bargaining power, a high level of membership participation, an experienced non-ideological opposition, and Executive commitment to democratic procedures. Ibid., p. 216.

Perhaps Turner's model which relies more heavily upon historical context can provide further insight. In common with the approach adopted throughout this Section Turner employed a tri-partite model of trade union composition. Rather than a simple divide between leaders and led Turner emphasised the relationships between lay activists, officials and a rank and file which was only occasionally involved directly in the running of the union. Turner accounted for differences in union democracy by reference to the relationships between these three groups, relationships which were largely determined by the unions' 'closed' or 'open' nature. 'Closed' unions were defined by their ability to regulate the entry of new workers to the trade, while 'open' unions lacked any control over entry. He argued that unions could be classified as having three types of government which were related to this open-closed distinction; these were 'popular bossdoms', 'aristocracies' and 'exclusive democracies'. The 'open' N.U.R. conforms to Turner's category of 'popular bossdom' while the S.W.M.F. and A.S.L.E. & F. were 'aristocracies' being dominated by one grade whose originally 'closed' union expanded to include workers from 'open' occupations. The dominant grades were train drivers in the case of A.S.L.E. & F. and hewers in mining unionism.²⁸

Although such a typology suggests a method of explanation for the divergent experience of the N.U.R., as with Martin's model the detailed supports for the theory do not always sit easily with the historical record. In Turner's model 'popular bossdoms', such as the N.U.R., were

²⁸Turner, op. cit., pp. 289-91. For Turner the term 'aristocracy' was attributed to mining trade unionism because a dominant elite "...may equally arise by the emergence from an initially-open union's membership of a dominant and virtually closed section - as in the case of... the face workers in the miners' unions." Ibid., p. 289.

distinguished by "...a generally low level of membership participation..."²⁹ However, far from being characterised by a low level of membership participation the N.U.R. was noted for high attendance by membership at local branches.³⁰ The records employed throughout this study do not suggest that attendance at N.U.R. branches or overall membership participation differed significantly from those in the S.W.M.F. and A.S.L.E. & F..

Turner appears to be on stronger ground when he argues that 'popular bossdoms' were characterised by:

...the greatest difference between the members and the₃₁ professional officials upon which they depend.

This strikes at the heart of our problem, for we need to explain why Thomas was able to subvert the will of lay activists by issuing appeals over their heads to the rank and file. Such a tactic clearly failed for the S.W.M.F. leaders Hartshorn and Brace in 1920, and was not even attempted by Bromley in A.S.L.E. & F.. Turner appears to provide some explanation of why activists were powerful in relation to the leading full time officials in S.W.M.F. and A.S.L.E. & F. and less powerful in the same relation within the N.U.R.. In the A.S.L.E. & F. and S.W.M.F. 'aristocracies', the local leaders, lay 'aristocrats' and central officials were relatively equal. Hence the ability of activists to keep Bromley and Richards in touch with activist sentiment. In the N.U.R. signalmen and guards played a prominent role in the affairs of the union. However, these groups were not able to dominate the machinery in anything like the same measure as the hewers and drivers in the S.W.M.F.

²⁹Ibid., p. 290.

³⁰P. Bagwell, THE RAILWAYMEN, 1963, p. 336.

³¹Turner, op. cit., p. 290.

and A.S.L.E. & F.. In the N.U.R. there was no direct parallel to the traditional craft status, education and authority of the engine driver or hewer.

In the S.W.M.F. and A.S.L.E. & F. the close identification between craft and union together with a strong group solidarity resulted in a tradition of close association between leading lay activists and full-time officers. In Turner's words:

...the official is very much one of themselves [the craft aristocracy]: his specialist qualities are largely an extension of the intimate knowledge of their occupation's conditions and practices which all its members possess in large measure.

Whereas in the case of the 'popular bossdoms':

...the full-time officials expertise necessarily embraces a range of affairs which is quite beyond the ordinary member's experience.³²

There was undoubtedly a larger percentage of the total membership which shared the skills of the officers in A.S.L.E. & F. and the S.W.M.F. than in the N.U.R.. In the latter those groups which may have felt some status inconsistency between themselves and the leader formed a larger fraction of the membership than in either the S.W.M.F. or A.S.L.E. & F..

Turner also noted that in the 'popular bossdoms' there was also "...often a distinct hierarchy among the officials themselves..." which contributed to the dominant role of the General Secretary.³³ The S.W.M.F. and A.S.L.E. & F. had essentially only two tiers of officers, their regional or district officers and the central functional officers.

³²Ibid., pp. 289-90.

³³Ibid., p. 290.

The much larger N.U.R. had a more substantial hierarchy of promotion and experience. The existence of such a hierarchy appears to have played an important part in determining the differences between the leadership of A.S.L.E. & F. and the N.U.R.. In the election for General Secretary in 1914 the relative equality of the organisers and officials in A.S.L.E. & F. contributed to Bromley's ability to defeat his vastly more experienced rival. Bromley's opponent, George Moore, had been editor of the union journal, Assistant General Secretary and Temporary General Secretary following the death of Fox which had created the vacancy. On the other hand in the N.U.R. the significance of seniority appears to have been greater. Even the most left wing branches found it necessary to back Thomas in the election contest for General Secretary in 1916 because of the absence of a left-wing candidate who had progressed far enough up the internal career structure of the union to pose a serious challenge.³⁴ Despite the strength of the Left in the N.U.R. they had little choice other than to back Thomas if they were to avoid the election of Bellamy, a still more right wing candidate.

Other structural elements which appear to have been significant include the strength of the Executive in relationship to the General Secretary. It would appear that by limiting Executive members' term of office the N.U.R. might have weakened an important check upon officers' power. In A.S.L.E. & F. members of the Executive were permitted lengthy terms of office partly in order to sustain a more effective lay check over official activity.³⁵ Similarly in the S.W.M.F. terms of office on

³⁴See Railway Review, 16.6.; 23.6.; 7.7.; & 14.7.16.. Liverpool No. 5. Branch, which led the Merseyside unofficial movement and subsequent crusade against Thomas after his election, unanimously agreed to nominate him for General Secretary.

³⁵A.S.L.E. & F. A.A.D., 1921, p. 400.

the Executive were far lengthier than those in the N.U.R. allowing its members to build up sufficient experience to counter the power of full-time officials to influence the Executive.

In sum, while Turner's model has its shortcomings, particularly in regard to levels of participation in union affairs, the distinction between 'popular bossdoms' and 'aristocracies' provides important insights into the differences in our case studies of union government. Martin's reliance upon faction, however, appears to be misplaced; moreover, a large number of his list of factors do not apply to either A.S.L.E. & F. or the S.W.M.F.. However, there remain three of Martin's factors which re-inforce Turner's model and appear to apply to both A.S.L.E. & F. and S.W.M.F.. These include occupational homogeneity, craft technology, and a highly educated membership with a high degree of identification with the craft and the union. It also appears that the size and strategic importance of the N.U.R. played a part. The N.U.R.'s growing significance as a member of the Triple Alliance coupled to his outspoken performance as an M.P. afforded Thomas the access to press and government which underpinned his ability to appeal over the heads of activists to the rank and file.

V

To conclude, it has been argued throughout this Section that the approaches and findings of the 'rank and file-ist' school have severe limitations when applied to labour organisation in the years 1914 to 1921. It has been argued that the centralisation of collective bargaining was not imposed upon a reluctant trade union rank and file by an alliance of employers, the state and trade union leaders. In our case studies and elsewhere it was the unions which initiated pressure for the

institution of national pay bargaining - often in the face of resistance from employers. Secondly, national collective bargaining was a goal aspired to not just by union officials but also by the most radical elements in the membership. Moreover, despite substantial differences on the issue, it remains the case that the majority of activists on the left in those organisations studied, far from fearing the centralisation of union government, strove hard to re-inforce that process.

The third broad area of difference with the 'rank and file-ist' school concerns its approach to leadership. In all the organisations studied, at some time during our period, leadership, broadly defined, was distinctly more radical than the membership it represented. In some cases individual leaders proved to be to the left of the majority of committed activists in their organisation. It appears therefore that any approach which counterposes stereotypes of a militant rank and file and a conservative leadership is entirely misleading. Moreover, a fourth area of disagreement was the finding that official labour organisations, rather than acting as part of the constraints upon workers, proved responsive to their policy demands and continued to be regarded by the vast bulk of activists as their principal weapon in the struggle against capital.

It has thus been established that leadership was capable of performing a radical function and that official machinery responded to pressure from below. However, neither was necessarily the case. Leadership continued to adopt a conservative stance in some instances, moreover, organisations and individuals displayed an ability to resist pressure from below. It remained possible, therefore, for particular leaderships and bureaucracies to attempt to frustrate activist aspiration, even if they did not universally perform this function. Key

figures such as Thomas of the N.U.R., it could be argued, played a critical role in preventing strikes. On this basis particular sections of leadership and the official machinery of labour might possibly have been involved in collaboration with employers and the state in an effort to defy attempts to establish a more aggressive strategy. If this was so the centralisation of both industrial relations and trade union machinery which was supported by activists may have been a misguided strategy. The N.U.R. was the most centralised of all the organisations studied and Thomas displayed more independence than any of his counterparts. In some instances therefore, both the elements of centralisation and leadership may have seemed to frustrate activist aspiration at critical moments. That possibility will be explored further in the conclusion to this thesis.

CONCLUSION

There is widespread recognition that the period 1880 to 1920 was of enormous significance for the development of a labour movement in Britain. A central feature of the literature covering this period has been the debate on the rise of labour. There has been substantial controversy over the existence, timing and above all the causation of any 'forward march of labour' between 1880 and 1920. In particular over recent years there has been an on-going controversy between those in the 'rank and file-ist' or 'revolutionary' school, and a number of younger 'revisionists'. This concluding chapter commences with a review of that debate and, subsequently employs the findings outlined in both Sections of this thesis in an assessment of the relative merits of the two approaches. The chapter concludes with a brief assessment of the causation and nature of the unrest in the light of the preceding discussion.

I

The 'rank and file-ist' school has had a profound effect upon the study of labour history since the 1970s. In a challenge to established interpretations of British industrial relations which stressed the evolutionary development of institutional systems, the 'rank and file-ists' re-discovered an alternative informal tradition in which work-based issues and struggles occupied centre stage. According to their critics, authors such as Hinton, Price, Burgess and Hyman, developed their distinctive interpretation largely as a response to the re-appearance of unofficial organisation based upon the workplace during

the 1960s. The 'rank and file-ists' have focused much of their attention upon explanations of the rise of labour and the mounting industrial unrest during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Alastair Reid recently challenged three central components of the 'rank and file-ist' account of the growth of labour consciousness.¹ These were: the changing structure of the working class; the machinery of industrial relations, including official trade unionism and collective bargaining systems; and the nature of state intervention. The debate between the 'rank and file-ists' and their critics over these three issues is outlined briefly below.

The growing homogeneity of working class experience in the period 1880 to 1920 has been a central element in accounts of the rise of labour for the great majority of historians of the Left, whether or not they support the 'rank and file-ist' perspective.² Reid rejects the foundations of this argument by stressing the continuance of heterogeneity. In Reid's view:

...the working class was economically fragmented and did not experience a major structural transformation increasing the degree of homogeneity during this period...

Thus, while the 'rank and file-ists' and others have stressed changes in the division of labour which reduced internal divisions within the working class, Reid emphasises the complexity of such changes and the

¹A. Reid, 'The Division of Labour and Politics in Britain, 1880-1920', in W. J. Mommsen & H. G. Husung (eds), *THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRADE UNIONISM IN GREAT BRITAIN AND GERMANY, 1880-1914*, 1985, pp. 150-165. For other attacks upon the 'rank and file-ist' school see J. Zeitlin, 'Trade Unions and Job Control: A Critique of 'Rank and Filism'', *BULLETIN OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY*, No. 46, Spring, 1983, pp. 6-7.

²See, example, E. J. Hobsbawm, *LABOURING MEN*, 1964, pp. 316-43.

³Reid, in Mommsen & Husung, 1985, op. cit., p. 150.

persistence of diversity and internal division.

The role of official trade union machinery and systems of conciliation occupy centre stage in the second of our three contested areas. Among the 'rank and file-ists' Richard Price has been most forthright in depicting the growth of bureaucracy within trade unions and the rise of collective bargaining machinery as part of the "...tightening of the structures of formal subordination [which] provided the essential impetus for the syndicalist spirit to enter the labour consciousness."⁴ For Price, trade unions gained recognition because this enabled employers to use union leaders to moderate the demands of their membership and enforce unpopular settlements upon the rank and file. Trade union leadership therefore became part of the machinery which maintained workers "subordination"; they were "managers of discontent".

Similarly, for the 'rank and file-ists' the growing involvement of trade unions with conciliation machinery increased discontent and industrial militancy. In Price's view:

This was not simply a matter of collective bargaining failing to deliver adequate economic rewards. It was probably true that the collective-bargaining procedures held wage increases to a lower level than was potentially obtainable... The essential stimulus to the labour unrest came from the operation of agreements... The problem lay in the way the procedures of collective agreements tended to exclude and restrict certain issues from

⁴R. Price, 'The Labour Process and Labour History,' SOCIAL HISTORY, Vol. 8, No. 1, Jan. 1983, pp. 69-70.

bargaining, delay the resolution of grievances,
and prohibit strike action.⁵

Moreover, in return for collective bargaining rights trade union leaderships allegedly relinquished control over traditional work practices. This loss of power in the workshop was itself said to have further fuelled unrest amongst the rank and file.

Reid, together with Jonathan Zeitlin, has rejected any notion that trade union leadership "subordinated" their members' interest.⁶ They deny that the interests of 'rank and file' and leadership were necessarily divergent. For Zeitlin the emphasis is on the "pervasive evidence of union responsiveness to pressure from below... Trade union leaderships were... acutely aware of the need to keep in close touch with their members' aspirations..." He also questions the juxtaposition of a theoretically militant membership and a theoretically conservative leadership, drawing attention to the "widespread evidence of rank and file passivity and conservatism."⁷ While Reid and Zeitlin accept that it "...would obviously be naive to assume that unions were straightforwardly democratic institutions...", they nevertheless believe trade union leaders were more generally to be found "...pursuing the same goals as the majority of their members..." rather than collaborating in the enemy camp.⁸

With regard to collective bargaining, Reid has observed that:

⁵R. Price, LABOUR IN BRITISH SOCIETY: AN INTERPRETATIVE HISTORY, 1986, p. 142.

⁶Reid, in Mommsen & Husung, 1985, op. cit., p. 157; Zeitlin, 1983, op. cit., p. 7.

⁷Zeitlin, Ibid.

⁸Reid, in Mommsen & Husung, 1985, op. cit., p.157.

Just because it had traditionally been said that formal institutions were an advantage since they promoted industrial peace is not a sound basis for inverting the assumption and arguing that they were a disadvantage because they channelled grievances away from direct control and strike action.

Moreover, Reid has argued that formal collective bargaining brought substantial gains to workers precisely in the area of job regulation held to be forsaken in such procedures by the 'rank and file-ists'. Indeed, Zeitlin goes further by suggesting that the defence of skill was actually managed most effectively by groups such as the boilermakers who eschewed a reliance upon workplace regulation for industry-wide collective agreements with employers. For the critics of 'rank and file-ism' conciliation machinery was a tool which could be employed more or less effectively by trade union or boss. The possibility of a beneficial outcome for the workforce was determined by a number of contingent factors rather than being inherent in the machinery itself.

The third area of controversy concerns the nature of state intervention. In Price's view, "...the emergent quasi-corporationist relationship between labour, the state and industry in the pre-1914 period, [and] the corporationist compromise of the war years...", underpinned the growth of a specifically labour consciousness.¹⁰ State intervention, according to the 'rank and file-ists' favoured the interests of employers and was aimed at the incorporation and emasculation of labour organisation. Thus for 'rank and file-ists' such as Hinton, the state, during times of crisis, acts almost as the tool of

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰R. Price, MASTERS UNIONS AND MEN: WORK CONTROL IN BUILDING AND THE RISE OF LABOUR, 1980, p. 239.

industrial capital.¹¹

Reid again totally rejects such a view arguing that the state:

...was not a 'capitalist state' which straightforwardly pursued the interests of British employers. Rather than interpreting government policies as simple reflections of the interests of dominant economic groups they should be seen as prioritising social stability at almost any cost...¹²

Moreover, in the context of the First World War, Reid attempts to invert the 'rank and file-ist' view arguing that in a tight labour market "...the state was generally responsive to pressure from the unions..."¹³ Zeitlin argues that even before 1914 state intervention tended to protect trade unions by promoting agreements which limited "...employers' freedom of action in the workplace."¹⁴

Although concerned with the entire span of the period from 1880 to 1920 the three strands of debate outlined above have a direct bearing upon the issues tackled in this thesis. Reid in particular has increasingly focused his attention upon the First World War in a re-appraisal both of the long term rise of labour and the proximate causes of the war and post-war unrest. Firstly, Reid accounts for labour's rise by reference to the short-run impact of the war rather than a long-run re-structuring of the division of labour. And secondly,

¹¹J. Hinton, THE FIRST SHOP STEWARDS' MOVEMENT, 1973.

¹²Reid, in Mommsen & Husung, 1985, op.cit., p. 162.

¹³A. Reid, 'Dilution, trade unionism and the state in Britain during the First World War', in S. Tolliday & J. Zeitlin (eds), SHOP FLOOR BARGAINING AND THE STATE: HISTORICAL AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES, 1985, p. 64.

¹⁴J. Zeitlin, 'Industrial Structure, Employer Strategy and the Diffusion of Job Control in Britain, 1880-1920', in Mommsen & Husung, 1985, op. cit., p. 334.

he rejects the explanations of Hinton and other 'rank and file-ists' for wartime industrial unrest. Reid argues that the extent of any rank and file revolt against trade union leadership has been greatly overstated. Moreover, Reid re-interprets the role of the state, arguing that state intervention actually strengthened labour rather than contributing to its subordination. This controversy is assessed in the following part of this conclusion, which examines in turn: the relative importance of long-run and short-run factors in the rise of labour; the nature of state intervention; and the impact of institutional factors on labour militancy.

II

(a)

The discussion of Co-operative-labour relations in Chapter IV has a direct bearing upon the existence of any long term rise of labour. Here the emphasis was firmly upon the impact of war as the critical radicalising factor for co-operators. Up to 1914 the great majority of the co-operative movement desired to maintain a distance between themselves and both the unions and Labour. However, the wartime attacks upon co-operative trading led co-operators to reverse their pre-war stance and enter into a variety of alliances with labour organisations. Between 1914 and 1921 a number of factors combined to transform co-operation from a staunch ally of Liberalism into a third wing of a tri-partite labour movement.

This conclusion tends to confirm Reid's emphasis on the significance of the short-run impact of war. However, Reid's conclusion was largely based on his rejection of the thesis that capital consolidation and the consequent growth in firm and plant size from the 1880s had underpinned the spread of class consciousness and socialist

politics. Clearly such changes in the world of work would not be expected to have affected co-operation in the same way as trade unions. Nevertheless there exists a relevant parallel in the argument that co-operative development was a reaction to the progressive concentration of capital among its competitors in the retail trade. While such pressures may have led to increased co-operative society amalgamation as well as prompting radical schemes for the centralisation of the movement, it appears to have had little or no impact in drawing co-operation closer to the trade unions and Labour Party. Secular economic change between 1880 and 1914 did not result in any significant growth of labour consciousness among the great bulk of Britain's co-operators.

This is not to argue that economic and social change was unimportant in the growth of labour consciousness. The local studies in Section I suggested that economic change had a profound effect upon the rise of labour after 1914. In Sheffield, Pontypridd and Liverpool full employment, decasualisation and the burgeoning demand for the products of heavy goods industries between 1914 and 1920 all contributed to the growing strength and self-confidence of individual trades and of labour as a movement. Waites has argued convincingly that the First World War produced a more homogeneous working class. Greater social mobility, inflation and occupational change all acted to reduce the differences between groups of working people.¹⁵

The studies in Section I emphasised the importance of the period from 1914 to 1921 for local labour movements. In Liverpool and

¹⁵B. A. Waites, 'The effects of World War I on class and status in England, 1910-20', JOURNAL OF CONTEMPORARY HISTORY, Vol. XI, No. 1, 1976, pp. 27-48.

Sheffield, once the issue of peace or war had been resolved, long standing and debilitating internal divisions in the local labour movement were ended with the development of a single unified organisational centre. The Trades Councils in Sheffield, Liverpool and Pontypridd continued to wield rather different levels of power and influence. Nonetheless within the labour movement all three markedly increased that influence. Moreover, all three also acquired a higher profile in local affairs beyond the confines of the movement. In each centre the link between trade unions and independent labour politics achieved an unparalleled level of acceptance. In Sheffield the close allegiance between the unions in the 'light' trades and Lib-Lab politics, which had lasted for decades, was finally ended as a result of the war. In Liverpool trade union organisation on the waterfront was being weaned away from its links with Conservatism and the beginnings of a relationship with Labour were being established. The war also prompted important changes in the relationship between co-operation and the local labour movement. In Sheffield pre-war opponents became post-war allies when co-operation and Labour formed their electoral alliance. In Liverpool, although no open alliance was possible, co-operation and Labour operated a de facto electoral pact. Co-operation in Pontypridd had been firmly established as a third wing of the local labour movement before the war. Although division remained a characteristic feature of labour movements in all three centres, during the post-war years those divisions were very largely contained within an agreed arena. The tendency to establish rival organisations came to an end after the war principally because of the success of the official machinery both organisationally and electorally. It was the post-war electoral success of Labour which was perhaps the most striking break with pre-war experience. In Pontypridd Labour gained control of the District Council for the first time. Here, Labour played an important positive role in

its own success. Labour considerably increased its control over mechanisms of social influence which had previously been largely the preserve of employers and other opponents of independent labour politics. Labour's self-confident assertion of an identity of interest between itself and the community in Pontypridd provided an important defence against the oft-repeated and damaging pre-war accusation that labour merely represented a sectional interest. In Liverpool Labour made an important breakthrough, although in no position to overturn Conservative domination, it became the only Party capable of challenging the ruling Party across the city. There was no steady trend towards such an enhancement of Labour strength evident in Liverpool politics before 1914. In Sheffield the war witnessed the effective demise of the Lib-Labs who, before the war, had been a formidable obstacle to Labour advance. For many in post-war Sheffield it appeared to be only a matter of time before Labour would control the council; again, this was not a view with any general currency before 1914.

The evidence in this thesis would, therefore, tend to re-inforce the argument that the growth of labour consciousness was significantly more rapid and thoroughgoing between 1914 and 1921 than it had been hitherto. This was particularly true among groups such as Liverpool workers and co-operators where before 1914 identification with labour was weak. Among organisations such as the S.W.M.F., A.S.L.E. & F., and the N.U.R. it would be foolish to deny that labour solidarity was on the increase before the outbreak of war. Similarly, in areas such as Pontypridd and Sheffield, the rise of Labour did not await the outbreak of war. The years 1914 to 1921 appear to have allowed the labour interest to move into a challenging position where none had existed before. In spheres where labour had acquired a voice before 1914, the war so strengthened labour that by 1920 labour organisations felt that power was being

contested on more or less equal terms.

(b)

In regard to the nature of state intervention, Reid is undoubtedly correct to reject the notion that the state acted simply as a tool of the employers. Such a straightforward view of wartime state activity has long been rejected for analysis which emphasises the state's need to maintain a high level of production.¹⁶ The Trade Union Amalgamation Act of 1917 greatly facilitated the task of securing amalgamation by removing the requirement for a two-thirds majority of the entire membership. The studies of mining and railway trade unionism earlier in this thesis also supported the view that state intervention benefitted trade unionism. In both industries unions realised their goal of national collective bargaining as a result of a combination of their own enhanced bargaining power and state intervention. Unions in rail, mining and elsewhere were anxious to retain government involvement in their industry at the end of the war - surely an unlikely reaction where the state truly a tool of capital. Furthermore, employer's complained that it was they who were being ignored and mis-treated by the state. In their eyes the state gave away too much to labour, pay awards in state controlled industries were too high and, as in the case of the notorious 12½% award to skilled engineers in 1917, often made on a basis which would only lead to further discontent.¹⁷

¹⁶C. J. Wrigley, 'World War I and State Intervention in Industrial Relations', in *idem.*, (ed.) *A HISTORY OF BRITISH INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS*, Vol. II: 1915-1939, 1987, pp. 26-27.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, pp. 52-53, for complaints against state interference from employers in the cotton and engineering industries. On the problems arising out of the 12½% award see, *Idem.*, *DAVID LLOYD GEORGE AND THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT*, 1976, pp. 219-22.

By the end of the war the government was involved in the active promotion of industrial relations strategies designed to produce equal representation for labour and capital. Indeed post-war government industrial relations policy was recently described as:

...predominantly favourable to the unions, who did well out of collective bargaining during this period both with respect to pay and their securing of the 47 or 48-hour week.¹⁸

It can be argued that labour's contribution to the war effort combined with the continued high levels of employment elevated the status of labour and its collective institutions to a point where the state was forced to look more favourably upon its claims. Government reconstruction initiatives such as the National Industrial Conference, Industrial Courts Act and the Whitley proposals were, apparently, intended to establish the framework for an industrial consensus, rather than the subjugation of the trade unions.¹⁹

Nevertheless, perhaps this is merely to commit the type of inversion for which Reid criticised the 'rank and file-ists'. To paraphrase Reid: just because it had been argued by the 'rank and file-ists' that the state was a tool of the employers is not a sound basis for simply inverting the assumption and arguing that the state took the part of labour in order to avert social crisis.²⁰ In reality

¹⁸A. Fox, HISTORY AND HERITAGE: THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF THE BRITISH INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS SYSTEM, 1985, p. 297.

¹⁹See R. Lowe, 'The Failure of Consensus in Britain: the National Industrial Conference, 1919-21', THE HISTORICAL JOURNAL, Vol. 21, 1978, pp. 649-75. And idem., 'The Government and Industrial Relations, 1919-39', in C. J. Wrigley, 1987, op. cit., pp. 189-90.

²⁰See above, p. 3, and Reid, in Mommsen & Husung, 1985, op. cit., p. 157.

the impact of state intervention was mixed. While labour made gains in some areas, employers also found that state intervention helped them realise long-cherished aims, such as the extension of output related payments systems - notably the premium bonus - into areas where it had been fiercely resisted before the war. In a number of critical industries though it was true that labour was increasingly being consulted, the government had actually drawn leading representatives of capital into the administration itself.²¹ While some employers undoubtedly had grounds for complaint, the absence of any widespread or co-ordinated protest suggests that, overall, employers were not dissatisfied with the impact of state intervention. After all, while concessions were indeed granted to labour, employers were often not confronted with the bill in the short term. Burgeoning wartime profits guaranteed by state subsidy clearly helped ease any distress felt by employers pressed by government to make concessions to labour.

While employers had reason for some satisfaction over their treatment by the state, some sections of labour had substantial grounds for discontent. In the case of the co-operative movement it is quite clear that their radicalisation resulted from their mis-treatment at the hands of government. It was precisely the perception that private business interests were so well served by the decision-making machinery of government, coupled with their own exclusion, that so enraged co-operators. Government handling of food supply, recruitment and taxation policy during World War I dispelled any belief in the even-handedness of the state among active co-operators. Co-operators claimed to have "...been boycotted ruthlessly in the interests of

²¹Allan Smith of the Engineering Employers' Federation, Eric Geddes of the Northern Eastern Railways, and Guy Calthrop, of the London & North Western Rail Company, are prominent examples among many.

private and monopolistic profiteers."²² Labour recruitment policies also provoked unrest particularly among skilled engineers and the miners. Socialists contrasted, with some success, the inequality of sacrifice between unscripted capital and the mounting levels of compulsory manpower recruitment.

We might also question the motivation of this supposedly benign government administration. Reid rightly points out that the labour administration of the Ministry of Munitions:

...became the preserve of a group of progressive Liberal civil servants and ex-trade unionists who... were able to develop policies which were favourable to the unions.²³

However, members of the Cabinet at times took a rather different attitude towards government labour policy. Lloyd-George later recalled that in order to effectively prosecute the war it was necessary to "...secure the greater subordination of labour to the direct control of the state."²⁴ The strategy of his government was to secure labour discipline by a combination of high wages and enhanced recognition and representation. It has been alleged that the latter part of this strategy merely aimed to incorporate labour leaders in order that they would enforce settlements "against their members' opposition."²⁵ Similarly the post-war corporatist machinery centred around Whitleyism and the National Industrial Conference can be interpreted as principally designed to forestall the spread of "advanced doctrines".²⁶

²²Lloyd-George Papers, F/4/2/11, copy of article from CO-OPERATIVE NEWS attached to letter from G. N. Barnes to Lloyd-George, 15.9.17.

²³Reid, in Mommsen & Husung, 1985, op. cit., p. 161.

²⁴C. J. Wrigley, 1976, op. cit., p. 236.

²⁵K. Middlemas, POLITICS IN INDUSTRIAL SOCIETY, 1979, p. 80.

What can we conclude from this conflicting evidence concerning the nature of state intervention between 1914 and 1921? Clearly the state did provoke unrest in a number of areas by the anti-labour character of its intervention. During the war this was particularly the case on the Clyde over job control for skilled engineers, amongst co-operators and among miners and skilled engineers over manpower. Moreover, by the second half of 1919 the government gave every impression of having forsaken its role of impartial arbiter, setting out instead to put labour in its place. However, Reid is undoubtedly correct that there was no 'Servile State' during the war. In addition to Reid's analysis of shipbuilding the evidence from the coal and rail industries outlined in this thesis also suggests that state intervention was regarded as an asset by the unions. The wartime state was no anti-labour monolith. Rather it contained contending attitudes to the relationship between labour and capital. In certain aspects of state labour policy those who favoured the labour interest gained the upper hand.²⁷ Nevertheless, it should be recognised that even these progressive Liberal and labour elements were partial only to the more "moderate" manifestations of trade unionism.

In assessing the causes of working class unrest we might question whether historical assessments of the nature of state intervention are really so significant. Perhaps contemporary appreciations of the equity of state intervention are of greater significance in explaining the

²⁶ See the comments of the Special Commissioners for the North-West engaged by the government to inquire into industrial unrest during 1917. Quoted in Wrigley, 1987, op. cit., p. 59. See also G.D.H. Cole & R. Postgate, *THE COMMON PEOPLE, 1746-1946*, 1946, p. 548.

²⁷ Reid, in Tolliday & Zeitlin, 1985, op. cit., passim.

unrest than an historical analysis of the inner workings of government. Attitudes within the labour ranks were undoubtedly mixed. Thus, among the 'advanced' leaders of the S.W.M.F. the state continued to be regarded as a kind of executive of the ruling class, in spite of the recognition that government would provide a better bargain for the miners. Elsewhere in the trade unions any acknowledgement that the state might prove more malleable than hard-line employers was tempered by a profound mistrust of government. Despite its limitations the 1917 Enquiry into Industrial Unrest revealed quite clearly that trade union activists across the country had anything but a positive view of government intervention. The District Reports indicated that government intervention lay at the bottom of the unrest in 1917. Food prices and supply, as well as "inequality of sacrifice" featured prominently. The North-West Area reported:

There is no doubt that throughout this area there is grave discontent with the way in which the departments in London exercise the control that is necessary during the war.

The Commissioners in Yorkshire and the East Midlands went further suggesting:

The Munitions of War Acts, the Military Service Act and the Defence of the Realm Act... have been enforced and employed by methods that are deeply resented.

In this region there was apparently "universal distrust... of the Government Departments..."²⁸

These reports are very much borne out by the studies of Sheffield, Liverpool and Pontypridd in this thesis which suggest that the state was

²⁸Commission of Enquiry into Industrial Unrest. Summary of the Reports of the Commission. (Cd. 8662-8669).

not looked upon by labour as a benefactor. In all three areas government was strongly criticised within labour circles over food shortages, profiteering, inflation and its handling of industrial relations. There was an appreciation that the strengthened position of labour combined with the vulnerability of the state to interruptions in production enabled workers to strike favourable bargains with government. In spite of the wartime victory for government officials who favoured labour, distrust of the state among labour activists actually increased as a result of their experience of wartime intervention.

The experience of wartime state intervention appears to have led increasing numbers of workers to question their adherence to state nationalisation in the post-war years. Thus, the M.F.G.B., at the suggestion of the S.W.M.F., altered its demand for nationalisation to include joint control by the workmen and the state. Such was the disenchantment with state control that during the debate Hodges observed that in the absence of "...effective working class control, I do not believe that nationalisation will do any good for anybody."²⁹ The N.U.R. similarly adopted a demand for joint control from 1917. While there is no doubt that nationalisation continued to command widespread support in the labour movement, there was growing opposition to state control from both Left and Right and particularly among those who had direct experience of wartime state control of industry. For example, Sheffield A.S.L.E. & F. decided not to take strike action in favour of nationalisation of the mines if they were to remain in government control. However, they were prepared to "down tools... in the event of the miners taking control."³⁰ As G.D.H. Cole observed in 1919 "...so far

²⁹M.F.G.B. Conference, 1918, p. 50.

³⁰See the Sheffield A.S.L.E.& F. No. I Branch Minutes, 18.1.20. For
(Footnote continued)

as the Labour movement is concerned the internal battle for the idea of workers' control has been fought and won."³¹ A major factor in that victory was disenchantment with the experience of wartime state control of industry. The perception of the nature of state intervention must remain an important factor in accounting for working class unrest during the First World War and beyond.

(c)

Our third main area of controversy concerns the role of institutional factors such as the formal machinery of both trade unionism and conciliation. For the 'rank and file-ists' these came to act as controls over workers. Thus Price argued "...the revolt of labour was against the institutions and tactics that worked for the incorporation of labour into society."³² The two main factors which contributed to such incorporation were the spread of national collective bargaining and the growth of trade union bureaucracy.

During the First World War employers' attitudes to national bargaining varied both between and within industry as well as changing over time. As Gospel has observed the war encouraged employers to favour national bargaining for three main reasons:

First, enhanced union strength and pushfulness increased the employers' fear of leapfrogging and created on their part a perceived need for them to coordinate their wage policies on an

³⁰(continued)

opposition to state control from a right wing labour standpoint see W. Williams, FULL UP AND FED UP: THE WORKERS' MIND IN CROWDED BRITAIN, 1921, p. 177.

³¹Quoted in B. Pribicevic, THE SHOP STEWARDS MOVEMENT AND WORKERS' CONTROL, 1910-122, 1959, p. 160.

³²Price, 1980, op.cit., p. 241.

industry-wide basis. Second,... the Committee on Production, and its awards of national increases familiarised both employers and unions with the notion of industry-wide settlements. Third, the Whitley Committee gave a considerable impetus to national bargaining in a broad spread of industries.³³

Gospel also describes how the Engineering Employers Federation granted recognition, first to the official trade union and subsequently the shop stewards in order to place them under tighter constitutional control. Moreover, conciliation procedures in the industry were used in a number of ways both to protect employers' 'right to manage' and to prevent the outbreak of district wage movements.³⁴

The studies of rail and mining in this thesis suggested that the unions gained from national bargaining. In both industries the centralisation of collective bargaining was secured partly as a result of pressure from the unions and in the face of longstanding opposition from the employers. Moreover, in both rail and mining high unemployment from 1921 and defeats for the unions, resulted in the employers either undermining or dismantling the national machinery.³⁵ Clearly employer and union attitudes to national collective bargaining had not settled around polarised class positions by the post-war depression. Zeitlin has suggested a general approach which might explain such differences. He argued that in industries where labour was weak conciliation machinery brought tangible gains for the unions through compromise agreements

³³H. Gospel, 'Employers and Managers: Organisation and Strategy 1914-39', in C. J. Wrigley (ed.), *A HISTORY OF BRITISH INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS*, Vol. II, 1914-39, p. 169.

³⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 164-65; 168.

³⁵See Conclusion to Section II, and Chapters V, VI and VII above. Gospel indicates that during the inter-war years national bargaining was also dismantled in road haulage, rubber, wool, and cotton weaving and spinning. *Ibid.*, pp. 172-73.

which otherwise might not have been conceded had individual employers been given a free hand. On the other hand, in the craft sectors where labour retained strong workplace organisation "...employers sought to force disputes procedures..." in the aftermath of "...lock-outs or unsuccessful strikes." Nevertheless in Zeitlin's view even in the craft sectors, conciliation machinery could bring concessions from employers. And, moreover, whenever the union acquired sufficient strength it could discard the constraining elements of such agreements, as did the unions in building, shipbuilding and engineering on the eve of war.³⁶

Thus it would appear that the incorporative embrace of conciliation was not a significant cause of unrest between 1914 and 1921. In those craft sectors where, arguably, procedure had favoured capital, the offending agreements had been modified or withdrawn. In industries, such as coal, rail and the docks, where employers had resisted national negotiation before 1914, the unions were able to benefit considerably from its introduction in wartime.³⁷ Moreover, the main pre-war charge against conciliation was that the machinery was used by employers to impose excessive delays in reaching a settlement of union demands, after 1914 these were effectively removed by the repeated intervention of government. Conciliation machinery clearly did not always produce the results trade unionists required, and on occasion itself became the butt of protest even after 1914. However, such protests were localised and short-lived. For the overwhelming majority of trade unionists conciliation machinery was a tool which could be employed more or less effectively in the allocation of spoils between labour and capital. Even

³⁶Zeitlin, in Mommsen & Husung, 1985, op.cit., pp. 332-33.

³⁷On the dockers see, N. Whiteside, 'The Dock Decasualisation Issue 1889-1924: Public Policy and Port Labour Reform', Ph.D. Liverpool, 1977, pp. 193; 234.

those, such as Ablett and Cook, who espoused all-out confrontation rather than conciliation, found the formal machinery indispensable in their attempts as Miners' Agents to protect their members' interests. Moreover, their 'incorporation' in such machinery did not prevent Ablett and Cook from advocating revolutionary strategies during periods of industrial action.

The importance of conciliation machinery as a cause of the unrest, both between 1910 to 1914 and 1917 to 1921 has been greatly overstated by Price and others. Where workers 'rebelled' against conciliation they overwhelmingly desired its reform and often its extension into new areas, rather than its destruction.

The second of the 'rank and file-ist' school's incorporating influences was the growth of trade union bureaucracy. Full-time national officers with their distinct skills and control over information gradually concentrated power at headquarters and in themselves. Accordingly, it has been argued that during the First World War the "subjugation" of labour resulted from the manner in which "...union leaders... collaborated closely with authorities in administering their war economies."³⁸ In regard to the period 1919 to 1921 Hinton recently placed great emphasis on the role of the leadership of the labour movement as perhaps the principal obstacle to any revolutionary threat. Hinton apparently shared J. T. Murphy's view of British labour leadership that:

The General Staff of officialdom is to be a dam
to the surging³⁹ tide of independent working-class
aspirations...

³⁸C. F. Sabel, 'The Internal Politics of Trade Unions', in S. Berger, ORGANIZING INTERESTS IN WESTERN EUROPE: PLURALISM, CORPORATISM, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF POLITICS, 1981, p. 222.

³⁹J. Hinton, LABOUR AND SOCIALISM, 1983, pp. 115-16.

Such a view of trade union leadership has been strongly rejected in each of the studies in Section II of this thesis. In A.S.L.E. & F. and the Co-operative Union it is argued that leadership was to the left of the majority of the membership almost throughout our period. As for the N.U.R. and S.W.M.F. the official structures proved very largely responsive to pressure from left activists. So much so that by 1920 the Executives of these two unions contained majorities which were also to the left of their respective memberships. These were not isolated examples. Much the same could be said of Robert Williams, Secretary of the Transport Workers Federation, and renowned advocate of 'direct action' who described leadership as "...but the puppets of the pressure from beneath."⁴⁰ In many unions where officials were keen to convey a patriotic and moderate image during the war they often, in practice, worked hand in glove with shop stewards and local activists to protect their members' interests.⁴¹

Nevertheless, although leadership was not necessarily "collaborationist" during our period it was certainly capable of being so. There is substantial evidence that government relied upon particular leaders to moderate the trade union challenge. Witness the oft quoted remarks of Bonar Law and Churchill concerning the usefulness of trade union officialdom to government during the post-war labour crisis.⁴²

⁴⁰Quoted in W. Williams, *op. cit.*, pp. 268-69. See also *Ibid.*, p. 54, for more fulsome praise of the responsiveness of leadership from Swansea tinplate labourers.

⁴¹See, for example, Reid's description of the relationship between shop stewards and officials in the wartime shipbuilding industry; Reid in Zeitlin & Tolliday, 1985, *op.cit.*, pp. 57-59.

⁴²See over.

More specifically, Wrigley has argued that during the war:

...skilled trade union leaders were transformed from men who represented their men's grievances to employers and the government, to men who quite literally saw to the organisation of the government's policies on removing restrictive practices and bringing in skilled and semi-skilled labour... often in the face of the violent opposition of their members.⁴³

During the post-war labour crisis in January 1919 the Minister of Labour made plain his reliance upon the "official element" to stem the unrest in Belfast, London and on the Clyde.⁴⁴

The records of the years 1914 to 1921 do not suggest that the nature of labour leadership can be judged in black or white terms. Leadership was by no means typically collaborationist. Moreover, trade union machinery proved generally responsive to pressure from below - although that response was neither automatic nor necessarily immediate. Nevertheless, certain trade union leaders, most notably Thomas of the N.U.R., proved able to resist activist pressure and pursue an often independent and collaborationist line. The common opinion of Thomas in government circles was that he could be relied upon to "play the game".⁴⁵ This did not mean Thomas habitually betrayed his members' interests in exchange for government preferment, rather he employed the tactics he thought most effective for the improvement of rail workers'

⁴²See Fox, op. cit., p. 293; Middlemas, 1979, op. cit., pp. 143-44; Hinton, 1983, op. cit., p. 115.

⁴³Wrigley, 1986, op. cit., p. 57.

⁴⁴Letter from Horne to Lloyd-George on 27.1.19; 28.1.19; 29.1.19; LG/F/27/6/2-4. This involved the General Secretary of the Municipal Employees Association and the leadership of the A.S.E. in efforts to bring the strikes to an end.

⁴⁵See, for example, the letter from Bonar Law to Lloyd-George, 19.9.18. on Thomas's role in the unofficial rail strike, LG/F/30/2/47. And Wrigley, 1986, op. cit., pp. 84-85.

conditions. Government was aware that for Thomas strike action was very much a last resort. But he was able to secure favourable deals for his union largely through his tenacious skill as a negotiator coupled to his exploitation of the fear that the "wild men" might take control if concessions were not granted to the conciliator.⁴⁶

It was argued in Chapter V (N.U.R.) that Thomas was able to frustrate official union policy because of his strong personal following amongst rank and file railwaymen. This is not to suggest that labour leadership was merely a neutral reflection of the balance of internal forces. Thomas's strength also lay in his political position. No left-wing figure could have achieved the degree of effective independent influence over strike policy realised by Thomas. His power depended to a significant degree on his access to press, government and employers, together with their willingness to support his line of action.⁴⁷ A left wing figure at the head of a union would have found it impossible to have gained press and government support for a militant strategy pursued in opposition to the union Executive. Such a leader could not gain legitimisation for his stance by using press and government to appeal over the heads of activist bodies to the rank and file.

⁴⁶ See, for example, the comments of E. Geddes to Lloyd-George in a letter of 15.1.20, as follows: "Undoubtedly Thomas feels he has won a great victory, and I suppose he has. He has without doubt worked very hard for a settlement, and has not in any way shown weakness by trying to squeeze concessions out of us after I had made our final offer... We ourselves feel the settlement is a very generous one for the men..." LG/F/18/4/1.

⁴⁷ For example, during the rail crisis in November and December 1917, Thomas successfully persuaded Bonar Law to suspend negotiations in order to give Thomas a stick with which to beat the Liverpool men who had engaged in unofficial action. For a fuller account see P. J. Maguire, 'The Impact of Unofficial Trades Union Movements and Industrial Politics, 1915-1922', D. Phil., Sussex, 1984, p. 274.

Support from government and press were important factors in ensuring that trade union leadership was not a passive reflection of rank and file opinion and that it tended towards moderation in this period. But government and press were not the predominant influence on leadership action. For the most part leaders responded to pressure from below. Leadership did collaborate but not universally. Moreover, even where leadership did collaborate it was not a cause of the unrest except, arguably, in a very few instances such as among skilled engineers on Clydeside during the war.

III

It is now time to summarise the findings of earlier analyses on the key elements of the debate between the 'rank and file-ists' and their critics, and to draw on the body of the thesis to offer some concluding thoughts on the causation and nature of the labour unrest between 1914 and 1921.

(a)

The first finding was that the research for this thesis supported an emphasis on the short run impact of the war in the rise of labour rather than secular evolution. Any pre-war rise of labour consciousness among co-operators was too fragile to pose a serious threat to the established Liberal orthodoxy. As argued in Chapter IV it was the events of the war and its aftermath which brought co-operation into de facto alliance with labour. A tendency towards a more homogenised working class experience before 1914 may have contributed to the character and scale of the unrest, but the impact of any such changes appears to have been more profound during the war than over preceding decades.⁴⁸

⁴⁸See B. A. Waites, 'The Effects of the First World War on Aspects of
(Footnote continued)

As for the nature of government intervention, it has been argued above that there was no 'Servile State' at the core of working class unrest. Government intervention often favoured labour during the war. Nevertheless the perceived iniquity of state action in a range of areas, including profiteering, food distribution, inflation and many others, were major causes of the unrest. Reid, emphasising that "...this was after all the *FIRST* World War", has argued that rather than imposing the dictates of capital the wartime state intervention is best characterised for the most part as having 'muddled through'.⁴⁹ This is well substantiated. However, even though such 'muddling through' included many policies favourable to labour, state intervention remained an important cause of unrest. Firstly, the economic consequences of state 'muddling through' provoked discontent and unrest in among working people. The government anxious to prevent a social crisis frequently responded by limiting or correcting the impact of their earlier action or inaction. While successful in heading-off grave social crises the government was unable to remove the original perception of government acquiescence to, or even promotion of, unequal class sacrifice during the national crisis. Moreover, for many it appeared that government connived at this state of affairs until pressed to mend its ways by labour.

After the war, particularly from the second half of 1919, the state-labour relationship appears to have soured still further. Labour

⁴⁸(continued)
the Class Structure of English Society', D. Phil., Open University, 1983, p. 565.

⁴⁹Reid, in Tolliday & Zeitlin, 1985, op. cit., pp. 68-69. Authors' italics.

activists accepted that government could be forced to grant concessions, but growing numbers believed that in any confrontation with capital the state would side with the latter rather than play the role of independent arbiter. Attitudes also hardened in government circles where preparations were being made for confrontation with the unions.⁵⁰ The state may well have pursued policies favourable to labour between 1914 and 1921. This did not prevent it from being portrayed and widely perceived as unsympathetic to labour's interests. State intervention was an important factor in the high levels of post-war unrest. This was partly because the experience of government wartime intervention encouraged workers in the belief that collective pressure on government would bring results. And also because government economic mis-management provoked a sense of injustice and discontent both in the workplace and in the community.

The third area of debate concerned the role of institutional factors, namely the machinery of trade unionism and conciliation. Both could act to "subordinate" labour. Neither did so necessarily or, indeed, for the most part. Moreover, any 'incorporation' of labour between 1914 and 1921 was not an important cause of the unrest. During the peak years of industrial action in 1919 and 1920, both rank and file and activists maintained an almost unerring faith in the ability of formal labour institutions to respond to their aspirations. This period did not witness a 'rank and file' rebellion against the official machine despite the unprecedented centralisation of both industrial relations and power within trade unions. Even prominent revolutionaries believed

⁵⁰ See, for example, Lloyd-George papers, F/30/3/31, where Lloyd-George, in a letter to Bonar Law, urged preparation for a miners' strike which included the freezing of co-operative food supplies. See also Wrigley, 1987, op. cit., pp.78-79; Fox, op. cit., pp. 306-08.

that the official machinery of labour could be made to do their work. John Maclean envisaged the possibility that the Triple Alliance might become the "...executive of the class struggle - the central committee of the New Society."⁵¹ Collaboration and incorporation made little contribution to the causation of the unrest. There was no post-war 'rank and file' rebellion, trade union machinery proved for the most part responsive to pressure from below.

(b)

It has been argued recently that the historical focus on the 'missed opportunities' of 1919 to 1921 is both misguided and teleological. Instead it has been suggested attention should be turned to the achievements of the organised labour movement between 1914 and 1921.⁵² There is much in this, those achievements were considerable. One such held particularly dear in many industries was the establishment of national bargaining. For some it was the most significant gain of the period. A local Dockers' official in Liverpool explained his support for the miners in 1921 in the following terms:

It is not so much a question of the reduction of wages. We recognise that as inevitable sooner or later. But a big principle is at stake. We cannot allow mine-owners to set aside national agreements. The settlement of wages on a national basis has become vital to us.⁵³

Even so the defeat of the miners and the return to district negotiation,

⁵¹Quoted in Hinton, 1973, op. cit., p. 309.

⁵²See Reid, in Tolliday and Zeitlin, op. cit., pp. 69-70; J. Hinton, 'Disconnecting socialist aspiration from class consciousness', BULLETIN OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY, Vol. 51, No. 3, November 1986, pp. 36-40.

⁵³Liverpool Evening Express, 6.4.21..

together with its erosion on the railways and the losses experienced elsewhere, suggest that the consideration of lost opportunities is not entirely misplaced. The frustration of demands for the use of 'direct action' to extract from the state firmer guarantees of national bargaining, possibly in the form of nationalisation of the mines and railways, therefore warrant further consideration.

Accounts of these missed opportunities have, inevitably, focused on the temper of the labour movement between 1919 and 1921. Milliband's description of the organised post-war working class as "...a live, militant force, unrevolutionary in its ultimate aims" remains a widely accepted interpretation.⁵⁴ In one sense this generalisation obscures as much as it reveals. While many were indeed "live" and "militant", others were not; moreover, some were avowedly revolutionary. Even attempts to generalise at a regional or local level are fraught with danger. There were conservative elements in Sheffield and Pontypridd, while rail workers in Liverpool, considered the most 'advanced' in the country, hardly conformed to the image of other Liverpudlian trade unionists. That said, the local studies in this thesis point to a regional patchiness in adherence to 'direct action'. During the 'arms to Poland' crisis of August 1920 the Councils of Action in Sheffield and Pontypridd were justifiably confident of their ability to organise a sizeable stoppage of work in their localities. However, in Liverpool their ambition stretched no further than "holding up the transport of munitions."⁵⁵ The possibility of a strike on the anti-war issue among

⁵⁴R. Miliband, *PARLIAMENTARY SOCIALISM: A STUDY IN THE POLITICS OF LABOUR*, 1972, p. 65.

⁵⁵Liverpool Evening Express, 19.8.20; Sheffield Independent, 16.8.20. Pontypridd Trades & Labour Council Minutes, Meeting of the Executive Committee of the Council of Action, 3.9.20.

the militant industrial sectors in August and September 1920 was real enough, had the government been foolish enough to provoke one. There was little sign that they would do so. In the absence of such a unifying issue the local Councils of Action withered rapidly despite the best efforts of local activists to maintain them for future struggles.

Clegg has recently identified the possibility of 'direct action' resulting from a "coalition of local leaders" within the official trade union movement. Such an alliance would:

...through representation in union executives and conferences, take control over national decision-making in the unions, and prevent the national leaders reaching compromises acceptable to employers and the government - not because the local men were revolutionaries... but because they had greater expectations than their national leaders of what could be achieved by threats of strikes⁵⁶ or actual strikes in the conditions of 1919.

While this formulation is instructive the findings in this thesis suggest it is in need of some modification. Firstly, there is a danger of ignoring those trade union officials who also hoped to adopt 'direct action' - officials were not necessarily more conservative than activists. Second, and perhaps more significant, is the assessment of the motivations of the "local men". Clegg rightly suggests that they were not necessarily revolutionaries. Many of these figures, however, embraced a world view in which confrontation between labour and capital was inevitable and, particularly in the wake of the Russian revolution, potentially cataclysmic. Indeed in South Wales and elsewhere some of Clegg's local leaders regarded themselves as revolutionaries. These men

⁵⁶H. A. Clegg, A HISTORY OF BRITISH TRADE UNIONS SINCE 1889, Vol. II, 1911-33, 1985, p. 279. See also J. Zeitlin, 'Trade union history or the history of industrial relations?', BULLETIN OF THE SOCIETY FOR THE STUDY OF LABOUR HISTORY, Vol. 51, No. 3, November 1986, pp. 34-36.

had direct experience of the Cambrian Combine strike where a dispute over the cutting price of coal in a single seam had developed into one of the most fundamental struggles of the entire pre-war labour unrest. The South Wales men and others knew that a strike over a small issue could have wider ramifications. Some of these local leaders then were revolutionary in that they desired a final victory of labour over capital. The main hope for such a victory lay in 'direct action' and a general, or extended Triple Alliance, strike. True, the majority of the local leaders who favoured the use of 'direct action' were not revolutionary. However, many of them fervently hoped to be able to use trade union industrial muscle to effect a major and possibly lasting defeat upon capital - primarily in their own industry but if possible more generally.

The principal explanation for the 'missed opportunity' of achieving more lasting gains for labour via 'direct action' did not then lie in the limited horizons of local (or national) advocates of the tactic. To a limited extent it lay in the ability of leaders like Thomas to prevent the use of the Triple Alliance. Largely it lay in the skill with which government handled the unions employing a judicious mixture of carrot and stick. But most importantly it lay in the absence of general support for such a strategy at each level of the unions. In certain parts of the country and in certain industries support for the aggressive use of 'direct action' had perhaps never been more widespread. Over particular issues and at specific times that support extended beyond the executive, the District Council and the committed attenders of the branch meeting. However, at bottom the "advanced men" were simply too far in advance of too many of their fellows at each level of the trade union hierarchy from the rank and file to the full time officer.

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