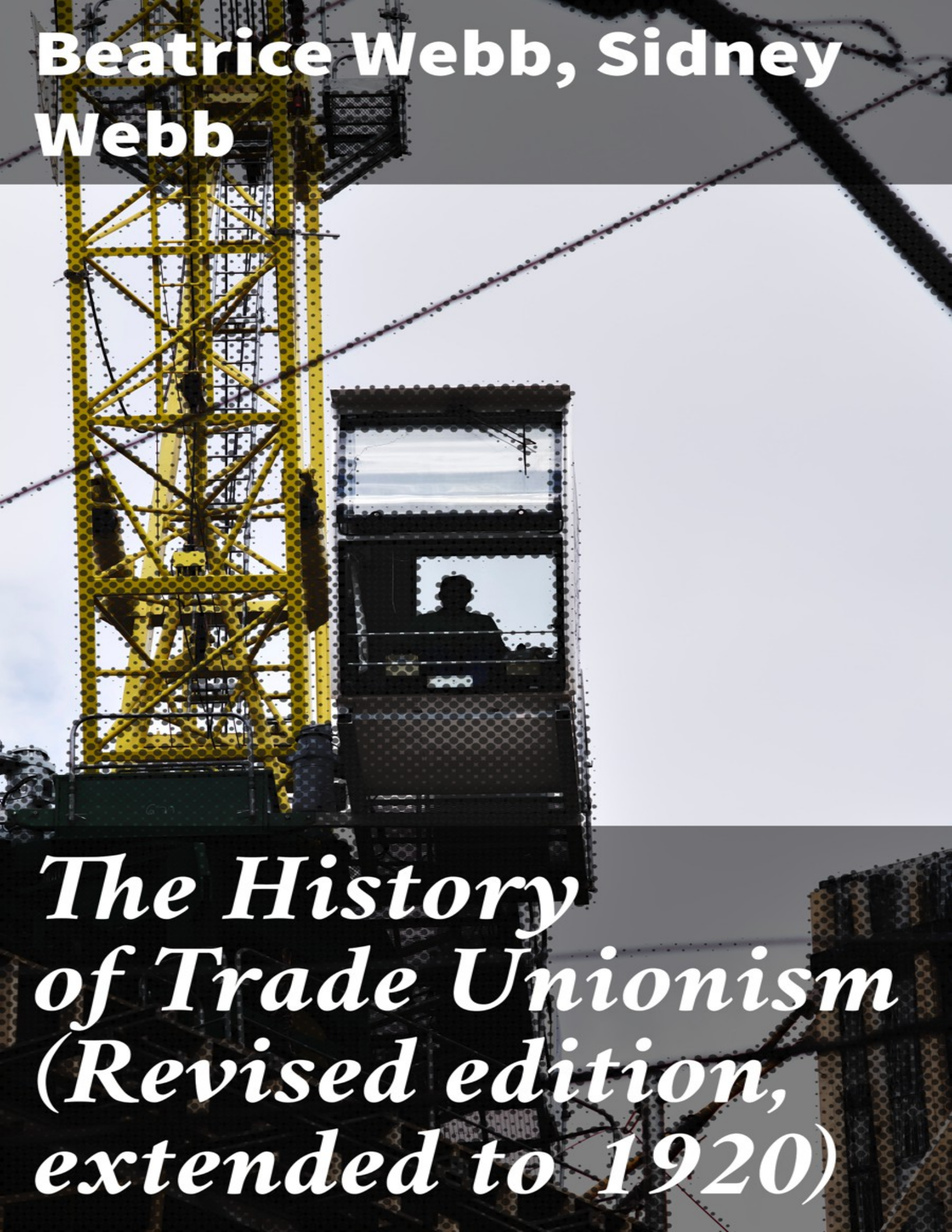

Beatrice Webb, Sidney Webb

The History of Trade Unionism (Revised edition, extended to 1920)

Beatrice Webb, Sidney Webb

The History of Trade Unionism (Revised edition, extended to 1920)

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338111319

Table of Contents

THE HISTORY OF TRADE UNIONISM
CHAPTER I
CHAPTER II
CHAPTER III
CHAPTER IV
CHAPTER V
CHAPTER VI
CHAPTER VII
CHAPTER VIII
CHAPTER IX
The Cotton Operatives
The Building Trades
Engineering and the Metal Trades
The Compositors
Boot and Shoemaking
Women Workers
The General Workers
The “Black-Coated Proletariat”
The Miners
The Railwaymen
Amalgamations and Federations
The General Federation of Trade Unions
Trades Councils
The Trades Union Congress
The Officers of the Trade Union Movement
CHAPTER X

Actions for Damages
The Taff Vale Case
The Trade Disputes Act
The Osborne Judgement
The Development of English Law
The Miscarriage of Justice
The Trade Union Act of 1913
The Rise in Status of Trade Unionism
British Trade Unionism and the War
The Revolution in Thought
The Increased Reliance on Direct Action
The Demand for the Elimination of the Capitalist Profit-maker
CHAPTER XI
APPENDICES
APPENDIX I
APPENDIX II
APPENDIX III
APPENDIX IV
APPENDIX V
APPENDIX VI
APPENDIX VII
APPENDIX VIII
INDEX
THE END

THE HISTORY
OF
TRADE UNIONISM

CHAPTER I

Table of Contents

THE ORIGINS OF TRADE UNIONISM

A Trade Union, as we understand the term, is a continuous association of wage-earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives.[3] This form of association has, as we shall see, existed in England for over two centuries, and cannot be supposed to have sprung at once fully developed into existence. But although we shall briefly discuss the institutions which have sometimes been described as the forerunners of Trade Unionism, our narrative will commence only from the latter part of the seventeenth century, before which date we have been unable to discover the existence in the British Isles of anything falling within our definition. Moreover, although it is suggested that analogous associations may have existed during the Middle Ages in various parts of the Continent of Europe, we have no reason to suppose that such institutions exercised any influence whatever upon the rise and development of the Trade Union Movement in this country. We feel ourselves, therefore, warranted, as we are indeed compelled, to limit our history exclusively to the Trade Unions of the United Kingdom.

We have, by our definition, expressly excluded from our history any account of the innumerable instances in which the manual workers have formed ephemeral combinations against their social superiors. Strikes are as old as history itself. The ingenious seeker of historical parallels might, for instance, find in the revolt, 1490 B.C., of the Hebrew

brickmakers in Egypt against being required to make bricks without straw, a curious precedent for the strike of the Stalybridge cotton-spinners, A.D. 1892, against the supply of bad material for their work. But we cannot seriously regard, as in any way analogous to the Trade Union Movement of to-day, the innumerable rebellions of subject races, the slave insurrections, and the semi-servile peasant revolts of which the annals of history are full. These forms of the "labour war" fall outside our subject, not only because they in no case resulted in permanent associations, but because the "strikers" were not seeking to improve the conditions of a contract of service into which they voluntarily entered.

When, however, we pass from the annals of slavery or serfdom to those of the nominally free citizenship of the mediæval town, we are on more debatable ground. We make no pretence to a thorough knowledge of English town-life in the Middle Ages. But it is clear that there were at times, alongside of the independent master craftsmen, a number of hired journeymen and labourers, who are known to have occasionally combined against their rulers and governors. These combinations are stated sometimes to have lasted for months, and even for years. As early as 1383 we find the Corporation of the City of London prohibiting all "congregations, covins, and conspiracies of workmen." In 1387 the serving-men of the London cordwainers, in rebellion against the "overseers of the trade,"[4] are reported to be aiming at making a permanent fraternity. Nine years later the serving-men of the saddlers, "called yeomen," assert that they have had a fraternity of

their own, “time out of mind,” with a livery and appointed governors. The masters declared, however, that the association was only thirteen years old, and that its object was to raise wages.[5] In 1417 the tailors’ “serving men and journeymen” in London have to be forbidden to dwell apart from their masters as they hold assemblies and have formed a kind of association.[6] Nor were these fraternities confined to London. In 1538 the Bishop of Ely reports to Cromwell that twenty-one journeymen shoemakers of Wisbech have assembled on a hill without the town, and sent three of their number to summon all the master shoemakers to meet them, in order to insist upon an advance in their wages, threatening that “there shall none come into the town to serve for that wages within a twelve month and a day, but we woll have an harme or a legge of hym, except they woll take an othe as we have doon.”[7]

These instances derived from the very fragmentary materials as yet printed, suggest that a more complete examination of the unpublished archives might possibly disclose a whole series of journeymen fraternities, and enable us to determine the exact constitution of these associations. It is, for instance, by no means clear whether the instances cited were strikes against employers, or revolts against the authority of the gild. Our impression is that the case of the Wisbech shoemakers, and possibly some of the others, represent the embryo stage of a Trade Union. Supposing, therefore, that further investigation were to prove that such ephemeral combinations by hired journeymen against their employers did actually pass into durable associations of like character, we should be

constrained to begin our history with the fourteenth or fifteenth century. But, after detailed consideration of every published instance of a journeyman's fraternity in England, we are fully convinced that there is as yet no evidence of the existence of any such durable and independent combination of wage-earners against their employers during the Middle Ages.

There are certain other cases in which associations during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, which are sometimes assumed to have been composed of journeymen,[8] maintained a continuous existence. But in all these cases, so far as we have been able to investigate them, the "Bachelors' Company," presumed to be a journeymen's fraternity, formed a subordinate department of the masters' gild, by the rulers of which it was governed. It will be obvious that associations in which the employers dispensed the funds and appointed the officers can bear no analogy to modern Trade Unions. Moreover, these "yeoman" organisations or "Bachelors' Companies" do not appear to have long survived the sixteenth century.

The explanation of the tardy growth of stable independent combination among hired journeymen is, we believe, to be found in the prospects of economic advancement which the skilled handicraftsman still possessed. We do not wish to suggest the existence of any Golden Age in which each skilled workman was his own master, and the wage system was unknown. The earliest records of English town history imply the presence of hired journeymen, who were not always contented with their wages. But the apprenticed journeyman in the skilled

handicrafts belonged, until comparatively modern times, to the same social grade as his employer, and was indeed usually the son of a master in the same or an analogous trade. So long as industry was carried on mainly by small masters, each employing but one or two journeymen, the period of any energetic man's service as a hired wage-earner cannot normally have exceeded a few years, and the industrious apprentice might reasonably hope, if not always to marry his master's daughter, at any rate to set up in business for himself. Any incipient organisation would always be losing its oldest and most capable members, and would of necessity be confined, like the Coventry journeymen's Gild of St. George, to "the young people,"[9] or like the ephemeral fraternity of journeymen tailors of 1415-17, to "a race at once youthful and unstable,"[10] from whose inexperienced ranks it would be hard to draw a supply of good Trade Union leaders. We are therefore able to understand how it is that, whilst industrial oppression belongs to all ages, it is not until the changing conditions of industry had reduced to an infinitesimal chance the journeyman's prospect of becoming himself a master, that we find the passage of ephemeral combinations into permanent trade societies. This inference is supported by the experience of an analogous case in the Lancashire of to-day. The "piecers," who assist at the "mules," are employed and paid by the operative cotton-spinners under whom they work. The "big piecer" is often an adult man, quite as skilled as the spinner himself, from whom, however, he receives very inferior wages. But although the cotton operatives display a remarkable aptitude for Trade Unionism, attempts

to form an independent organisation among the piecers have invariably failed. The energetic and competent piecer is always looking forward to becoming a spinner, interested rather in reducing than in raising piecers' wages. The leaders of any incipient movement among the piecers have necessarily fallen away from it on becoming themselves employers of the class from which they have been promoted. But though the Lancashire piecers have always failed to form an independent Trade Union, they are not without their associations, in the constitution of which we may find some hint of the relation between the gild of the master craftsmen and the Bachelors' Company or other subordinate association in which journeymen may possibly have been included. The spinners have, for their own purposes, brigaded the piecers into piecers' associations. These associations, membership of which is usually compulsory, form a subordinate part of the spinners' Trade Union, the officers of which fix and collect the contributions, draw up the rules, dispense the funds, and in every way manage the affairs, without in the slightest degree consulting the piecers themselves. It is not difficult to understand that the master craftsmen who formed the court of a mediæval gild might, in a similar way, have found it convenient to brigade the journeymen or other inferior members of the trade into a subordinate fraternity, for which they fixed the quarterly dues, appointed the "wardens" or "wardens' substitutes," administered the funds, and in every way controlled the affairs, without admitting the journeymen to any voice in the proceedings. [11]

If further proof were needed that it was the prospect of economic advancement that hindered the formation of permanent combinations among the hired journeymen of the Middle Ages, we might adduce the fact that certain classes of skilled manual workers, who had no chance of becoming employers, do appear to have succeeded in establishing long-lived combinations which had to be put down by law. The masons, for instance, had long had their "yearly congregations and confederacies made in their general chapiters assembled," which were expressly prohibited by Act of Parliament in 1425.[12] And the tilers of Worcester are ordered by the Corporation in 1467 to "sett no parliament amonge them."[13] It appears probable, indeed, that the masons, wandering over the country from one job to another, were united, not in any local gild, but in a trade fraternity of national extent. Such an association may, if further researches throw light upon its constitution and working, not improbably be found to possess some points of resemblance to the Friendly Society of Operative Stonemasons of the present day, which was established in 1832. But, unlike the operative in the modern building trades, the mason of the Middle Ages served, not a master *entrepreneur*, but the customer himself, who provided the materials, supervised the work, and engaged, at specified daily rates, both the skilled mechanics and their labourers or apprentices.[14] In contrast with the handicraftsmen of the towns, the masons, tilers, etc. remained, from the completion of their apprenticeship to the end of their working lives, in one and the same economic position, a position which appears to have been intermediate between

those of the master craftsman and the journeyman of the other trades. Like the jobbing carpenter of the country village of to-day, they were independent producers, each controlling the processes of his own craft, and dealing directly with the customer. But unlike the typical master craftsman of the handicraft trades they sold nothing but labour, and their own labour only, at regulated customary rates, and were unconcerned, therefore, with the making of profit, whether upon the purchase and sale of materials or upon the hiring of subordinate workers.[15] The stability of their combinations was accordingly not prevented by those influences which, as we have suggested, proved fatal in England to the corresponding attempts of the hired journeymen of the handicrafts.

But if the example of the building trades in the Middle Ages supports our inference as to the cause of the tardy growth of combination among the journeymen in other trades, the “yearly congregations and confederacies” of the masons might themselves demand our attention as instances of early Trade Unionism. Of the constitution, function, or ultimate development of these mediæval associations in the building trades we know unfortunately next to nothing.[16] It is remarkable that there is, so far as we are aware, no trace of their existence in Great Britain later than the fifteenth century. During the eighteenth century there is, as we shall see, no lack of information as to combinations of workmen in nearly every other skilled trade. The employers appear to have been perpetually running to Parliament to complain of the misdeeds of their workmen. But of combinations in the building trades we

have found scarcely a trace until the very end of that century. If, therefore, adhering strictly to the letter of our definition, we accepted the masons' confederacy as a Trade Union, we should be compelled to regard the building trades as presenting the unique instance of an industry which had a period of Trade Unionism in the fifteenth century, then passed for several centuries into a condition in which Trade Unionism was impossible, and finally changed once more to a state in which Trade Unions flourished. Our own impression is however that the "congregations and confederacies" of the masons are more justly to be considered the embryonic stage of a gild of master craftsmen than of a Trade Union. There appears to us to be a subtle distinction between the economic position of workers who hire themselves out to the individual consumer direct, and those who, like the typical Trade Unionist of to-day, serve an employer who stands between them and the actual consumers, and who hires their labour in order to make out of it such a profit as will provide him with his interest on capital and "wages of management." We suggest that, with the growing elaboration of domestic architecture, the superior craftsmen tended more and more to become employers, and any organisations of such craftsmen to pass insensibly into the ordinary type of masters' gild.[17] Under such a system of industry the journeymen would possess the same prospects of economic advancement that hindered the growth of stable combinations in the ordinary handicrafts, and in this fact may lie the explanation of the striking absence of evidence of any Trade Unionism in the building trades right down to

the eighteenth century.[18] When, however, the capitalist builder or contractor began to supersede the master mason, master plasterer, etc., and this class of small *entrepreneurs* had again to give place to a hierarchy of hired workers, Trade Unions, in the modern sense, began, as we shall see, to arise. “Just as we found the small master in the sixteenth century struggling to adapt and appropriate the traditions of the superseded handicraft organisation, so we shall find the journeyman at the close of the seventeenth century [in some trades and at the close of the eighteenth century in others] endeavouring to build up a new status out of the ruins of the small master.”[19]

We have dwelt at some length upon these ephemeral associations of wage-earners and on the journeymen fraternities of the Middle Ages, because it might plausibly be argued that they were in some sense the predecessors of the Trade Union. But strangely enough it is not in these institutions that the origin of Trade Unionism has usually been sought. For the predecessor of the modern Trade Union, men have turned, not to the mediæval associations of the wage-earners, but to those of their employers—that is to say, the Craft Gilds.[20] The outward resemblance of the Trade Union to the Craft Gild had long attracted the attention, both of the friends and the enemies of Trade Unionism; but it was the publication in 1870 of Professor Brentano’s brilliant study on the “Origin of Trades Unions” that gave form to the popular idea.[21] Without in the least implying that any connection could be traced between the mediæval gild and the modern Trade Union, Dr. Brentano suggested that the one was in so far the successor of the

other, that both institutions had arisen “under the breaking up of an old system, and among the men suffering from this disorganisation, in order that they might maintain independence and order.”[22] And when George Howell prefixed to his history of Trade Unionism a paraphrase of Dr. Brentano’s account of the gilds, it became commonly accepted that the Trade Union had, in some undefined way, really originated from the Craft Gild.[23] We are therefore under the obligation of digressing to examine the relation between the mediæval gild and the modern Trade Union. If it could be shown that the Trade Unions were, in any way, the descendants of the old gilds, it would clearly be the origin of the latter that we should have to trace.

The supposed descent in this country of the Trade Unions from the mediæval Craft Gilds rests, as far as we have been able to discover, upon no evidence whatsoever. The historical proof is all the other way. In London, for instance, more than one Trade Union has preserved an unbroken existence from the eighteenth century. The Craft Gilds still exist in the City Companies, and at no point in their history do we find the slightest evidence of the branching off from them of independent journeymen’s societies. By the eighteenth century the London journeymen had in nearly all cases lost whatever participation they may possibly once have possessed in the Companies, which had for the most part already ceased to have any connection with the trades of which they bore the names.[24] It is sometimes suggested that the London Companies have had an exceptional history, and that in towns in which the gilds underwent a more normal development they may have

given rise to the modern trade society. So far as Great Britain is concerned we have satisfied ourselves that this suggestion rests on no better foundation than the other. Neither in Bristol nor in Preston, neither in Newcastle nor in Glasgow, have we been able to trace the slightest connection between the slowly dying gilds and the upstarting Trade Unions. At Sheffield J. M. Ludlow, basing himself on an account by Frank Hill, once expressly declared[25] that direct affiliation could be proved. Diligent inquiry into the character and history of the still flourishing Cutlers' Company demonstrates that this exclusively masters' association at no time originated or engendered any of the numerous Trade Unions with which Sheffield abounds. There remains the case of Dublin, where some of the older unions themselves claim descent from the gilds. Here, too, careful search reveals, not only the absence of any affiliation or direct descent, but also the impossibility of any organic connection between the exclusively Protestant gilds which were not abolished until 1842, and the mainly Roman Catholic Trade Unions which attained their greatest influence many years before.[26] We assert, indeed, with some confidence, that in no case did any Trade Union in the United Kingdom arise, either directly or indirectly, by descent, from a Craft Gild.

It is often taken for granted that the Trade Union, whatever may have been its origin, represents the same elements, and plays the same part in the industrial system of the nineteenth century, as the Craft Gild did in that of the Middle Ages. A brief analysis of what is known of the gilds will be sufficient to show that these organisations were even

in their purest days essentially different, both in structure and function, from the modern trade society.

For the purpose of this comparison it will be unnecessary for us to discuss the rival theories of historians as to the nature and origin of the Craft Gilds. We may agree, on the one hand, with Dr. Brentano[27] in maintaining that the free craftsmen associated in order to stop the deterioration of their condition and encroachments on their earnings, and to protect themselves against "the abuse of power on the part of the lords of the town, who tried to reduce the free to the dependence of the unfree." On the other hand, we may believe with Dr. Cunningham[28] that the Craft Gilds were "called into being, not out of antagonism to existing authorities, but as new institutions, to which special parts of their own duties were delegated by the burgh officers or the local Gild Merchant," as a kind of "police system," in fact, by which the community controlled the local industries in the interest of the consumer. Or again, we may accept the middle view advanced by Sir William Ashley,[29] that the gilds were self-governing bodies of craftsmen, initiating their own trade regulations, the magistrates or town council having a real, if somewhat vague, authority to sanction or veto these ordinances for the good of the citizens. Each of these three views is supported by numerous instances, and to determine which theory represents the rule and which the exception would involve a statistical knowledge of Craft Gilds for which the material has not yet been collected. It will be evident that, if Dr. Cunningham's theory of the Craft Gild is the correct one, there can be no essential resemblance between these semi-municipal bodies and the

Trade Unions of to-day. Dr. Brentano, however, produces ample evidence that, in some cases at any rate, the gilds acted, not with any view to the protection of the consumer, but, like the Trade Unions, for the furtherance of the interests of their own members—that is, of one class of producers. Accepting for the moment the view that the Craft Gild, like the Trade Union, or the Employers' Association, belonged to the genus of "associations of producers," let us examine briefly how far the gild was similar to modern combinations of wage-earners.

Now, the central figure of the gild organisation, in all instances, and at all periods of its development, was the master craftsman, owning the instruments of production, and selling the product. Opinions may differ as to the position of the journeymen in the gild or to the extent of the prevalence of subordinate or semi-servile labour outside it. Different views may be entertained as to the reality of that regard for the interests of the consumer which forms the ostensible object of many gild ordinances. But throughout the whole range of gild history the master craftsman, controlling the processes and selling the products of the labour of his little industrial group, was the practical administrator of, and the dominant influence in, the gild system.[30] In short, the typical gild member was not wholly, or even chiefly, a manual worker. From the first he supplied not only whatever capital was needed in his industry, but also that knowledge of the markets for both raw material and product, and that direction and control which are the special functions of the *entrepreneur*. The economic functions and political authority of the gild rested,

not upon its assumed inclusion of practically the whole body of manual workers, but upon the presence within it of the real directors of industry of the time. In the modern Trade Union, on the contrary, we find, not an association of *entrepreneurs*, themselves controlling the processes of their industry, and selling its products, but a combination of hired wage-workers, serving under the direction of industrial captains who are outside the organisation. The separation into distinct social classes of the capitalist and the brainworker on the one hand, and the manual workers on the other—the substitution, in fact, of a horizontal for a vertical cleavage of society—vitiates any treatment of the Trade Union as the analogue of the Craft Gild.

On the other hand, to regard the typical Craft Gild as the predecessor of the modern Employers' Association or capitalist syndicate would, in our opinion, be as great a mistake as to believe, with George Howell, that it was the "early prototype" of the Trade Union. Dr. Brentano himself laid stress on the fact, afterwards brought into special prominence by Dr. Cunningham, that the Craft Gild was looked upon as the representative of the interests, not of any one class alone, but of the three distinct and somewhat antagonistic elements of modern society, the capitalist *entrepreneur*, the manual worker, and the consumer at large. We do not need to discuss the soundness of the mediæval lack of faith in unfettered competition as a guarantee of the genuineness and good quality of wares. Nor are we concerned with their assumption of the identity of interest between all classes of the community. It seemed a matter of course to the statesman, no less than to the

public, that the leading master craftsmen of the town should be entrusted with the power and the duty of seeing that neither themselves nor their competitors were permitted to lower the standard of production. “The Fundamental Ground,” says the petition of the Carpenters’ Company in 1681, “of Incorporating Handicraft Trades and Manual Occupations into distinct Companies was to the end that all Persons using such Trades should be brought into one Uniform Government and Corrected and Regulated by Expert and Skilful Governors, under certain Rules and Ordinances appointed to that purpose.”[31] The leading men of the gild became, in effect, officers of the municipality, charged with the protection of the public from adulteration and fraud. When, therefore, we remember that the Craft Gild was assumed to represent, not only all the grades of producers in a particular industry, but also the consumers of the product, and the community at large, the impossibility of finding, in modern society, any single inheritor of its multifarious functions will become apparent. The powers and duties of the mediæval gild have, in fact, been broken up and dispersed. The friendly society and the Trade Union, the capitalist syndicate and the employers’ association, the factory inspector and the Poor Law relieving officer, the School Attendance officer, and the municipal officers who look after adulteration and inspect our weights and measures—all these persons and institutions might, with equal justice, be put forward as the successors of the Craft Gild.[32]

Although there is an essential difference in the composition of the two organisations, the popular theory of

their resemblance is easily accounted for. First, there are the picturesque likenesses which Dr. Brentano discovered—the regulations for admission, the box with its three locks, the common meal, the titles of the officers, and so forth. But these are to be found in all kinds of association in England. The Trade Union organisations share them with the local friendly societies, or sick clubs, which have existed all over England for the last two centuries. Whether these features were originally derived from the Craft Gilds or not, it is practically certain that the early Trade Unions took them, in the vast majority of cases, not from the traditions of any fifteenth-century organisation, but from the existing little friendly societies around them. In some cases the parentage of these forms and ceremonies might be ascribed with as much justice to the mystic rites of the Freemasons as to the ordinances of the Craft Gilds. The fantastic ritual peculiar to the Trade Unionism of 1829-34, which we shall describe in a subsequent chapter, was, as we shall see, taken from the ceremonies of the Friendly Society of Oddfellows. But we are informed that it bears traces of being an illiterate copy of a masonic ritual. In our own times the “Free Colliers of Scotland,” an early attempt at a national miners’ union, were organised into “Lodges” under a “Grand Master,” with much of the terminology and some of the characteristic forms of Freemasonry. No one would, however, assert any essential resemblance between the village sick club and the trade society, still less between Freemasonry and Trade Unionism. The only common feature between all these is the spirit of association, clothing itself in more or less similar picturesque forms.

But other resemblances between the gild and the union brought out by Dr. Brentano are more to the point. The fundamental purpose of the Trade Union is the protection of the Standard of Life—that is to say, the organised resistance to any innovation likely to tend to the degradation of the wage-earners as a class. That some social organisation for the protection of the Standard of Life was necessary was a leading principle of the Craft Gild, as it was, in fact, of the whole mediæval order. “Our forefathers,” wrote the Emperor Sigismund in 1434, “have not been fools. The crafts have been devised for this purpose: that everybody by them should earn his daily bread, and nobody shall interfere with the craft of another. By this the world gets rid of its misery, and every one may find his livelihood.”[33] But in this respect the Trade Union does not so much resemble the Craft Gild, as reassert what was once the accepted principle of mediæval society, of which the gild policy was only one manifestation. We do not wish, in our historical survey of the Trade Union Movement, to enter into the far-reaching controversy as to the political validity either of the mediæval theory of the compulsory maintenance of the Standard of Life, or of such analogous modern expedients as Collective Bargaining on the one hand, or Factory Legislation on the other. Nor do we wish to imply that the mediæval theory was at any time so effectively and so sincerely carried out as really to secure to every manual worker a comfortable maintenance. We are concerned only with the historical fact that, as we shall see, the artisans of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries sought to perpetuate those legal or customary regulations of their trade which, as

they believed, protected their own interests. When these regulations fell into disuse the workers combined to secure their enforcement. When legal redress was denied, the operatives, in many instances, took the matter into their own hands, and endeavoured to maintain, by Trade Union regulations, what had once been prescribed by law. In this respect, and practically in this respect only, do we find any trace of the gild in the Trade Union.

Let us now turn from the hypothetical origin of Trade Unionism to the recorded facts. We have failed to discover in the manuscript records of companies or municipal corporations, in the innumerable trade pamphlets and broadsheets of the time, or in the Journals of the House of Commons, any evidence of the existence, prior to the latter half of the seventeenth century,[34] or indeed much before the very close of that century, of continuous associations of wage-earners for maintaining or improving the conditions of their working lives. And when we remember that during the latter decades of the seventeenth century the employers of labour, and especially the industrial “companies” or corporations, memorialised the House of Commons on every conceivable grievance which affected their particular trade, the absence of all complaints of workmen’s combinations suggests to us that few, if any, such combinations existed.[35] We do, however, discover in the latter half of the seventeenth century various traces of sporadic combinations and associations, some of which appear to have maintained in obscurity a continuous existence. In the early years of the eighteenth century we find isolated complaints of combinations “lately entered into” by the

skilled workers in certain trades. As the century progresses we watch the gradual multiplication of these complaints, met by counter-accusations presented by organised bodies of workmen. From the middle of the century the Journals of the House of Commons abound in petitions and counter-petitions revealing the existence of journeymen's associations in most of the skilled trades. And finally, we may infer the wide extension of the movement from the steady multiplication of the Acts against combinations in particular industries, and their culmination in the comprehensive statute of 1799 forbidding all combinations whatsoever.

If we examine the evidence of the rise of combinations in particular trades, we see the Trade Union springing, not from any particular institution, but from every opportunity for the meeting together of wage-earners of the same occupation. Adam Smith remarked that "people of the same trade seldom meet together, even for merriment and diversion, but the conversation ends in a conspiracy against the public, or in some contrivance to raise prices."[36] And there is actual evidence of the rise of one of the oldest of the existing Trade Unions out of a gathering of the journeymen "to take a social pint of porter together."[37] More often it is a tumultuous strike, out of which grows a permanent organisation. Elsewhere, as we shall see, the workers meet to petition the House of Commons, and reassemble from time to time to carry on their agitation for the enactment of some new regulation, or the enforcement of an existing law. In other instances we shall find the journeymen of a particular trade frequenting certain public-

houses, at which they hear of situations vacant, and the “house of call” becomes thus the nucleus of an organisation. Or we watch the journeymen in a particular trade declaring that “it has been an ancient custom in the kingdom of Great Britain for divers Artists to meet together and unite themselves in societies to promote Amity and true Christian Charity,” and establishing a sick and funeral club, which invariably proceeds to discuss the rates of wages offered by the employers, and insensibly passes into a Trade Union with friendly benefits.[38] And if the trade is one in which the journeymen frequently travel in search of work, we note the slow elaboration of systematic arrangements for the relief of these “tramps” by their fellow-workers in each town through which they pass, and the inevitable passage of this far-extending tramping society into a national Trade Union.[39]

All these, however, are but opportunities for the meeting of journeymen of the same trade. They do not explain the establishment of continuous organisations of the wage-earners in the seventeenth and eighteenth rather than in the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries. The essential cause of the growth of durable associations of wage-earners must lie in something peculiar to the later centuries. This fundamental condition of Trade Unionism we discover in the economic revolution through which certain industries were passing. In all cases in which Trade Unions arose, the great bulk of the workers had ceased to be independent producers, themselves controlling the processes, and owning the materials and the product of their labour, and had passed into the condition of lifelong wage-earners,

possessing neither the instruments of production nor the commodity in its finished state. “From the moment that to establish a given business more capital is required than a journeyman can easily accumulate within a few years, gild mastership—the mastership of the masterpiece—becomes little more than a name.... Skill alone is valueless, and is soon compelled to hire itself out to capital.... Now begins the opposition of interest between employers and employed, now the latter begin to group themselves together; now rises the trade society.”[40] Or, to express this Industrial Revolution in more abstract terms, we may say, in the words of Dr. Ingram, that “the whole modern organisation of labour in its advanced forms rests on a fundamental fact which has spontaneously and increasingly developed itself—namely, the definite separation between the functions of the capitalist and the workman, or, in other words, between the direction of industrial operations and their execution in detail.”[41]

It is often assumed that the divorce of the manual worker from the ownership of the means of production resulted from the introduction of machinery, the use of power, and the factory system. Had this been the case we should not, upon our hypothesis, have expected to find Trade Unions at an earlier date than factories, or in industries untransformed by machinery. The fact that the earliest durable combinations of wage-earners in England precede the factory system by a whole century, and occur in trades carried on exclusively by hand labour, reminds us that the creation of a class of lifelong wage-servants came about in more than one way.

We may note, to begin with, the very old institution of the printers' "chapel," with its "father" and "clerk," an informal association among the compositors of a particular establishment for the discussion and regulation, not only of their own workshop conditions, but also of their relations with the employer, who must, in early days, have been a man of superior education, with an outlook much wider than that of his journeymen.

The "chapel" may possibly be nearly as old as the introduction of printing into this country.[42] We have no evidence as to the date at which the "chapels" of different printing offices entered into communication with each other in London, so as to form a Trade Union. But already in 1666 we have *The Case and Proposals of the Free Journeymen Printers in and about London*, in which they complain of the multiplication of apprentices and the prevalence of "turnovers"—grievances which vexed every compositors' Trade Union throughout the nineteenth century.[43] Whether the "Free Journeymen Printers" managed to continue in existence as a Trade Union is uncertain. We have found no actual evidence of any other combination among compositors than the "chapel" earlier than the eighteenth century.

One of the earliest proven cases of continuous association among journeymen is that of the hatters (or feltmakers), whose combination—now the Journeymen Hatters' Trade Union of Great Britain and Ireland—may perhaps claim to trace its ancestry from 1667, the very year in which the Feltmakers' Company, consisting of their employers, obtained a charter from Charles II. Within a few

months the journeymen in the various London workshops—each of which had apparently a workshop organisation somewhat resembling the printers' "chapel"—had combined to present a petition to the Court of Aldermen against the Master, Wardens and Assistants of the Company. The Court of Aldermen decided that, in order "that the journeymen may not by combination or otherwise excessively at their pleasure raise their wages," a piecework list is to be annually settled and presented for enactment by the Court of Aldermen. The journeymen seem to have co-operated with the employers in presenting this list, and in preventing the employment of non-freemen. The rates fixed did not, however, always satisfy the journeymen, especially when the employers were successful in getting them lowered; and in 1696 we read of a deputation appearing before the Court to declare that they had resolved among themselves not to accept any less wages than they had formerly received, and to ask for a revision of the order. They had, according to the masters' statement, not confined themselves to peaceful resolutions, but had made an example of a journeyman who had remained at work at the reduced rates. "They stirred up the apprentices to seize upon him as he was working, to tie him in a wheelbarrow, and in a tumultuous and riotous manner to drive him through all the considerable places in London and Southwark." It was alleged that the men were organised in "clubs," which "raised several sums of money for the abetting and supporting such of them who should desert their masters' service." In 1697 the employers introduced the "character note" or "leaving certificate," the Company enacting that no master should employ a

journeyman who did not bring with him a certificate from his previous employer. Successive prosecutions of journeymen took place for refusing to work at the lawful rates, but the workmen seem to have had good legal advice, and to have defended themselves with skill. On one occasion they pleaded guilty, and promised amendment and the abandonment of their combination, whereupon the prosecution was withdrawn. On another occasion they got the case removed by writ of *certiorari* from the Lord Mayor's session to the Assizes, where Lord Chief Justice Holt referred the dispute to arbitration. The award of June 1699 was a virtual victory for the journeymen, after a three years' struggle, as it gave them an increase of rates, with a stoppage of all legal proceedings.[44] That the London Trade Clubs of the journeymen hatters, or at any rate their several workshop organisations, maintained a continuous existence we need not doubt; though we do not hear of them again until 1771, when they seem to have established a national federation of the local trade clubs existing in more than a dozen provincial towns with those of Southwark and the West End of London, very largely for the purpose of maintaining and enforcing the statutory limitation of apprentices. In 1775 this federation appears to have been strong enough, not only to obtain increased rates of wages, but also the exclusive employment of "clubmen." There were "congresses" of the hatters in 1772, 1775, and 1777, held in London for the adoption of "bye-laws" for the whole trade; but we believe that these "congresses" were attended by delegates from the workshops in and near London only. It is clear that similar organisations existed in