

Development of Trade Unions: Decline and Growth of Trade Unions 1870-1914

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This Paper will examine how and why trade unions developed in the way they did in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It will argue that the union movement was conditional on the micro and macro developments of the economy and that these developments altered the attitudes and the nature of the unions themselves. It will also argue that the unions pre-1914 were not able to create a mass movement, however, the movement itself was going in that direction. By 1914, the unions were bigger, more unified and stronger than in 1870. The economy and the subsequent changing attitudes of the unions both had an immense impact in benefitting and hindering this movement.

The two married economists and sociologists, the Webbs, defined a trade union as “a continuous association of wage earners for the purpose of maintaining or improving the conditions of their employment”.¹ Trade unions in the 19th century would contract and expand, exercising a great influence on the contemporary economy, whilst also changing and shaping the way we view the relationship between labour and capital. It was an expression of organised agency, fought for by the working masses, as a method by which the working-class could improve their means. This paper will look at the trends and developments within unionism between 1870-1914, why unions grew and declined and how their nature and attitudes changed. It is important we understand this period of unionism as it can provide us an understanding of how the working-class in a period of weakness and division was able to find a voice and method of betterment.

One thing that should be noted first is that the estimations of the membership sizes of the trade unions pre-1892 arguably hold a large margin of error, as trade union membership was likely either

¹ Cited in, T. J. Hatton, et al. “The Union Wage Effect in Late Nineteenth Century Britain.” *Economica*, vol. 61, no. 244, 1994, pp. 435–56. *JSTOR*, Accessed 20 Dec. 2024, pp. 435

overestimated or underestimated, depending on the circumstance.² It is only after 1892, with the official surveys by the Labour Department of the Board of Trade, together with the trade union estimates themselves, that we can have greater confidence in the estimated number of union members.³ This is something to keep in mind when reading this paper.

Trade cycles were the most significant conductor and catalyst for the expansion and contraction of the trade unions. James Cronin claimed that it was periods of economic boom, such as 1871-73, 1888-91 and 1911-13, where the trade unions grew and expanded at their most rapid pace.⁴ In the years before 1870 there was still only a small proportion of the workforce who were members of the unions, an estimated 500,000 workers.⁵ However, with the massive economic boom in the early 1870s, this numbers grew to over 1 million.⁶ This is because in times of economic boom and expansion of industry, there is a greater demand for workers, driving unemployment to low levels and thus giving the workers a strong bargaining position against their employers. This then enabled unions to more effectively demand concessions and so attracted members.⁷ But with the eventual depression of economic growth there comes a depression of union growth. There is thus an intertwined nature between unions and the economy. Unionism, in this context, was enabled by the success of growing capital to succeed itself. It needed the benefits that trickled down to its membership and the low unemployment, caused by rapid economic growth, to sustain itself. But also, this demonstrates that the workers were actively aware of their value and when they had the opportunity to, they organised themselves.

² W. Hamish Fraser, *History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1988*, (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), pp. 73

³Ibid

⁴J. Cronin, 'Strikes 1870-1914', in *History of British Industrial Relations 1875-1914* (ed.) Chris Wringley, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 86

⁵D. Aldcroft and M. Oliver, *Trade unions and the economy: 1870 - 2000* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 6

⁶Ibid

⁷J. Hinton "The Rise of the Mass Labour Movement: Growth and Limits", in , *History of British Industrial Relations 1875-1914* (ed.) Chris Wringley, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 20

Britain lost its high growth and pinnacle economic advancement after 1873. Growth rates decreased from 2.2% between 1850-73 to 1.8% between 1873-1913, the 0.4% difference having a great impact when compounded year on year.⁸ With the falling rates of profits and prices, coupled with growing competition from abroad, it placed British industry in an increasingly vulnerable position.⁹ The employers tried to levy this weakened economic growth on the backs of the workers. They did this through wage cutting and increases to working hours. This led to fierce confrontations between the unions and employers. For example, the Amalgamated Society of Engineers fought a battle with their employers in 1879 to maintain their 9 hour work-day, a battle that they won. This however was not the norm. The weakened state of the economy reverberated into the unions in the form of unemployment and weaker earnings and most had to concede to their employers. The Clyde workers, for example, had their daily work hours increased to 54 and their wages decreased by 20% in 1878. What we see from this is the cyclical nature of unionisation. There was the initial offensive by the unions in the early-1870s with the prosperous economic condition. Leading to the counteroffensive in the late 1870s by the employers with the economic downturn. Thus the advantages conferred to either the employer or union in their battles, was always in the context of the economic background in which those battles happened. This placed unions in a precarious position. They had very little ability to sustain their growth and as a result, they could not largely enact or procure any long-term benefits from their members. But the continuation of industrial disputes during poor economic conditions highlights, however, that unions were not willing to give up their benefits. Even during precarious periods, workers still went on strike and fought for what they had gained. Nevertheless, the battle was hard fought and generally did not go in the unions favour.

In the 1880s there was high unemployment peaking between 1886-8, with an average of 9.1% of the population being unemployed. So, when a business revival occurred in the late 1880s, leading to unemployment falling to an average of 2.6% between 1889-91, disgruntled workers

⁸S. Pollard, *Britain's Prime and Britain's Decline*, (London: Hodder Arnold, 1989), pp. 3

⁹ W. Hamish Fraser, *History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1988*, pp. 70-72

began to flock to the unions.¹⁰ The unions expanded rapidly and their success is most clearly seen in the Great Dock Strike of 1889. The strike started on the 14th August over a wage dispute by some casual dockers. The new expansion in the unions is revealed in that by the 25th August the strike had grown to an estimated 130,000 dockers. The pressure was so great that the employers eventually acceded to the demands of the unions and the dockers returned to work on the 16th September.¹¹ But as Raw shows, this strike and other strikes like it led to a new stage in unionism, fitly named 'new unionism'. As she shows, this 'new unionism' was open to much larger sections of the previously unorganised working-class. Raw emphasises this aspect of the 'new unionism' arguing that it was after the strike waves in the late 1880s and early 1890s that unionisation truly began for women. It had with it the same militant impetus being present in women's unions as seen in the men's. This is evident in the largely female led 19-week long strike at Manningham Mills in Bradford that culminated in riots in the city centre in April 1891.¹² Other sections of the unorganised, such as the unskilled and semi-skilled were beginning to be organised. As Hamish found, between the mid- 1880s and early 1890s unions grew in the ports and the cotton mills, the match factories and even amongst the sailors and the firemen, which had all previously been unorganised. Some of these unions were formed in opposition to the elitist 'New Model Unions' of the previous period. For example, the Glasgow Dock Labourers Society was created in 1888 to challenge the control of the Stevedores.¹³ This antagonism between the old elitist unions and the new unions is clear. We can see this evidently when notable new trade union organisers in 1891, Tom Mann and Ben Tillet, criticised the old unions in a penny pamphlet - 'The New Trade Unionism - A reply to Mr. George Shipton':

"Many of the older unions are very reluctant to engage in the labour struggle, no matter how great the necessity... so that to a large extent they have lost their true characteristic of being fighting organisations".¹⁴

¹⁰ 'Unemployment statistics from 1881 to the present day' - , accessed 18th December, 2024

¹¹ Raw, Louise. *Striking a Light : The Bryant and May Matchwomen and Their Place in History*, (Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2011), pp. 210-215

¹² *Ibid*, pp. 217

¹³ W. Hamish Fraser, *History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1988*, pp. 75

¹⁴ Sourced in M. Davis, *Comrade or Brother? : A History of the British Labour Movement*, (London: Pluto Press, 2009), pp. 116

Unionisation became very popular very rapidly. By 1888 membership grew from around 750,000 in the late 1880s to 1.5 million in 1892.¹⁵ . Unions were extremely successful with 50% of the strikes between 1888-90 succeeding.¹⁶

Once again with the economic boom ending, there was a growth of unemployment (6.9% - 1892-4) and attacks by employers on the unions. These rolled back the victories of 'new unionism'.¹⁷ For example, the combined membership of the 7 largest unions went from 320,000 in 1892 to 80,000 in 1896.¹⁸ Many of the 'new unions', as a result, did not survive after 1891, they were left beaten and bruised, unable to make further headway in the labour market. The ultimate final defeat of new unionism was the defeat of the dock strikers in 1893, leading to the dissolution of the Sailors and Firemen's union a year later.¹⁹

Despite the eventual defeat, unionism here started to change in nature. There was an opening up of the unions to a broader section of the workforce. Women and unskilled workers were finally getting access to union organisations. A radical streak tinged this unionisation effort and the contrast between the new and old unions is clearly seen. It evidently reveals a step towards the mass unionisation seen in the 20th Century. The trade cycles enabled this growth. The economic growth and low prices in late 1880s provided greater sections of the workforce sufficient means to organise themselves. But the trade cycles inherently pushed workers to organise. The harmful memory of insecurity and instability during recession periods pushed workers to create organisations to support one another. Whilst the periods of boom provided the workers resources and money to actually implement this desire.

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 73

¹⁶ D. Aldcroft and M. Oliver, *Trade unions and the economy: 1870 - 2000*, pp. 14

¹⁷ 'Unemployment statistics from 1881 to the present day' - , accessed 18th December, 2024

¹⁸ J. Hinton, *Labour and Socialism: A History of the British Labour Movement 1867-1974*, pp. 50-51

¹⁹ E. Hunt, *British Labour History 1815-1914*, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1985), pp. 307-8

But we will not overstate the extent of new unionism. Hunt estimates that only half of the newly organised union members during this expansion of industry were from the historically unorganized industries. By 1892 still $\frac{2}{3}$ of unionists were members of the traditional old unions.²⁰ This seems to logically follow, as the developments in the economy were not radically different to developments in previous years. It explains why the older unions benefited the most from this wave of union organising.

What differences there was in the sense that there was growth of these new members, can also be attributed to the changing dynamics of the economy and society. This is in regards to the rise in living standards in this period for the working-class. Workers simultaneously had more money and more time, which they could dedicate to educational activities. These activities grew socialist and class-conscious ideas among sections of the working-class, which grew labour solidarity in the industries, which hitherto had been unorganised. Thus being a causal factor in the growth of unions in the semi and unskilled workforce.²¹

Likewise in this period between 1870-93 the nature of the workplace was changing; this too effected the development and subsequent nature of the unions. Before 1870 there was still a strong presence of artisanal and craft labour.²² However, in the search of profits it became a prerogative of employers to start utilizing labour saving technologies and machinery and with this it came to change the characteristics of the workplace, decreasing the influence of the skilled artisanal working-class.²³ Firms at this time were not massive and did not fully have the capital to completely reorganise their labour, however even if gradual, the changes surrounding the organization of the workplace were still a significant point of contention for many of the skilled working-class.²⁴ This is a further indicator as to why old unionists flocked to the unions during this period of the expansion. These skilled workers were fiercely opposed to the increasing use of machines in the workplace, as it deskilled them and undermined the privilege status they held. For

²⁰ Ibid, pp. 296, 299

²¹ J. Hinton, 'The Rise of the Mass Labour Movement: Growth and Limits', pp. 24

²² G. Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society*, (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1978), pp. 42

²³ J. Hinton, 'The Rise of the Mass Labour Movement: Growth and Limits', pp. 25

²⁴ W. Hamish Fraser, *History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1988*, pp. 107

example, Aldcroft and Oliver found that in a factory in Nottingham there was a machine which could produce 1 million bricks in a day, compared to one worker who could produce only 10,000.²⁵ Consequently, this became a key issue raised by the old unions to protect their members from the changing dynamics of industry, leading to confrontation and strikes. For example, the boot and shoe strike in 1893, which was conducted in opposition to mechanisation of the industry.²⁶

But just like with the new unions, the old unions were not immune to the trade cycles going against their favour or from the wrath of their employers. In the late 90s the old unions would try to put up a fight against their employers. For example, Benson found that the number of strike days between 1896-8 increased to 6,479, from 3,405 days between 1893-5.²⁷ With the economic conditions of Britain having been continually worsening over this period, the trade unionist struggle against automation and mechanisation became increasingly hard to maintain as a valid cause. As a result, many of the old unions would be defeated by the employers in the 90s, significantly hurting their influence and strength. For example, the defeat of the historic and influential Amalgamated Society of Engineers in the 1897 lockout.²⁸ Price claims that this aggressive attack on the old unions, however, did have a complimentary effect on shifting them leftwards. With the decline of craft privileges and the blurring of skilled and unskilled labour in the 90s, many old unionists came to recognise that a more solid struggle against employers was necessary and laid the groundwork for future struggle.²⁹ However, in the end, instead of the solidified mass unionism that was hoped for, the unions became divided, small, weak and sectional.³⁰ The 90s were a flashpoint of union organising. A precedent of economic instability and vulnerability and the erosion of traditional union workplaces, led to a great standoff between worker and employer. Previously unorganised sections of the working-class were becoming more willing to unionise reveals the beginning of a trend of mass

²⁵D. Aldcroft and M. Oliver, *Trade unions and the economy: 1870 - 2000*, pp. 17

²⁶A. McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain: 1880-1950*, (Lincolnshire: Palgrave, 2001), pp. 216

²⁷J. Benson, *The Working Class in England 1875-1914*, (Kent: Croom Helm Ltd, 1985), pp. 96

²⁸E. Hunt, *British Labour History 1815-1914*, pp. 298

²⁹R. Price, *'Britain'*, in M. Linden, J. Rojahn (ed.), *The Formation of Labour Movements: 1870-1914*, Volume 1 (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1990), pp. 14

³⁰Ibid, pp. 15

organisation. Although they were defeated and unable to make strong headways among large sections of the unskilled workforce, it was still a historic step forward.

Now another very influential factor on the development of trade unions was the growth of conciliatory schemes between workers and employers, to deal with industrial disputes, conducted through the unions. By the 70s, employers started to move away from the violent strikebreaking methods and turned their efforts to utilizing conciliatory schemes to mitigate worker grievance without having to disrupt their workplaces through lengthy strikes.³¹ As noted before, British capital was in a precarious position at this time with the slowing down of the economy, growing foreign competition and fear of growing labour unrest. Gore argues that employers knew that they had to put a handle on the unions and subordinate them for industrial peace and profits.³²

As shown above, by the end of the 90s the union movement had devolved into small sectional unions. For example, by 1906, 4/5 unions had 1000 members or less.³³ Hobsbawm found that the diminished power of the unions resulted in them to look for alternative methods of gaining benefits for their members. So, they started to look towards conciliatory schemes.³⁴ These schemes provided employer recognition of the unions, something that was important for legitimising the union. As Coates and Topham put it, it meant “that the realities of class have now entered into the formal structure of social relations”.³⁵ With recognition the union movement did benefit because despite the setbacks in the mid-1890s, union density grew from 11.1% in 1892 to 13.1% by 1900.³⁶ Evidently unions were adapting and finding new methods for survival.

³¹ A. McIvor, *A History of Work in Britain: 1880-1950*, pp. 216

³² V. Gore *Rank and File Dissent* in, *History of British Industrial Relations 1875-1914* (ed.) Chris Wringley, (Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1982), pp. 64

³³ D. Aldcroft and M. Oliver, *Trade unions and the economy: 1870 - 2000*, pp. 8

³⁴ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875 - 1914*, (London: Abacus, 1994), pp. 32

³⁵ K. Coates and T. Topham, *The Making of the Labour Movement: The formation of the Transport and General Workers Union 1870-1922*, (Nottingham: Bertrand Russel House, 1994), pp. 72

³⁶ W. Hamish Fraser, *History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1988*, pp. 73

However, Gore claims that in return for this recognition, the unions had to accept some concessions, which were harmful to their workers' rights. For example, further introduction of machinery, financial penalties for breaking codes and greater discipline and organisation of the workers and their workplace.³⁷ Hunt claims that this meant that when labour disputes were then internalized into the unions, it became the duty of the unions to enforce labour discipline rather than the employer.³⁸ Power in the unions shifted more so from the 'rank and file' membership and the local union branches to the central organisation of the unions.³⁹

With this there developed a growing divide between the 'rank and file' members and the union organisers and leaders. Gore claims that the conciliation of the unions to the employers would then lead to sections of the membership becoming increasingly disillusioned with the official ways to express grievances and would find other alternatives. For example, there was a wave between 1899-1901 of unofficial miners' strikes by members of the Miner's Federation of Great Britain, angered that wage limits had been imposed by the conciliatory board.⁴⁰ This disobedience reveals the beginning of a growing tendency of unions to lose control over their own members. This is a consequence of the changing relationship between the employers and the unions. The unions attitudes changed as result of its defeats in the 90s. They wanted reform, they wanted stability and they wanted incremental progress. But this came at the expense of independence and significantly, the trust of their membership. It was the trade cycles and the attacks by employers in the 90s, that laid the groundwork for the proliferation of these schemes. Once again demonstrating the profound impact that economic factors had to play in how trade unions operated and developed.

With the turn of the century there was another downturn in the economy, a downturn like in the years before which weakened the unions. However, unlike in the period between the 1870s to 1890s this economic downturn also had prices rising faster than real wages, something which

³⁷ V. Gore, *'Rank and File Dissent'*, pp. 65

³⁸ E. Hunt, *British Labour History 1815-1914*, pp. 327

³⁹ W. Hamish Fraser, *History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1988*, pp. 110

⁴⁰ V. Gore, *'Rank and File Dissent'*, pp. 65

hurt the worker economically. In fact, between 1903-05 there were half the amount of labour disputes than in 1899.⁴¹ But workers did not abandon unionism in this period. Coates and Topham found that between 1900-1910, unionist membership increased from 2 million to 2.5 million.⁴² So, despite the setbacks and the poor economic conditions, the unions were still able to entice the working-class.

But the unions were still not a mass tool for the working class. Unionism was concentrated largely in specific industries. Metalworking, engineering, shipbuilding, mining, quarrying, textiles and building made up $\frac{2}{3}$ of the union population alone in 1900. Mining was specifically successful and troublesome. Membership grew from 150,000 union members in 1888 to 921,000 in 1913 and with this growth, the miner's unions constantly flexed their muscles. They contributed 50% of all strikes and workdays lost between 1893-1911.⁴³ Benson claims it was the nature of the mining industry that caused such militancy within its ranks, firstly, mining quarries were largely quite large, which allowed larger and more sustained industrial disputes, 43% of the collieries employed 500 to 1000+ workers.⁴⁴ Secondly, mining was able to attract more members due to the large number of major industrial disputes conducted, for example, the 1892 Durham strike, the 1894 strike in Scotland and the 1898 and 1910 strikes in Wales.⁴⁵

Mining unions were willing to fight for their membership and pushed for benefits through striking. There was downward pressure on their wages which heightened resentment and so greater support for unions. Their real wages declined by 20% between 1900-05. Hamish argues that their successes and disruption of the economy led to the mining unions being granted 8-hour workdays, legislated in 1908. But do not let it be mistaken that there were no rifts in the mining union either. Many of the younger members were more militant than their older union leaders, many felt that they were not being led properly.⁴⁶

⁴¹ W. Hamish Fraser, *History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1988*, pp. 106

⁴² K. Coates and T. Topham, *The Making of the Labour Movement: The formation of the Transport and General Workers Union 1870-1922*, pp. 247

⁴³ D. Aldcroft and M. Oliver, *Trade unions and the economy: 1870 - 2000*, pp. 6, 12

⁴⁴ J. Benson, *The Working Class in England 1875-1914*, pp. 95

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 97

⁴⁶ W. Hamish Fraser, *History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1988*, pp. 113-15

In response the employers were utilising other tool to dull the growing threat of the union movement. They started to push for legal attacks to combat and hurt unions. The pinnacle of these legal attacks was the Taff Vale Case, where in 1901 it was found by the House of Lords that unions could be liable to loss of earning and potential damages suffered during industrial action.⁴⁷ This led to unions as, Smith puts it, to be “truly naked and unprotected at the altar of the common law”.⁴⁸ He highlights this vulnerability in the Glamorgan case of 1902, in which the South Wales Miner’s Federation (SWMF) was sued by employers for inducement of breach of contract. Effectively because the unions were assisting their members out on strike during a period of high industrial unrest due to decreasing wages they were acting illegally and liable to prosecution. The law was totally against the unions and in the Glamorgan case the SWMF had to pay over £57,000 in damages.⁴⁹ The law would be amended in 1906 to provide greater securities and immunity for unions under the Trade Disputes Act, nevertheless, the unions were always still vulnerable to the common law to confine their immunities.⁵⁰ We see here the tendency for the law to side with the employers over the unions. This hurt the capacity for unions to assist their members and organise effectively during this period. This was a serious setback for unions, but as shown above it did not fully dissuade its growth. It would arguably even push radicalism further in the preceding period.

So, unionism still was not yet a mass institution at the turn of the century. Only a select few industries had high levels of unionisation and the reason for this, as noted previously, is that the nature of these industries facilitated it. Despite this unionisation was still growing and still a threat. The threat posed by the movement and the growing militancy at this time within industries such as mining, pushed employers to widen their arsenal of attack. They adopted greater legal actions and utilised the law effectively to expose and hurt the unions. Opening them up and making them liable for the actions of their members. This created organisational issues and reveals to us the institutional bias that existed

⁴⁷ Harvey, C. and Press, J. (2000) 'Management and the Taff Vale Strike of 1900', *Business History*, 42(2), pp. 63–86, pp. 63

⁴⁸ Smith, Paul. "Unions 'naked and Unprotected at the Altar of the Common Law', pp. 55

⁴⁹ Ibid, pp. 50-55

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 60-61

within British law towards the employing class and against the unions at this time.

Developing from 1910-14, unionism and labour militancy started taking ground again. There was an increase of membership in unions by 50% and it was driven by a start of a boom period, again with low unemployment, but also, due to ongoing issues of real pay decreases and long-term grievances over the workplace and conditions.⁵¹ This period would be come to known as the Great Unrest. As shown by Callaghan, there was a feeling of an impending civil war.⁵² In 1912 alone there was over 40 million working days lost due to strike action⁵³ There was industrial action taking place at an unprecedented scale and by groups with little history of striking. Lyddon notes that golf caddies went on strike, 'pit boys' in mines and schoolchildren's strike occurred in 1911.⁵⁴ Thus even younger people were taking part in industrial action and were becoming increasingly radicalised as well. Whilst 1912 was the peak of official strike, Hamish found that 1913-14 were equally feverish but with more emphasis on unofficial strikes and unskilled labour doing the striking.⁵⁵ Thus we see the consequences of new unionism during this period and how ultimately it was not truly defeated in the 1890s, both skilled and unskilled labour were putting up a significant fight. But this radicalism was a great threat to the established order and this pre-war period presents an increasingly polarised society with union organisation, official or unofficial at its helm

Darlington asserts that this newfound militancy presented itself as a bottom-up tactic of labour unrest. It was the 'rank and file' members who acted to strike and then it was the union who followed and officiated the strike. In fact, this new militancy even challenged leftwing leaders. Tom Mann's appeals for the dockers in the 1911 dockyard strike to go back to

⁵¹ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875 - 1914*, pp. 38

⁵² Callaghan, John. "The Edwardian Crisis: The Survival of Liberal England and the Rise of a Labour Identity." *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* no. 33 (2012): 1-23, pp. 6

⁵³ Lyddon, Dave. "Postscript: The Labour Unrest in Great Britain and Ireland, 1910-1914 - Still Uncharted Territory?" *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations* no. 33 (2012): 241-265, pp. 456

⁵⁴ Lyddon, Dave. "Postscript: The Labour Unrest in Great Britain and Ireland, 1910-1914 - Still Uncharted Territory?", pp. 248 -251

⁵⁵ W. Hamish Fraser, *History of British Trade Unionism 1700-1988*, pp. 119

work was flatly rejected by the striking workers.⁵⁶ In Liverpool in 1911, during the Dockyard and transport strikes, two strikers were shot dead by the military after guerilla warfare in the streets. 58,000 troops were brought in as martial law to various militant parts of the UK to quell any potential uprising.⁵⁷ The failure of the conciliatory schemes in mitigating worker grievance only put fuel on the fire. Growing 'wild cat' strikes demonstrates that workers were increasingly becoming confrontational. It reveals that even despite crushing defeats 15 years before, workers were not dissuaded by union organising. With the poor trade cycles and economic instability, workers once again sought security in their unions. This time however, due to the changing nature of the workplace, with growing mechanisation and deskilling, divides between workers were being shed. There were greater unity and solidarity and with this came greater strength. So, by the end of this wave of militancy, the union movement had grown significantly, it reached $\frac{1}{4}$ of the workforce and was in a stronger position against the employers.⁵⁸ The workforce had radicalised and were more willing to fight and confront their employers. This would set the labour movement up for the mass unionism of the 1920s onwards and helped shape future labour disputes in the years to come.

In conclusion, trade unions went through drastic changes between the years 1870 to 1914. The unions in 1914 were much larger and stronger than in 1870. They did this through gradually developing larger and more broad forms of union organisation. They united and thrived in periods of economic boom and maintained memories of economic and hierarchical cruelty in times of recession. People sought out unions to be a bulwark against poverty and unemployment. They were received with attacks through both long-lasting industrial disputes and the unfair legal system. By the 1910s, due to long lasting economic and employer pressure, there developed socialist undertones within the movement, with radicalism coming to the forefront of union organising. The pre-war period would see high levels of industrial disputes and significant agitation amongst the working-class. Effectively it was the precursor to the mass unionisation of the postwar period. So overall, it was the changing trade

⁵⁶ R. Darlington, *Labour Revolt in Britain 1910-14*. (London: Pluto Press; 2023), pp. 197

⁵⁷ E. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire: 1875 - 1914*, pp. 38-9

⁵⁸ D. Aldcroft and M. Oliver, *Trade unions and the economy: 1870 - 2000*, pp. 6

cycles in the economy that had the most profound impact on unionism in Britain.

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