

# ROBERT OWEN AND TRADE UNIONISM

*by John Butt*

WHEN in 1828 Robert Owen returned to Britain from the United States after the failure of his communitarian experiment at New Harmony, he soon found himself at the head of a working-class movement. In the 1820s large numbers of co-operative societies were founded, and with the repeal of Combination Laws (1824-5) increasingly powerful trade unions emerged. Underpinning this florescence of practical working-class radicalism was the reception of Owen's theories taken from *A New View of Society* (1813) and *Report to the County of Lanark* (1820). In particular, three writers – John Gray, William Thompson and Thomas Hodgskin – refined Owen's views and in the process developed a system of socialist economics which, in turn, was to have a great influence on Marx. Hodgskin's *Labour Defended* (1825), Gray's *Lecture on Human Happiness* (1825) and Thompson's *Labour Rewarded* (1827) started from a common acceptance of the labour theory of value and the assertion that capital represented merely the fruits of past labour kept in reserve. The lesson they taught intelligent working men was that they should attempt to gain the full benefit of their efforts. Thompson regarded it as inevitable that "hostile camps of the employers and labourers are everywhere formed".

Despite the undoubted influence of Godwin, Bentham and Ricardo on these writers, their main source of inspiration was Owenism, for it was Owen who had pointed out the paradox of "poverty in the midst of plenty" and the alternative possibility of the good life, free from insecurity and want, if society was reformed according to his principles. Whereas the Luddites had smashed machines which they regarded as the main cause of working-class poverty, Owen taught that the real enemy was the competitive ethos which devalued human labour by the unplanned application of machinery. In a rational economic system, Owen taught, men would not be displaced willy-nilly by labour-saving inventions and wages forced downwards. Instead, machinery would be used to reduce the hours of work and to raise the general standard of

living for all. The result would form the economic basis for the millennium:

“These principles breathe universal love of our fellow beings; industry among all classes; equality of privileges for all the human race; peace and goodwill to all mankind; the equal distribution of labour and wealth, and universal knowledge and happiness”.

Thus ran the editorial in the first number of the Owenite *Co-operative Miscellany* (January 1830).

Inevitably, Owenism had a great appeal to working men. Owenites became leaders of working-class institutions – co-operative societies and trade unions. Among the most important union leaders of this period was the Owenite Irishman, John Doherty, who in the late 1820s favoured a ‘General Union of Trades’ in Lancashire as a defence against the great economic power of the employers. This was one of a number of contemporary attempts at trade-union unity, and on 6 March 1830 Doherty started the *United Trades’ Co-operative Journal* as the paper of Lancashire working-class solidarity. Based on Manchester but with local unions of trades in other Lancashire towns, this general union became the basis for the formation of the National Association for the Protection of Labour. From Lancashire this organisation spread into Yorkshire and more extensively into the Midlands, and on 1 January 1831 *The Voice of the People* replaced the *United Trades’ Co-operative Journal* as the official organ of N.A.P.L. The dignity of labour and the right of every man to a decent standard of life were constant subjects in its columns – and more practically, better wages, fewer hours and the end of child labour.

### **Local Trade Unions**

Yet the difficulties of building up a nationally organised general union from Lancashire were considerable in an age when railways were in their infancy and government-sponsored repression of unionism was commonplace. Local initiatives by Lancashire employers reduced the effectiveness of the spinners’ union, the most militantly effective pressure group in the county. Workers’ energies in Yorkshire led to the formation of short-time committees there, concentrating on the attractive but limited objective of the ten-hour day. In March 1831 the London trades formed a federal Metropolitan Trades’ Union aimed at

parliamentary reform and reduced hours of labour. But when Doherty went to London to secure support for N.A.P.L., he had little success. Indeed, on his return, his Manchester committee opposed his suggestion that they move to London, and the quarrel became so deep that Doherty left the N.A.P.L.

However, in the early 1830s trade unionism was growing in most industrial districts. With it, mainly because of ignorance and superstition, persisted older forms of secret society ritual – initiation ceremonies and the taking of oaths, the latter being illegal under an Act of 1797. These pathetic symbols of solidarity were far less important than the need to prevent discrimination against men on the trade union committee. It was the need for security that encouraged secrecy, and this must be clearly separated from the acceptance of ritual, which in reality was a grave weakness.

The prevalence of sub-contracting in British industry, especially in the textile trades whose spinners commonly employed child labour, provided a stick with which to beat trade unionists during the ten-hours campaign. Manufacturers argued effectively that factory children were being used as a cover by trade unionists who employed them and sometimes beat them. To reduce children's working hours would bring financial ruin, since the hours of all adult labour would commonly have to be reduced – and any sensible man knew that all the profit was made in the last hour of the working day! When the 1833 Factory Act became law, it was much more limited than many trade unionists had hoped; their main demand – a working day of ten hours – was not won until 1847 and even then, not for all workers.

### **The Grand National Consolidated**

It was against the background of general agitation for causes which Owen had long espoused – shorter hours, the end of child labour, co-operative action, and labour exchanges – that the formation of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union should be seen. On 13 February 1834 trade union delegates met in London to form a single body of trade unionists in Britain. Robert Owen was not at first a member but the inspiration of his ideas is clearly apparent in its constitution. Its syndicalist aspirations owed much to his writings in *Crisis* during October 1833:

“national arrangements shall be formed to include all the working classes in the great organisation . . .”

Within a few weeks the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union enrolled between half a million and a million members, according to several reports. James Morrison’s *Pioneer*, formerly the journal of the Builders’ Union, became the official paper of the G.N.C.T.U. On 22 February 1834 Morrison waxed lyrical on the development of the new union:

“Our little snowballs have all been rolled together and formed into a mighty avalanche.”

Essentially, the G.N.C.T.U. was mainly composed of skilled artisans, and their objectives, although accepted by Robert Owen, involved methods, notably the use of the strike weapon, which generally he opposed. Employers equally used lockouts to try to break the G.N.C.T.U., and the government backed them as far as it was able within the existing law. However, such was the fear among the propertied classes that *The Times* clamoured for outright suppression and the re-enactment of the Combination Laws.

The Whig government, so representative of the landed interest and yet so sympathetic to industrialists, found an ideal opportunity for demonstrating its practical sympathy for employers. In March 1834 six agricultural labourers from Dorset were sentenced to seven-years transportation for administering unlawful oaths in their newly formed branch of G.N.C.T.U. Great protest meetings were held up and down the country. The Grand National concentrated its efforts on a monster procession to present a petition against the sentence. And Robert Owen joined G.N.C.T.U. by way of the ‘Grand Miscellaneous Lodge’, organised in April 1834 with Owenites such as Samuel Austin in key positions. The Whig government remained unmoved by the procession or the petition. The Tolpuddle Martyrs were transported with indecent haste and became an immortal part of trade union history.

Attempts by G.N.C.T.U. to aid strikers and those locked out were gradually rendered ineffectual through lack of funds. Member unions such as the London Tailors, embarked upon precipitate strike action without any effective control from the centre. The collection of funds and levies became difficult as the down-swing in the trade cycle in 1834 reduced the number of members in work. Employers vigorously broke local branches of the union, especially in the Yorkshire textile districts

by requiring all workers to renounce G.N.C.T.U. and to sign ‘the document’, a “yellow-dog” contract making this renunciation binding.

Discord among the leadership did not mend matters. Owen disapproved of violence and favoured moral regeneration as a method much to be preferred to the strike. He had no time for class hatred or conflict. Despite his occasionally wild sectarian language, he was essentially a believer in social harmony rather than disharmony. Earlier he had proclaimed:

“I now give you a short outline of the great changes which are in contemplation and which shall come suddenly upon Society, like a thief in the night. This change is to be accomplished not by violence, bloodshed, or any species of injustice. We have long since discovered that as long as Master contends with Master no improvement, either for man or master, will be possible . . .”

And at the sixth Co-operative Congress he made it clear that he was thinking of a grand union of masters and men. This may well explain his slowness to join the G.N.C.T.U. and the significance to him of the Tolpuddle Martyrs.

### A New Society

Such a union of employers and employed had even less practicality than it might have now. But Owen’s idea depended upon his millenarianism. Fundamentally, he was a sectarian not a trade unionist. He was a prophet of a new society rather than a man concerned with the bread-and-butter issues of day-to-day unionism. He displayed no tolerance for those who thought in terms of limited short-term gains. Equally, many of the members of G.N.C.T.U. had little time for Owen’s unorthodox religious views and even less for his grand schemes. His paternalistic attitude to working-class causes was made most obvious when he dismissed his two principal lieutenants, J. E. Smith and James Morrison. Morrison’s *Pioneer* did not publish after July 1834 and the *Crisis*, edited by Smith, was closed down by Owen in August.

By August 1834 the G.N.C.T.U. was clearly in a state of disarray bereft of its main organs. At a meeting of delegates in London called by Owen it was renamed, in accordance with Owen’s real wishes, the British and Foreign Consolidated Association of Industry, Humanity and Knowledge. Owen was elected Grand Master, and it was decided

‘to reconcile the masters and operatives’. Although Owen had earlier subscribed to the view that a general strike might be necessary to secure an eight-hour day and a better life for working people, he thought it should be conducted without class hatred or violence. He expected “superior minds among all classes of society, male and female” to rally to the call, and ‘the thief in the night’ would be the conscience of rich and poor alike, for all could take “a new view of society”.

Owenism temporarily became a mass movement in the early 1830s and in the process it seems that Owen himself became more radical. His was too grandiose a vision for those with practical experience as employees on the shop-floor. But the true lesson of G.N.C.T.U. is that it demonstrated the perpetual difficulty of organising a national body of all trade unions able to reconcile adequate member discipline with wide political, social and economic aims. The trade union phase of Owenism foundered upon this very rock – and Robert Owen moved next into a clear sectarian position as the ‘Social Father’ of a diminishing band of loyal Owenites.