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Why were the 'New Unions' of the late nineteenth century so controversial?

The third quarter of the nineteenth century had seen the trade unions move into respectability: they concentrated on their bargaining power, on negotiation rather than confrontation, on lobbying parliament (via organisations such as the Trades Union Congress' Parliamentary Committee) rather than striking. As Musson underlines[1], despite the achievements of the skilled unions, they were non-revolutionary: instead, they focussed on reform. There was little room in these unions for unskilled labourers, traditionally despised by the more 'aristocratic' workers[2]. After a wave of parliamentary triumphs in the 1860s-1870s such as the Reform Act (1867), the Trade Union Act (1871) or the Employers and Workmen Act (1875), trade unions returned to the familiar alliance between labour and the Liberal Party, or 'lib-labism', under the influence of Gladstone's leadership[3]. However, the economic downturn in the late 1870s, with increased unemployment and depressed conditions for the workers, saw the rise of a new breed of leaders, younger and more militant than their predecessors, challenging what they saw as the complacency of the existing unions. To understand what made the 'New Unions' that these men created controversial, a comparison with the old ones is necessary. By underlining the differences and the innovations, but also by pointing out the continuities, it will be possible to analyse the details of their disputes, as well as their legacy to the trade unions in general.

[1] *British Trade Unions 1800-1875*, Ch.8, 'New Horizons'.
[2] See Hobsbawm, 'Artisan or Labour Aristocrat?'.
[3] *A Short History of the Labour Party*, Ch.1, '.

By 1875, the trade unions of the skilled workers could feel justifiably proud of their achievements: organisations such as the London Trades Council (founded in 1860), and later the Trades Union Congress (1868), led by men such as William Allan and Robert Applegarth had earned a degree of recognition and respectability for their unions, prominent amongst which the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (ASE, 1851), or the Amalgamated Society of Carpenters and Joiners (ASCJ, 1862)[4]. They used strike as a weapon of last resort, and preferred quiet and peaceful pressure on parliament and bargaining with employers rather than direct confrontation and violence; a strategy which, if not revolutionary, seemed to have been successful in securing some lasting gains. These organisations had relatively high subscription rates, but provided benefits for sickness or unemployment[5] and lobbied parliaments for better wages and working conditions. In the mining districts, this even resulted in the election of trade unionists as MPs, for instance Alexander McDonald and Thomas Burt[6]. The main unions were highly centralised, had a permanent full-paid secretary and concentrated on a single craft, skilled and respectable, albeit at a national level. They were not opposed to capitalism, but aimed at a relationship of equals with employers. By 1874, the TUC could claim over a million registered members, a clear indication of its potential strength. Championing issues such as temperance, safer conditions for women and children, the TUC could be suspected of adopting a "middle-class" world-view and favouring radical individualism and self-regulation rather than deeper, more encompassing systematic changes.

[4] *The Age of Reform*, Ch.VI, 'The Condition of the People', pp.612-615.
[5] Boyer, 'What Did Unions Do in Nineteenth-Century Britain?', p.323.
[6] *United We Stand*, Ch. 6, 'State Intervention among the Process Workers'.

However, only a minority of skilled workers were members of trade unions; roughly 10 percent on average, and even the mighty ASE only organised 40 percent of its trade[7]. The situation was even worse for the unskilled workers, for whom attempts to get organised had been so far unsuccessful. The psychological barrier perceived between the skilled workers and the mere labourers did not help, as Hobsbawm stresses out. Considered as a threat and as too feckless to organise by the established unions, they were generally excluded from the collective bargaining process. As they did not have skills which they could use to negotiate, and as their earnings were too modest to pay subscriptions, organising unions was a challenge[8]. Joseph Arch's National Agricultural Labourers' Union (founded in 1872), although 70000 members strong at its peak, quickly collapsed when economic conditions worsened. Since they did not have as many connections with the government and parliament, unskilled labourers were more easily victimised than skilled workers and more harshly punished. With less negotiating power, they were also more likely to resort to desperate measures and violence, and were thus more radical in their outlook. However, with the technological advances linked to the industrial revolution, the gap between skilled and unskilled was starting to close; indeed, the division between these groups was not clear. Semi-skilled workers, such as miners, or dockers, could not be easily replaced, and in many trades there was a close connection between skilled workers and their assistants, where the latter could easily replace the former if need be (for instance during strikes). This became especially salient when the economy worsened in the mid-1870s, causing massive unemployment.

[7] 'Artisan or Labour Aristocrat?', p.363.
[8] *United We Stand*, pp.218-220.

This crisis coincided with the rise of Marxist ideas abroad and socialist groups at home, such as H.M. Hyndman's small but influential Social Democratic Federation (SDF)[9]. Young and energetic members of the ASE, such as Tom Mann and John Burns, also belonged to the SDF and, as unemployment rose in the 1880s, started to challenge openly the 'lethargy' of their union. They campaigned for a legal eight-hour day, and stressed the need to stop excluding the unskilled workers. The American Knights of Labour had already started to develop general unions in the north-east, and the National Labour Federation was organising the semi-skilled in the same region in 1886; in 1888, the National Amalgamated Labour Union was founded in Swansea, for dock labourers[10]. As John Burns stressed out, the difference between these new unions and the old ones was that "[…] the 'new' see that labour-saving machinery is reducing the previously skilled to the level of unskilled labour, and they must in their own interests, be less exclusive than hitherto" – a Marxist argument about deskilling the workers[11]. As Mann also underlined, craft unionism was not strong enough to "combat the vast aggregations of Capital", and only by mass formations could "the Labour and Socialist movement keep pace with the constant effort of the capitalists to get a wider and deeper grip of everything"[12]. It is easy to imagine how inflammatory such language would have sounded to the ears of old unionists who saw themselves as the partners, not the adversaries, of factory owners. However, as the employers themselves increasingly organised themselves on a national scale, they were more or less forcing the unions to respond by a matching increase in scale.

[9] *United We Stand*, pp.250-251.
[10] Duffy, A.E.P, 'New Unionism in Britain, 1889-1890: A Reappraisal', p.307.
[11] Quoted in Hobsbawm, 'Trade Union History', p.362.
[12] Ibid., p.362.

Two episodes illustrate particularly well the character of 'New Unionism'. The first is the London Dock Strike of 1889. Buoyed by the recent success of the National Union of Gas workers and General Labourers led by Will Thorne, a member of the SDF, Ben Tillett, the leader of a small tea-warehouse union started to campaign for higher rates and further concessions; assisted by Tom Mann and John Burn, the movement soon became a general workers' strike, involving 20,000 men for more than a month[13]. Mann and Burn focussed on building popular support and involving labourers who might otherwise have become substitute workers. The campaign even became international when Australian trade unions offered £30000! Ultimately successful, the strike did not however achieve lasting unity amongst the different trades involved. It did however encourage the creation of general unions across the country. This type of activism, based on confrontation rather than negotiation with the employers, was something typical of 'New Unionism'. Another example, on a smaller scale, is the match-girls' strike at Bryant and May in 1888[14]. Annie Besant, a radical journalist, founder of *The Link*, started investigating working conditions at a match-making factory, and wrote an article entitled "White Slavery in London"; the owners responded by firing workers who had talked to her, triggering a strike. Besant organised the strikers, appeal for the support of London Trades Council, and, as in the case of the London Dock Strike, campaigned for public sympathy. Here again, the strikers forced their bosses to submit to their demands. A Union of Women Match Workers was created (although it only survived until 1903), with Besant at its head, another example of socialist influence in trade unionism.

[13] *United We Stand*, p.221.
[14] Satre, L.J., 'After the Match Girls' Strike: Bryant and May in the 1890s'.

Two main controversial aspects of the 'New Unions' can then be identified: first, unlike the craft unions, they were aiming to unite skilled and unskilled workers, and tried to cross trade boundaries by establishing general unions. Second, their leaders were inspired by socialist ideas and considered that workers had to fight for their rights against their employers, and that they had to look beyond self-regulation and get government support. By ideology (and lack of means), they did not provide the same benefits as the old unions, which also meant that to attract members they had to keep their momentum by championing new fights: this explains why their membership soon declined in the late 1890s-early 1900s. Moreover, as Duffy stresses out, there were connections between 'Old' and 'New Unionisms'. The National Labour Federation involved old unionists such as Thomas Burt, and the growing gulf between employers and employed, the de-personalisation of business, was getting recognised by craft unionists. Although they were confrontational and more militant, the young union leaders were only the forefront of a wave gathering momentum, which would achieve lasting results later in the 20th century.

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