

TRADE UNIONISM AS A FACTOR IN SOCIAL EVOLUTION.

BY ALFRED J. TAYLOR, F.L.S., F.R.G.S., E.

In any endeavour to trace the evolution of social life, we may safely assume as a starting point that the family is the natural foundation of all social relations.

Blood relationship would naturally, in its infancy, form the strongest tie between members of the human race. Then would come the ties of kinship: and these in turn would broaden out into the realisation of duties as between man and man—the observance of which would be necessary to give stability to a brotherhood based on the foundations of a *general* social relationship. As the conditions of society became more complex, various and conflicting interests would necessarily arise; and in time would become developed those well-defined separations of interests that characterise the social relations of the Nineteenth-Century Civilisation.

It is with one of these well-defined lines of development in social life that I have now to deal: and as all social and political changes are of slow growth, it must be remembered that I cannot possibly do more than touch upon some of the salient points in a subject so vast and interesting as that which we are about to discuss:—Trade Unionism as a Factor in Social Evolution.

In the first place I would remind my hearers, that as one of the necessary factors in the development of a higher civilisation a time was reached in the history of the human race when it became necessary for those having special regard for particular interests to combine for the promotion and protection of those interests.

Combination became necessary, for example, to counteract influences that were likely to become dominant to the injury of the common good: and thus we find that in the middle ages combinations known as “Craft Guilds” were formed in which masters and workmen united to protect the interests of certain trades.

These Craft Guilds, after long and obstinate struggles, succeeded in winning certain privileges and political powers that paved the way for the succeeding victories that have been won by the modern combinations known as Trade Unions.

The Craft Guilds, however, differed from the Trade Union in so far that, while under the former, masters and men combined for the common object of protecting their particular trades; the Union is designed to regulate the interests

of Trade "exclusively from the workman's point of view. Instead of the Guild in which masters and men were as one, we have on the one hand the association of the employers, and on the other the unions of the workmen." (*Subjects of the Day*, page 106, August, 1890.)

At the time of the ancient Guild comparative equality prevailed. The master trained, personally, his own apprentices, who were in most cases inmates of his dwelling. The relationship between master and man was almost that of the family, "and their trade was a mystery not to be communicated to outsiders." But as the conditions of society changed, the masters, being the strongest, used their power "rather to advance their own individual interests than to serve the good of the whole trade," and this was the disintegrating factor that ultimately led to the breaking up of the Craft Guilds, and left labour without organisation of any kind whatever.

Taking advantage of their helpless condition, the dominant class, for the time being, influenced the Legislature to pass laws for the special government of the workers, to which we can only now look back with wonder and amazement.

Under the laws referred to, labour was enforced as a duty, and refusal to work was punished as a crime. "The rates of wages for which men should work were fixed by act of Parliament; and it was equally an offence for the workman to demand, or the employer to pay, more than the law specified. Combination of every kind was strictly prohibited, and any found uniting for the purpose of dealing with the conditions of labour were subjected to extremely severe penalties." (*Ibid.*, page 107.)

Under Act 2 and 3, Edward VI., c. 15 (which is regarded as the starting point of Legislation against combinations), it was enacted "that if any artificers, labourers, etc., should conspire, covenant, or promise that they should not make nor do their work but at a certain rate, or should not work but at certain hours, they should forfeit, for the first offence, £10, or suffer twenty days imprisonment; for the second offence £20, or the pillory; for the third offence £40 or the pillory, and the loss of one ear," etc.

This law, we are told by the writer I have already quoted, "was in spirit but a type of all the Legislation affecting labour which prevailed right down to the end of the first quarter of the present century." "Indeed," he observes, "it is not too much to say, as Professor Rogers has done in his book on wages, that from the times of the Wars of the Roses up to the repeal of the combination laws, all legislation was 'a conspiracy concocted and carried out by parties interested in its success, entered into to cheat the English workman of his

wages, to tie him to the soil, to deprive him of freedom, and to degrade him to irreparable poverty.' ”

We all know the natural fruits of such legislation. Refused the privilege of stating their grievances openly and the right to combine to enforce, even in a legitimate manner, a recognition of their wrongs, men will work in secret and endeavour to accomplish by stealth, and in an illegal manner, the ends that should be attained constitutionally, if the truest interests of society are to be conserved.

It was so in the instance under consideration. When the workers found that they could do nothing lawfully to better their condition and relieve them from their enforced slavery, they formed secret combinations; for, as Howell has rightly affirmed, “Tyranny and oppression will always produce men who will not be deterred, by any consideration of danger, from combining to resist what they deem an injustice.”

After the passing of the prohibitory laws I have referred to only the most zealous workers combined openly, “but,” says Howell, “under the cloak of friendly societies many associations were formed . . . Secrecy was the child of suppression; the Legislature forged at once the chains of the workmen and the weapons for their deliverance.”

When the law prohibited combination on the part of the workers, the journeymen tried to fix a list of prices. This the employers opposed on the ground that they alone had the right to fix the price of labour. The idea of arbitration in such matters was also opposed.

That the efforts of the workmen to combine were to some extent successful is sufficiently shown in the fact that at the commencement of the present century strikes were found to be common in almost every trade. Class interest and influence was consequently once more brought to bear, and in the year 1800 a statute was passed directed against all associations of workmen established for any of the purposes for which such societies were then in existence; for, as I have just mentioned, under the pretext of being friendly societies, associations had been formed having for their object the furthering of the interests of the workers as against the influence and power of the masters.

By the statute referred to (40 Geo. III., c. 106) all agreements between journeymen and workmen for obtaining an advance of wages for themselves or others, or for reducing the hours of work, or preventing the employment of hands, or in any way affecting any person carrying on any manufacture, was declared to be illegal. Power was given to one Justice of the Peace to convict summarily and impose imprisonment for two months upon any workmen making such agreements, or interfering in the other ways mentioned.

Under this law those who were bold enough to defy its provisions were made to suffer heavily; for the laws were put in force without mercy, and oftentimes in defiance of justice. As an instance, it may be mentioned in 1805 three linen-weavers were sent to Wakefield gaol for three months—one for the offence of carrying a letter to York requesting assistance from other workmen. The men were invariably punished very severely, but they invariably failed whenever they attempted in turn to prosecute the masters for combination, although some of their cases were fully proved. I might cover pages in quoting instances in support of these statements, but that would only unnecessarily trespass upon the time I have at my disposal. Those who are curious in the matter I must refer to Howell's excellent account of the *Conflicts of Capital and Labour*, pp. 105-7.

"The history of these persecutions and contentions," says that writer, "and the consequent privations endured by the workmen, for the purpose of securing their independence, is a real record of heroism. In spite of oppression the most crushing; of legal enactments the most stringent; of punishments the most cruel for any infraction of these acts, the men continued to combine; they contested every inch of the ground, until, after a struggle of centuries, they were on the threshold of victory; partial, it is true, but still most important, viewed by the light of later facts. . . . A few men in Parliament, with Joseph Hume at their head, had observed their struggles for industrial freedom, and in the year 1824 they moved for and obtained the appointment of a Select Committee of the House of Commons to consider the laws relating to workmen and artisans." The conditions under which the workers were struggling at this time may be judged from the statement of the same historian that "there are men still living who can recollect the time when they had to bury the books and records of their Society on the Town Moor of Bolton, in Lancashire, when oaths had to be resorted to, and were administered to for the purpose of securing mutual protection; when to ask for a rise of wages, or even to receive an advance, if offered, was a violation of the law," and when the exportation of machinery and the emigration of artisans was alike forbidden.

In due time Mr. Hume's committee brought up its report. Briefly summarised, it admitted that combinations of workmen had taken place in England, Ireland, and Scotland, and that at the time of taking evidence such combinations were in existence, attended with strikes—the object being to keep up wages, regulate the hours of working, and to impose restrictions upon the masters respecting apprentices or others whom they might think proper to employ; that serious breaches of the peace had resulted, attended with loss both to masters

and workmen, and that the laws relating to combinations had not only not been efficient to prevent combinations, either of masters or of workmen, but on the contrary, in the opinion of many, had a tendency to produce mutual irritation and distrust.

The Committee expressed the opinion of its members that masters and workmen should be freed from the existing restrictions regarding rates of wages and hours of working, and be left at perfect liberty to make such arrangements as they might naturally think proper; also, that the Statute Laws interfering in these particulars should be repealed, as well as the common law under which a peaceable meeting of masters or workmen could be prosecuted as a conspiracy.

While suggesting these concessions, the committee recommended "That it is absolutely necessary, when repealing the Combination Laws, to enact such a law as may efficiently and by summary process punish either masters or workmen who by threat, intimidation, or acts of violence, should interfere with the perfect freedom which ought to be allowed to each party of employing his labour or capital in the manner he may deem most advantageous." (Howell.)

The result of the Select Committee's Report was the Act of 1824 (5 Geo. IV., c. 95).

This Act relieved workmen from all liability to punishment for engaging in peaceful combinations or strikes.

Strikes on a large scale immediately occurred in various parts of the country, and the Legislature was seized with a panic, which the manufacturers did their best to promote. Towards the end of the session the panic subsided, and "all parties," we are told, were contented with a reproduction of the Act last quoted "with some alteration in its shape, and in the language of some of its provisions." Statute 6 Geo. IV., c. 129, therefore took the place of Statute 5 Geo. IV., c. 95.

The employers realising that their former power to crush the workers and force them to accept the terms they might dictate was gone, were far from being satisfied; and in 1830 they succeeded in obtaining another enquiry bearing upon combinations and strikes. The report was fruitless, and was never officially published, but from the portions of it published in 1862 by Mr. Senior—and afterwards in his "Historical and Philosophical Essays" (1865)—it has been shown that it was adverse to the workmen.

Under Statute 6 Geo. IV., c. 129, while exempting from punishment persons meeting together to determine wages and hours of labour (which the persons actually present at the meeting might require or agree to give), the law defined all combinations or agreements affecting the wages or hours of work of persons *not present* at the meetings as conspiracies. Under the definition of conspiracies were also included attempts to control a master in the management of his

business, and agreements not to work in company of any given person, or to persuade others to leave their employment, or not to engage themselves. For such offences the law-breakers were liable to fine and imprisonment.

At this period the growing activity of the Unions, and the frequent recurrence of strikes, intensified the anxiety and enmity of the employers.

In 1834 an incident occurred that brought into prominence the disabilities under which the workers were still labouring.

“Six Dorchester labourers,” says Howell (p. 116), “were convicted and sentenced to seven years’ transportation, ostensibly for administering unlawful oaths, but really for the ‘crime of combination.’ This conviction was so manifestly unjust, and the sentence so outrageously cruel,” he continues, “that some of the ablest, certainly the most independent, men of that day condemned *both*, in no measured terms; and they resolutely demanded the remission of the sentence on these six poor men, and their immediate liberation. An immense demonstration took place in the Copenhagen Fields, on Monday, March 21st, 1834, attended, it is said, by about 400,000 persons; and a procession between six and seven miles in length, consisting of nearly 50,000 workmen, proceeded to the official residence of Lord Melbourne for the purpose of presenting a petition with over 266,000 signatures, on behalf of those six convicted peasants. After a good deal of opposition on the part of the Whig Ministry of that day, backed as it was by the major portion of the manufacturing classes, and, after much delay, the men were ‘pardoned,’ and ordered to be liberated. But the whole proceeding in regard thereto,” the writer goes on to say, “were shamefully cruel and even cowardly. The men had been hastened out of the country” (to New South Wales), “and, even when they were pardoned, some of them did not hear of their pardon until years afterwards, and these might never have heard of it until the expiration of their sentence, had it not been for the merest accident of one of them falling across an English newspaper in the colony.”

This case, as might be expected, gave an impetus to the cause of Unionism. Stimulated by the successful meetings they had been able to organise, the workers were led to make an effort to establish a national federation of the whole of the trades. A weekly newspaper was started to assist the scheme, which for a time gave promise of success. When, however, the men who had been convicted were pardoned, the agitation cooled down. But the workers had got to realise their power. “Permanent work,” says Howell, “had already begun to take the place of mere spasmodic effort; the several trades were busily employed in perfecting the machinery of their organisation, and thenceforth it is not difficult to trace

their systematic operations, and discover the permeating influence of their associative strength and power."

The history of Unionism from this stage for some years afterwards is a record of strikes, prosecutions, and protests, not against the law, but against the way in which it was being administered.

The prosecutions and convictions resulted in the Unions increasing in number; and, on March 25, 1845, a Society was established, under the title of the National Association of United Trades, which became the centre of a great movement, and gave birth to a newspaper called the *Labour League*. It proposed to raise a sum of £50,000 to provide a fund for the support of workers thrown out of work by labour disputes. It bore fruit in the consolidation of trade associations, and the better understanding of the aims and objects of the Unions.

In 1856 a Select Committee was appointed to enquire into matters connected with masters and operatives; and in 1860 another committee was appointed for a similar object. These inquiries served the purpose of throwing light upon the questions at issue between the employers and the workmen.

As I have already mentioned the feeling of the workmen had not been so much against the law as against its administration, but the Builders' Strike and lock-out in London in the year 1859—the excitement attending which created universal interest for many months—brought about a crisis that led to an organised effort and demand for the amendment of the law itself. The Press took the side of the employers, and denouncing the Unions as Secret Societies, "whose power was sustained only by terrorism," demanded that they should be stamped out as an incurable and detestable evil. The Unionists replied by challenging investigation. In the year 1866 it was shown as the result of enquiry by a Select Committee, that the average number of convictions, under the existing laws in England and Scotland alone exceeded 11,000 cases annually. The enquiry led to the passing of the Master and Servants' Act, 1867.

In the latter year outrages said to have been committed in Sheffield, Nottingham, and Manchester, led to the appointment of a Royal Commission, with power to enquire into the organisation, rules, operations, and conduct of trade societies.

"The investigation," Howell tells us, "was searching and complete. The result was embodied in 16 volumes of reports; the ordeal was a severe one, but," he adds, "the Unions as a whole came out of it *without a stain*."

Trade Unionism, and the cause it represented, had won a great and glorious victory. This was demonstrated in the results of the enquiry. Instead of Legislation to suppress

“the incurable and detestable evil,” a Temporary Act, protecting the funds of the Unions, was passed in the year 1869, and two years afterwards was passed a Trade Union Act, which sanctioned their objects and legalised their action.

What a shout of victory must have gone up when the workers realised that the law might be appealed to in the future for their protection, and might no longer be used as an instrument of persecution and revenge in the hands of their masters!

And it was in their onward march from this point that we have had a splendid illustration of the truth of Mr. Gladstone's utterance when he declared that we may always trust the People.

“After the passing of the Criminal Law Amendment Act, 1871,” writes Howell (p. 126)—and let the record ever remain to the honour and glory of the Trade Unions—“the agitation for the total repeal of all the penal laws affecting labour became more and more intensified and persistent;” but “the action for securing this end was constitutional and methodical; the public mind was educated by meetings, lectures, publications, annual congresses, deputations to ministers, and interviews with members of Parliament, and by debates, bills, and petitions, until at last a Conservative Government in 1875, after a slight show of resistance, with the excuse and help afforded by the report of another Royal Commission, granted the workmen's demand.”

So much for the history of Trade Unions in Great Britain up to the time when the National Conscience found expression in the voice and action of the Legislature, and set the workmen free.

During the past 27 years the British workmen have shown themselves worthy of the confidence reposed in them; and by their conduct they have justified before the whole world the action of the Nation's Legislature in granting them the freedom they now enjoy.

My notes on the history of Trade Unions would hardly be complete without some reference to the labour struggles in the United States, and on the Continent. I have dealt most fully with the evolution of Unionism in Great Britain, because there we find the best illustration we can obtain of Unionism as a factor in Social Evolution, for there we have a land

“Where freedom broadens slowly down
From precedent to precedent;
Where faction seldom gathers head,
But by degrees to fulness wrought
The strength of some diffusive thought,
Hath time and space to work and spread.”

The era of the Civil War—we are told by Dr. Ely, in his History of the Labour Movement in America—brought into

prominence, with other matters of importance, a vast number of labour problems, due to fluctuations of the currency, to rapid changes from prosperity to adversity, and also to the sudden and marvellous accumulation of wealth in the hands of successful business men and lucky adventurers. "Never before," he writes, "were there such sharp contrasts in the country between riches and poverty. . . . Two other especially weighty circumstances must not fail to be mentioned. First, the concentration of the labouring classes in large establishments in great industrial centres had continued without interruption; second, during the war, native labour had in many quarters been replaced by foreign labour, and race antagonism added intensity to the natural struggle between employer and employed."

To these causes we may trace the organisation of labour in America.

"Most trades," writes Mr. Washington Gladden, in his article on "Social Problems in the United States" (*Subjects of the Day*, Aug., 1890), "are now organised; there are also trades assemblies in which some degree of co-operation between the trades is secured, and one National Society, the Knights of Labour, has been formed, whose ambition it is to gather into its ranks all classes of labourers, organised and unorganised. But," he continues, "if any compact union of the labouring classes is to be secured, it is likely to take the form of a federation of Trades' Unions, rather than that of one comprehensive labour organisation into whose local unions labourers of all classes shall be promiscuously gathered."

I need not follow the growth of the labour movements in America much further. Suffice it to say, that for the six years ending 1866, strikes and lock-outs occurred, and battles were fought in the interests of labour involving a cost to the employees amounting in round numbers to twelve millions sterling.

"One result of the labour war of 1886," says the writer last quoted, "was the introduction into a considerable number of establishments of the principle of participation in profits. . . . Since that date the movement has been steadily gaining ground; the success of some of the experiments has been notable, and there is a fair prospect that the system of participation will gain a firm footing in our industrial Society. That it is logically the next stage in the evolution of labour seems obvious."

On the Continent, the workers have to win their right to combine for the protection of their mutual interest. They are as yet only experiencing the throes of the political birth-pang that will ultimately give them the liberty they are aiming at.

I turn now to the second portion of my paper in which I wish to deal briefly with the tendency of Trade Unions.

When it is remembered that "associative effort"—taking shape in Trade Unionism—has been the "natural evolution of generations of increasing political freedom," and that each form of industrial association is that most suitable to the conditions under which it originates and lives, I think it will also be admitted that the present potentialities of Unionism need give us no alarm for the future.

I hold with Mr. William Clark—one of the contributors to the interesting "Fabian Essays," (p. 62), "that there *has* been, and *is proceeding*, an Economic Evolution, practically independent of our individual desires or prejudices;" and holding this as an article of my political faith, I do not contemplate the future of Unionism with fear or misgiving.

Unionism, like the individual, has to spell out its way in syllables of painful experience, but the fact that it has sometimes seemed to blunder and fail has no more been an indication of weakness or want of vital strength than is the falling back of a ripple on the sandy shores an indication that the waters are receding from their work of drawing down the "dust of Continents to be."

"No doubt vast eddies in the flood,
Of onward time shall yet be made,"

but are the eddies any indication that the waters are not passing onward? Nay! do not the eddies create the very force necessary to carry them forward?

Let us not, then, judge Unionism by the apparent mistakes that have been made, but rather by the sun-lit milestones that have marked its progress.

On pages 427-9 of his history, Howell gives a list of nearly 60 important Acts which were more or less the outcome of the combined action of the Trade Unions during the years 1869 to 1889; and even this list, it is admitted, gives but a bare record of the direct results of the action of the Unions and Congresses, and, more recently, of labour representation in the National Parliament, where the voice of Unionism is now listened to with respect, and its influence made manifest. As Howell has pointed out, however, "it is not so much in specific performances that the record of Trade Unions is seen to greatest advantage. It is rather," he says, "in those unrecorded fields of labour which constitute the everyday life-work of the Unions that they display their power, wield their influence, and achieve their more permanent successes. The improved condition of the working classes to day is largely due to their efforts. The improvement has been slow—terribly slow; and it is not so apparent to the younger generation as to those whose age and experience takes them back to the "forties" and "fifties"

of the present century. The progress, nevertheless, has been real and substantial in material advantages—wages and hours of labour; in social position, by the recognition of industrial rights; in political status, by enfranchisement and election to the highest posts open to popular election; in constitutional rights and judicial obligation by the repeal of repressive and disabling laws, and by the enactment of more just and equitable enabling laws . . . and even in the administration of justice the position of workmen has improved enormously.” This writer strongly emphasises a fact that he declares has hitherto been lost sight of by economical writers, and that is, “the higher duration of life attained by the members of the Unions in recent, compared with former, years.” He gives striking statistics in support of this assertion, and points to the important consideration that this longer duration of life speaks volumes as to the present improved conditions of life and labour—that the homes and circumstances of the people must be better, for the wives share in the longer duration of life, and that the improved conditions of the heads of the family cannot fail to exercise a beneficial influence upon its younger branches.

Above all, it has been the tendency of Unionism to bring more prominently under notice the absolute necessity that exists for a wiser allocation of labour, if misery is to be banished from the ranks of the working classes. This is the problem towards which associative effort must turn its almost undivided attention in the immediate future. Almost without consciousness of the fact the Trade Unions have been working out the answer to the riddle, working it out, it may be, through much travail and suffering, but with a growing demonstration of the fact that “the end will crown the work.”

What are the avowed objects of Trade Unions? I do not ask upon what grounds we may justify their existence, for their existence is explained in the fact of their adaptability to the economic conditions under which we live. Trade Unionism takes its place as a natural and necessary factor in the evolution of social life, for as Jevons nicely puts it in his little work on “The State in relation to Labour” (p. 88), “Common trade interest is one of the strongest bonds of society, and, judged by the light of history, is likely always to be a considerable factor in social affairs.”

“In their essence,” writes Howell, “Trade Unions are voluntary associations of workmen for mutual protection and assistance in securing generally the most favourable conditions of Labour. This is their primary and fundamental object, and includes all efforts to raise wages or prevent a reduction in wages; to diminish the hours of labour, or resist attempts to increase the working hours; and to regulate all matters pertaining to matters of employment or discharge, and modes

of working . . . The sphere of their action extends to almost every detail connected with the labour of the workman and the well-being of his everyday life."

Such aims and objects as these must necessarily have a tendency for good, and if in striving to give effect to the ideals they "stretch lame hands of faith to reach" the Trade Unions sometimes get caught in the eddies of the flow-tide of Social Evolution, the experience is wholesome, and must be recognised as an essential factor in their progress. In this fact lies our hope for the future. Each mistaken effort of misused strength in the past has taught them lessons of wisdom that will certainly be taken advantage of, and turned to good account in the future. Every conflict that now takes place between Capital and Labour, and all the experience of the troublous past, goes to demonstrate beyond any room for doubt that the objects and aims of Trade Unions must be attained peaceably, or not at all; that their work must be carried out upon constitutional lines, and must find a response in the National Conscience if it is to bear the fruit they hope to pluck.

In the fact that the Unions must, as a matter of experience, get to recognise these truths, lies our guarantee of the benign influence that associative trade effort is likely to exercise in the future.

It will be remembered that in my opening remarks I referred to the broadening of the ties of kinship into a realisation of the duties between man and man that finds expression in a brotherhood based on the foundations of social duties and relationship.

In the gradual evolution of the highest civilisation there must necessarily be different phases of social relationship. The phase we have now entered upon is being largely moulded and shaped by the influence of Trade Unionism, and I do not think there is anything to regret in our forced admission of this fact. For, if the human race is progressing, and not retrograding, then, surely, the recognition of the fact that Trade Unions have become important factors in the development of a higher civilisation is sufficient demonstration in itself that the tendency of Trade Unionism is for good and not for evil.

The more immediate tendency of associative effort on the part of the working classes appears to my mind to lie in the direction of a fairer apportionment of the world's wealth, and a wider recognition of equality and brotherhood than has yet been realised in the world's history.

The present strife between Capital and Labour cannot continue for ever. Each conflict has but served the purpose of bringing the contending parties closer together, and the time cannot be far distant when they shall stand face to face,

and agree to live and work together in unity of purpose for a mutual good.

That is what I see in the immediate future as likely to result from the victories of Trade Unionism in the past, and its influence at the present time—an Industrial Partnership, in which, social distinctions being set aside, the skilled workman will work hand to hand with the man of capital, and each will share the just profit of his enterprise and skill.

And, far away beyond this, I see the development of a social life in which associative effort will have played a not unimportant part, the ideal Socialism of One

"Who wrought
With human hands the Creed of Creeds
In loveliness of perfect deeds."