

Preface

The British Trades Union Congress is the oldest national institution representing organised workers to be found anywhere in the world. It lacks a comprehensive history. This volume is an interim study which seeks to focus on some of the more important leaders and events that shaped the TUC during the twentieth century. Over that hundred-year period the TUC often played a highly effective and influential role in the history of Britain in peace as well as war. In many ways the TUC's achievements remain an unwritten and too often unknown story. Through the words and actions of some of the TUC's greatest figures this book seeks to narrate and assess its development in the last century. David Low, the *Manchester Guardian's* finest cartoonist, used to draw the TUC as an affectionate, amiable, lovable but rather shambolic and frisky carthorse, hardly a symbol of modernity. But like his figure of Colonel Blimp it became a kind of icon. Decent, slow, circumspect, insular, sometimes arrogant, but also loyal, emotional and often grateful for very little, the TUC grew, prospered and then endured. It is often forgotten that it was the TUC who took the leading role in the creation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900 that became the Labour Party six years later. Without the TUC and its affiliate unions there would never have been a Labour Party or a Labour government at all.¹ The Socialists, at least in Labour's early years, were very much a minority, usually in ideological conflict with one another. It was the TUC who stood for unity, common sense and practicality. Moreover, the TUC was also very much a self-standing institution, which developed an industrial as well as a political perspective. Its best general secretaries sought to develop a distinctive and separate purpose for the TUC, apart from its umbilical connection of sentiment and mutual self-interest with the Labour Party. Trade unions through affiliation to the TUC had to deal with governments of all political persuasions. They were bargainers first and foremost, seeking deals, negotiating agreements and settlements for their members at work and not simply obedient servants of a party or ideology. Walter Citrine, the TUC's greatest general secretary, put it well in 1926 when he wrote:

The British trade union movement has its roots very deeply in economic soil, and, unlike some of the Continental movements, it is

not so susceptible to revolutionary change that at the wave of a wand it can become suddenly transformed. It has been built up to redress immediate economic injustices, not to change violently and fundamentally the social system in accordance with an abstract theory.

Citrine – he became Sir Walter in 1935 and was made a Labour peer in 1946 – can rightly be described as the founder of the modern TUC. For the 20 years from September 1926 to September 1946 he was to be its most impressive general secretary. Nearly 40 years ago he wrote an excellent two-volume autobiography. There has been no other full-length study of Citrine since then. This is a pity. He was a formidable figure – a brilliant administrator, a profound philosopher of modern trade unionism, a far-sighted architect of a new kind of TUC with a sustained interest in public policy and in transforming its relations with the state, a principled pragmatist who transformed the organisation into a highly respected, sensible and responsible body, which became an Estate of the Realm during the Second World War.

Ernest Bevin, the extraordinary founder and general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union, was – as he once remarked immodestly of himself – one in a million. In this book I assess his role in alliance with Citrine during the Second World War. As Minister of Labour and National Service, Bevin became the key figure in Winston Churchill's coalition government, perhaps its most important member after the Prime Minister himself. He came to symbolise the indomitable will and spirit of the British working class in what was to be its finest hour. Alan Bullock's trilogy of Bevin's life is not going to be replaced in the near future. But I hope my chapter on the Bevin–Citrine alliance in the war, however, goes some way to refocus his achievement in relation to the TUC.

Arthur Deakin and Frank Cousins, successive general secretaries of Bevin's union, stamped their own autocratic personalities on the TUC's development during the years of the so-called post-war settlement of full employment, the planned economy and the welfare state. My chapter on those two men seeks to examine their importance in forging a close relationship between the TUC and successive governments as well as the Labour Party after 1945. Deakin's reputation – in my opinion – has suffered at the hands of posterity, in some ways unfairly. He was certainly no Bevin but by any other standards he proved to be a strong and articulate defender of Labourism during its golden age, even if he was hated by the left and found himself increasingly out of touch with the times as full employment fuelled wage-push inflation and unofficial

strikes. Cousins has received better treatment, although he was disliked and even feared by many of his colleagues on the TUC general council. Geoffrey Goodman's biography remains indispensable. But it is by no means the last word on a man even he describes as the 'awkward warrior'. The chapter is taken from one I contributed to a centenary volume on the Labour Party, published in April 2000 by Macmillan.

George Woodcock, TUC general secretary from September 1960 to February 1969, was a fascinating figure, a genuine working-class intellectual recluse, who tried to modernise the TUC at a time when popular feelings towards trade unionism were turning sour. Woodcock never wrote his memoirs. Nor is there a biography of him. There should be. The chapter on Woodcock in this book is derived from an essay I wrote on him in a volume on post-war industrial politics published in April 2000 by Ashgate.

Vic Feather was TUC general secretary for only four years but they turned out to be some of the most turbulent in the organisation's modern history. There is only a brief biography of him by Eric Silver. He deserves much more of our attention. In his dealings with Harold Wilson's government and with that of Edward Heath he proved to be a canny and indefatigable defender of the TUC and responsible trade unionism.

Jack Jones, general secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union from 1969 until 1978, was the colossus of the Labour Movement. He was the inspiration behind the Social Contract between the TUC and the Labour party and then the Labour government during the still controversial 1970s. His own memoirs are worth reading. But more is needed. With the help of his union's own archives, I devote a chapter of this book to his enormously constructive contribution to the history of the TUC.

Both Len Murray and then Norman Willis had to preside over a TUC that was pushed by Conservative governments from the epicentre of British politics to its margins in only a brief period of time. The rise and fall of the TUC as an Estate of the Realm is too big a subject for this book to discuss sensibly. But my chapter seeks to describe and assess the role Murray and Willis played in those years of remorseless contraction and decline after 1979.

John Monks is the new moderniser of the TUC. Since he was elected its general secretary in September 1993, he has restored respect and authority to the organisation after its long, troubled retreat into the wilderness. The TUC is once more listened to and heeded by Whitehall departments and among employer associations. From the issue of

Britain's position in Europe to the concept of social partnership in the workplace, from the need to reform Britain's inadequate education and training system to new forms of company law to encourage employee participation, Monks is setting a new, positive TUC agenda after years of protest and defeat. It is far too early to assess his contribution but a brief account of his first years as TUC general secretary completes this millennium volume.

Of course, the modern history of the TUC is much more than the lives of the handful of white men who dominated many of its proceedings in the twentieth century. I am well aware of the enormous contributions many others – both men and women – made to build the TUC into not only Britain's largest voluntary pressure group but a key national institution in the public life of the country. But this volume has one specific purpose: to highlight, through the public lives of some of its key leaders who were at the centre of the TUC's activities since the early 1920s, the enormous importance of the trade union movement in making Britain the country it is today. An introductory chapter seeks to place the TUC's overall role into that wider political economy.

I should like to thank John Monks, the TUC's general secretary, for his assistance in the preparation of this volume. David – now Lord – Lea was also supportive throughout. Mike Power in the TUC's media department helped to bring this book to fruition. Christine Coates was helpful at the TUC Library, now based at the University of North London. I am also grateful to Christine Woodland and Richard Storey for their assistance at the Modern Record Centre in the University of Warwick where the TUC archive is stored.

This book is dedicated to A. F. Thompson of Wadham College, Oxford, who was an inspiring teacher of modern history when I was an undergraduate at the college in the early 1960s. Throughout my 30 years as a journalist he remained an important influence on my thought on labour and trade union matters as well as being a friend.

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