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## Walter Citrine and TUC Modernisation, 1926–1939

We have passed from the era of propaganda to one of responsibility and the things that are said in this Congress cannot be said lightly and ought not to be said without mature thought.<sup>1</sup>

The primary function of the trade union movement is to get better conditions here and now ... Trade unionism should concentrate more upon trying to secure changes in capitalism which will elevate working-class standards.<sup>2</sup>

The modern TUC is very much the personal achievement of Walter McClennan Citrine. He was its general secretary from the aftermath of the General Strike in September 1926 to September 1946, just over a year after the end of the Second World War and the election of the first majority Labour government. Citrine was only 39 years of age when elected to head the TUC after the sudden death of Fred Bramley in October 1925. He was the youngest man ever to have held the post in its history. Citrine became one of the most important figures in the formation of the mid-twentieth-century Labour Movement but his contribution has not received the acknowledgement it deserves. If he is remembered at all today, Citrine is seen as primarily an efficient administrator, who brought a badly needed order and coherence to the TUC's often disorganised activities. His filing system, introduced to organise TUC head office business in the 1920s, was to last for nearly 70 years. 'Poor fellow, he suffers from files', the young Aneurin Bevan once sneered about Citrine.<sup>3</sup> His practical book on the ABC of chairmanship.

published in 1939, still remains a useful, sensible guide on how to run a public meeting. 'It is Citrine on Chairmanship not *Das Kapital*, which is the standard text book for the lad anxious to better himself in the Labour party', opined veteran political journalist Alan Watkins on the cover of its more recent edition.<sup>4</sup> The voluminous annual TUC general council reports, often full of intimate details of meetings between TUC leaders and prime ministers that make a mockery of the 30-year rule on the prohibition of official documents to the public gaze, were very much due to Citrine's determination to ensure all affiliate unions were kept fully informed about the TUC's many activities. At a time when the managing of institutions, especially those inside the Labour Movement, was seen as a thankless and boring task best left to under-valued backroom clerical staff, Citrine demonstrated the importance of effective administration for the achievement of trade union success. Under his shrewd direction the TUC began to recruit and retain a highly intelligent and loyal cadre of committed enthusiasts – many university graduates – to serve in its growing full-time secretariat. They were dedicated to the promotion of the labour interest through the creation of often informal networks of influence that grew up with many Whitehall departments beyond the confines of the Ministry of Labour. The impressive *esprit de corps* among staff, still to be found inside Congress House, derives from that tradition of high-minded excellence and dedication to public service which really first began with Citrine. It was his ambition to build up the TUC as a professional institution that could hold its own against senior civil servants and captains of industry in furthering the cause of trade unionism.

Citrine was certainly regarded as a different type of trade union leader in the 1920s compared to his predecessors at the TUC, perhaps above all because of his dedicated and ethical commitment to public service professionalism. With his expertise in shorthand, he filled his notebooks with detail as a meticulous accumulator of facts. He 'has character, industry and intellect', admitted Beatrice Webb in her diary after Citrine paid her and Sidney Webb a visit at their Hampshire home in Liphook in July 1927. 'He is the first intellectual to be at the centre of the trade union movement.' She described him as having the manners, clothes and way of speaking of a 'superior bank clerk', adding he was 'a non-smoker, non-drinker, small slow eater, takes a daily cold bath, sleeps with his windows open – altogether a hygienic puritan in his daily life'. 'He has the integrity and loyalty of the better type of British mechanic', she noted. Although Mrs Webb did not believe Citrine would 'become a hanger-on of the directors of capitalist industry', she feared he suffered

from the weakness of 'personal vanity and the sort of conceit which arises from continuous association with uneducated and unself-controlled superiors'.<sup>5</sup>

But it would be quite wrong – on the basis of such middle-class condescension – to conclude that Citrine was merely a cold-blooded, tidy-minded and methodical bureaucrat, slavishly dedicated to the protection of TUC rules and procedures. He was far more than just the Mr Polly of the TUC. Indeed, he turned out to be an insightful and idealistic philosopher of industrial relations, laying down with great clarity a strategic vision of what the TUC's role ought to be in a modern political economy that has stood the test of time. Even before he became TUC general secretary, Citrine had demonstrated he was capable not only of managing a large organisation but also of possessing a realistic grasp of complex industrial and political issues. This had been evident during his time as the elected full-time district secretary of the Electrical Trades Union on Merseyside in October 1914 and more especially after he became the ETU's assistant general secretary in the summer of 1920, when he saved the union from the prospect of financial ruin, until his appointment as Fred Bramley's deputy in January 1924.<sup>6</sup> It was during those formative years that Citrine developed his fundamental views about trade unionism that were modified but not substantially changed during his lengthy period as TUC general secretary.

Citrine always remained, despite accusations of being an elitist, first and foremost a firm believer in the primacy of collective bargaining. 'I infinitely preferred voluntary agreements to state regulations in the relations between employers and workpeople', he explained in his memoirs. 'I found that the men serving employers' associations were chaps much like myself and they knew that continuous strife was of no ultimate benefit to either side.'<sup>7</sup> The way to avoid endless conflict was to establish mutual trust and respect between trade unions and employers. 'We knew that ours was a continuing relationship and that if one snatched a temporary advantage by sharp practice the other would be sure to get his own back some time or other. We fought each other in negotiations but we never broke faith.'

Attending annual meetings of the Trades Union Congress immediately after the Great War of 1914–18 as one of the ETU's delegates, Citrine also gave some initial thought to what he envisaged should be the TUC's future. 'I felt it lacked authority and that the movement needed a central executive body which could act decisively on behalf of trade unionism as a whole', he suggested. 'I had not the slightest thought of superseding the TUC by any new creation but solely of widening its powers.' Citrine

believed this meant its evolution into becoming 'a general staff for labour and by labour I mean the trade unions'.<sup>8</sup> Bramley held the same view. The need to balance or reconcile the voluntary traditions of industrial relations with the call for giving greater delegated centralising power to the TUC was a problem that was to trouble Citrine during all his years as its general secretary.

But he was left in little doubt during the early 1920s about the difficulties that stood in the way of strengthening the TUC's power and authority in relation to its affiliate member unions. The wave of union mergers which led to the formation of the Transport and General Workers Union in 1922 and the General and Municipal Workers Union two years later was a factor in holding back the TUC's own growth as an effective representative voice of trade unionism as a whole. The existence of such large general manual unions with boundless ambitions to expand in a highly competitive labour market tended to restrict some of the hopes held inside the TUC that it would be able expand its own role in the wider trade union interest. When Citrine first started work as Bramley's assistant on 20 January 1924 the TUC had recently gone through its most radical period of reconstruction since its foundation in 1868.<sup>9</sup> The position of TUC general secretary had been transformed from a part-time to a permanent, full-time job with the retirement of Charles Bowerman, who had been the TUC's secretary from 1911 to 1923 while remaining a Labour Member of Parliament throughout his years in office. The TUC also replaced its Parliamentary Committee with a general council. The new body was provided with the task of resolving inter-union disputes, promoting 'common action by the trade union movement on general questions such as wages and hours of labour' and 'any matter of general concern that may arise between employers and trade unions or between the trade union movement and the government'. The general council was also empowered 'to keep a watch on all industrial movements, and where possible, to co-ordinate industrial action', as well as 'assist any union which was attacked on any vital question of trade union principle'. But some unions feared such an unequivocal commitment might threaten their own freedom of action. A clause was added to the description of the general council's authority, making it quite clear that its new powers were 'subject to the necessary safeguards to secure the complete autonomy of the unions and federations affiliated to Congress'.<sup>10</sup> A system of functional committees was also established along with a number of specialist departments. In addition, the TUC and the Labour Party agreed to coordinate their activities through the creation of a number of committees and

departments covering research, international affairs, legal matters and publicity which were administered under their joint control. A National Joint Council of Labour was founded covering the two bodies, but it proved to be less of a success. While the two organisations occupied the same premises in London's Eccleston Square and moved in with the IGWU when Transport House was opened in May 1928, joint arrangements were often subject to mutual strain and criticism and led to occasional outbursts of mutual ill-feeling during the period of the first minority Labour government in 1924 when the TUC complained it not been consulted at all on anything of importance by Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald.

In fact, from the moment of his arrival at TUC headquarters Citrine was keen to establish some distance for the organisation he worked for from the internal affairs of the Labour Party. At a dinner of the parliamentary Labour Party when still assistant secretary, he insisted that 'the necessity for a closer collaboration between the Labour party and the TUC' needed to be 'compatible with the different functions of each and our different memberships'.<sup>11</sup> He told his audience of senior party leaders including MacDonald and Philip Snowden that the trade unions needed to work for all workers, irrespective of what their political opinions might be, and as a result they 'must have a different view on some questions from the Labour party and this applied to economic and social subjects well as politics'. It meant that the TUC, 'while affording every possible support to the party generally must occasionally express a different view. It must retain the right of independent political opinion and expression. I hoped it would never surrender that right.'

Citrine's outspoken comments at that Commons dinner were an early sign of his determination to strengthen the industrial wing of the Labour Movement and ensure it would never be subordinate to the demands of politicians, not even if they were supposed to be the TUC's allies in the same noble cause. Citrine was soon to realise that severe limits stood in the way of his ambitious objective of transforming the TUC into a national representative organisation for affiliate trade unions with power and authority over them to enforce collective decisions they made among themselves. In 1924 Bramley gave him the sensitive and thankless task of examining the possibility of a reform of trade union structures on industrial lines in response to a congress resolution that had called for this. The result was a highly detailed report written by Citrine himself for presentation to the 1925 Congress. It might have displeased some senior union leaders but it demonstrated his realism as he spelt out the formidable obstacles to the grandiose vision of British trade unionism

then held by some on the left. Citrine did so through highlighting what he described as the 'defects' of existing trade union structures. He believed 'sectionalism' between the unions was one of the most serious obstacles to the creation of TUC unity and he saw no evidence it would be easily eradicated. 'It will continue vigorously as long as the small unions seem to fulfil more effectively the most immediate interests of their members', he explained. 'Its removal is only possible by a clearer recognition of the mass interests of the working class. It is no use fulminating against sectionalism. It exists and may continue to exist for a long time.' Citrine also highlighted the weakness caused by the ceaseless competitive struggle being fought between the unions in the search for more members with its 'waste of effort, material and money'. Further weaknesses, perceived by Citrine, included the varied rates of union contributions and benefits and the job demarcation lines running through industries that provoked bitter, self-destructive and protracted inter-union disputes. But it was the lack of any policy coordination between the unions which Citrine believed was the greatest weakness of all. 'It is seldom that even a group of closely related unions can act decisively and promptly in time of necessity', he explained. 'Looked at from a critical standpoint the efforts of the trade union movement have been concentrated almost entirely upon its limited object of betterment of conditions.' If the unions were to establish a united front for the achievement of their more ambitious common objectives such as the control of industry or closer relations with the state, he believed they would have to eradicate the weaknesses highlighted in his memorandum.<sup>12</sup>

In his incisive analysis of the bewildering diversity of class, industrial and occupational, federal, confederal and craft unionism, Citrine was conscious of the problems raised by such a complex structure that made the hope of establishing a more cohesive and centralised TUC look quite unrealistic. But his sobering memorandum also revealed what Citrine would really have ideally liked to have seen happen to make the TUC a much more dynamic and effective organisation. To a perhaps surprising degree, he revealed himself as something of an enthusiast for the romantic idea of one big union. Although never a revolutionary syndicalist in the tradition of the American Industrial Workers of the World (the Wobblies), he wrote positively of how such an approach would strengthen the forces of organised labour against employers and the state. As he explained of what he called class or general unionism:

All workers, irrespective of grade, craft or occupation, would be in one all-embracing union. They would sink their craft and sectional

prejudices and would aim at a single standard of conditions for all who toil. If we look at the mission of trade unionism as being that of functioning on behalf of the working class as a whole, it is certain that this is the most theoretically perfect type of organisation. The one big union would be by far the most comprehensive type of industrial organisation which could be devised. Such a union would have its central executive endowed with executive power corresponding to that of our national centralised trade unions. The executive would be representative of the various industrial groups in which the members were engaged. The work of the union would be departmentalised to conform to those industries and would be staffed by specialists with a knowledge of the work of their members. In its local or geographical relations, the one big union would have its branches in the various areas, each of which would be departmentalised in a similar manner to the national executive. Reaching down from the branches there would be a system of shop stewards representing each of the different types of workers and these would in turn be organised together into workshop committees.

In Citrine's opinion, it was the concept of 'class unionism' which would meet the demands for a new trade union structure that had been made by left-wing union leaders at the 1924 Hull Congress. 'It would reduce the number of unions to the lowest possible minimum', he explained.

It would be a power to secure control of industry and as an instrument against capitalism would function with a mighty force which no other type of organisation could exert. Sectionalism would be done away with. Competition for members would no longer exist. Demarcation conflicts would be at an end and coordination of policy would be realised in its most complete form.

But ever the realist, Citrine also went on to question whether such an idea of one big union, for all its superficial attractions, was really practical politics in the industrial world of the 1920s.

The very magnitude of the idea makes its realisation difficult and it seems so far removed that one runs the risk of being called a visionary in seriously contemplating it. The task of its achievement would be enormous. It would mean nothing more or less than the complete amalgamation of all existing unions into one huge aggregation.

He pointed out that the TUC was itself 'the nucleus of one big union', structured in 17 separate trade groups and supervised by the general council. 'It could be developed until it became capable of functioning on behalf of the whole trade union movement', he suggested. Citrine visualised the existing trades councils being transformed under the TUC's authority into 'actively functioning bodies' in a relationship with the general council that was similar to that between district or management committees and affiliate unions. They in turn would be connected to shop stewards and workshop committees, which would have restricted functions 'to the consideration and settlement of domestic matters strictly limited to the factory, workshop or undertaking to which they are attached'. However, Citrine acknowledged that the trade union movement was still far removed from such a possibility, although he argued the one big union concept 'might usefully be borne in mind as the direction in which future efforts towards developing trade union organisation should be made'.

In the remorseless logic, clarity and maturity of his arguments, the 37-year-old assistant secretary laid bare the underlying weaknesses of the British trade union movement at that time, strong in its use of bellicose rhetoric but reluctant to recognise the industrial realities of its weak and uncoordinated structures that held it back from any decisive shift to greater forms of centralisation which would threaten union autonomy. 'I knew then in 1925 that there would have to be a revolution in thinking before the executives of the trade unions would follow the course I outlined. They were intensely jealous of their autonomy and afraid of their authority being usurped', he recalled.<sup>13</sup> The final report on trade union structure was not actually published by the TUC until 1927, but by then Citrine had accepted that little could be done in the way of fundamental modernisation on the lines he wanted in the face of a trade union structure shaped not by reason or common sense but by history, tradition, custom and competition.

## **The industrial crisis**

In fact, Citrine was anxious about the immediate prospects for the trade unions in the summer of 1925. His pessimism was not shared by most union leaders in the aftermath of Red Friday on 31 July 1925. Many of them exulted over what they believed to be the proven strength of organised labour and the way the TUC's threat of collective action in support of miners had forced Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and his cabinet to climb down in the coal crisis. Baldwin had

announced the government would provide a nine-month-long subsidy for the industry and appointed former Liberal Home Secretary Sir Herbert Samuel to chair an independent commission with the thankless task of finding solutions to the problems of the coal industry. Citrine took a more sober view than many of his colleagues of what all this might portend. 'We must not become inflated with any sense of victory', he warned in July 1925. 'Nothing would be more fatal than a false sense of security and reliance on the silent might of the trade union movement.' As ever, Citrine was thinking ahead strategically. 'We must regard this struggle as nothing more than a skirmish of outposts. We were not tested. We have won a moral victory without bringing our guns into action.'<sup>14</sup> Citrine sensed this was not going to be the end of the matter, that the government would feel compelled at some point to confront the TUC and the unions and call their bluff. The open way the cabinet prepared its contingency plans for the prospect of a general strike, with the formation of the Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies, suggested ministers were not going to bow the knee to the TUC in the future. Citrine also doubted whether rank and file trade unionists would really be willing to respond to a general strike call if doing so meant challenging the authority of a democratically elected government. As he explained in his July 1925 memorandum:

In time of strike on the narrow issue of resisting a reduction in wages or an extension of hours, there would not be much trouble in securing the loyalty of the men. But if the issue was raised in a constitutional sense it might easily be that the law-abiding British trade unionists would desert the organisation and rally to the standards of constitutional authority. Against that there is always the feeling that working class people throughout history have tended to stick together in times of crisis, certainly until the position had become hopeless. But even with the greatest loyalty what authority is there to serve an orderly and national general strike? The general council has not that power today. In apportioning the transport unions – who incidentally cannot always be expected to be the storm troops of the movement – the council were wise in limiting the scope of the struggle.<sup>15</sup>

As Citrine noted, it might be easy to win pledges of promised financial support from affiliate unions in solidarity with strikers in another union, but ensuring the money was actually handed over for that purpose was another matter. The executives of affiliate unions would simply not be prepared to shoulder the responsibility for calling general strikes.

What we ought to do is surely to seek the greater concentration of power in the hands of somebody able to logically, intelligently and promptly use it. What is that body? The general council? Is it possible at one stride to get power vested in the general council to call a strike of the whole movement on a national issue? I am afraid not.

In a signed article published in *Labour* – the TUC's own magazine – in September 1925, Citrine wrote: 'Nothing could be more harmful and perhaps fatal than to engender a false sense of security and reliance on the latent might of the trade union movement.'<sup>16</sup> He called on the unions to display a 'calm consideration' on how to develop an 'industrial strategy based on the principles of centralised power and united leadership'. Citrine was gloomily prophetic about the outcome of any further industrial conflict that dragged in the state. He suggested it was 'almost inevitable that in any future dispute of considerable magnitude the government will at some point become involved. It may be that a capitalist government next time will show no inclination to evade the issue but will be prepared to force matters to a conclusion on grounds of their own choosing.' Citrine argued that the trade unions had forced the government to back down from a confrontation with them on Red Friday, mainly because of their own disciplined unity, public sympathy for the miners, as well as the TUC's determination not to allow the crisis to degenerate into a direct conflict with the powers of the state. But he added:

Our objective was a purely trade union one, legally and morally justifiable. We took every precaution to avoid being stampeded into a policy of violence. If the challenge of the movement could have been given the appearance of a denial of the government's right to govern and as the beginning of open war between society as at present constituted and the whole organised working class movement, a very serious situation might have arisen.

Citrine was convinced the trade unions would not be able to adopt similar tactics in the future with rank and file support unless the issues affected their daily lives and were 'a matter of vital interest to the whole working class'. 'We cannot be sure of their loyalty and unity in support of aims which it may be possible to attain by other paths – by the ballot box and political action, instead of by direct industrial methods.'

Citrine was also concerned about the question of where 'authority should lie in the trade union movement for the

'general combined action'. 'The TUC general council does not possess it', he wrote. 'No single body or organ of the trade union movement possesses it.' By limiting the threat of industrial action on Red Friday to the transport unions, the general council had acted wisely, he maintained. 'Had it been necessary to call a general stoppage we should have realised where our weakness lies. Mainly in the fact that the general council, though it has been invested with extended powers, is not yet in a position to carry out of itself even the expressed will and determination of the unions.' The raising of financial and other support as well as the responsibility for calling a strike was not concentrated in the TUC general council but diffused through union organisations, Citrine pointed out. 'Many – perhaps a majority – even of the union executives could not constitutionally act without the sanction of a ballot vote of their members.' Such a cumbersome, slow-moving procedure would make it hard for all the unions to coordinate their strategies when speed of decision-making was the paramount consideration. But the alternative was for the unions to delegate authority to call such strikes to another body like the TUC general council. However, if this was to happen the general council would have to be entrusted with effective means to determine tactics and strategy.

In late 1925 Citrine believed that 'from the welter of conflicting opinions and ideas' a desire for such centralisation was 'steadily emerging', so that 'in time of necessity' the TUC would be able to 'organise the unions to fight as a single army'. 'The march of events is forcing a greater realisation of the mutual interdependence of all unions', declared Citrine as 'the large scale industrial dispute' replaced smaller, localised, sporadic strikes and lock-outs. He believed the mining crisis would merely be the 'forerunner of other attacks to come'. 'It is logical, legitimate and morally justifiable to prepare for such eventualities', argued Citrine. But 'any attempt to abuse the power of the movement or to fight upon anything other than a simple and easily understandable and strictly industrial issue would be fraught with grave dangers of disaster'.<sup>17</sup>

The acting general secretary made no attempt to hide his anxiety about the industrial outlook facing the trade union movement in the winter of 1925–26. In an interview with Herbert Tracey, the TUC's chief press officer, in December 1925, he may have seemed 'calm and dispassionate', 'methodical with an orderly mind and a tidy work table', but Citrine was pessimistic about the consequences of a growing trend by workers towards 'centralised mass action' with solidarity 'no longer a sentiment but a basis of policy'.<sup>18</sup> The extension of strikes to cover

workers not directly involved with the issue in dispute would, he believed, lead to a nation-wide industrial conflict and the state would not be able to abstain from intervention because of its responsibilities to the well-being of society as a whole. Citrine believed that in such circumstances the government would be unable to avoid allying with the employers as it sought to maintain essential food supplies and meet other community needs. 'The government is forced to engage in strike-breaking or abdicate its functions as a government', Citrine admitted as he predicted the country was 'moving to a total crisis in its economic affairs'. So what could the unions do about this? To that vital question he was unable to provide any satisfactory answer. But his mood at the time suggests he was reluctant and apprehensive about leading the TUC into a conflict with the government which he did not believe the trade unions could possibly win.

The candour of Citrine's arguments indicates that he was trying to alert his general council colleagues to the realities of what was a highly volatile and unpredictable situation. The time for rhetorical posturing was coming to an end. Unions would have to face the consequences of their own words. He believed no government would tolerate any disruption of essential food supplies. 'A general strike is a literal impossibility', he concluded. Citrine revealed his gloomy thoughts in more detail in a memorandum he presented to a joint meeting of the TUC's special industrial committee and Miners' Federation leaders on 19 February 1926. In public, he agonised over the 'problem of trade union leadership'. Citrine believed industry was moving into a new era of large-scale national strikes that would replace small isolated stoppages. In an often inchoate way the unions were broadening their bargaining horizons beyond limited sectional interests and recognising that on working hours, wages and essential labour conditions it was better to fight together than individually. But Citrine was unconvinced that the trade unions were really prepared to abandon their traditions and practices and display the necessary practical collective solidarity to ensure success. The British trade union movement had 'been built up to redress immediate economic injustices not to change violently and fundamentally the social system in accordance with any abstract theory'.<sup>19</sup> He insisted it would be through the 'hard school of experience' that trade union members would be 'brought to a full realisation of the necessity for establishing that form of organisation which will best enable the movement to function as a single effective unit'.

Moreover, Citrine insisted that all his trade union life he had 'steadfastly adhered to the conviction that the control of policy must be

vested absolutely and completely in the hands of the rank and file', and not by implication to a body like the TUC. The growth of national collective agreements since the end of the Great War was making such a commitment to worker participation over vital decisions more difficult to achieve and the need for centralised trade union authority ever more necessary. Citrine cast doubt on the sense of talking about a disciplined army of labour when trade unions first had to be accountable to their own members. The trade unions in times of crisis had not been endowed with the authority to make decisions on their own responsibility without recourse to securing rank and file approval. Citrine believed there was 'no workable alternative to the concentration of power in the hands of comparatively few people if decisive and effective action was to be taken on a large scale in cases of urgent necessity'. But this also meant that effective mass action could only be sought when the trade union movement was 'fighting for the maintenance of essential principles'. As he explained:

Nothing would more surely lead to the disintegration of the movement than a reckless abuse of power and the responsibility which its possession must bring, is of itself a guarantee against precipitate or improper use of the might which the trade union movement is steadily building up. The traditions, temperament and the inherent commonsense of our movement will prevent anything like a dictatorship of officials. We need not fear the phantom of a bureaucracy. The need at the moment is for a movement to inculcate a thorough recognition by the workers of the class consciousness and confidence which the new strategy will entail and the sweeping away of the suspicion, jealousies, misunderstanding and resentments which the mischievous doctrine of 'don't trust your leaders' was calculated to foster.<sup>20</sup>

Such a realistic analysis from Citrine on the eve of the 1926 General Strike highlighted his conviction that the TUC would have to move forward carefully if it was to avoid a confrontation with the state which it could not possibly hope to win and which might lead to its humiliating defeat. The acting general secretary did not relish the prospect of having to lead the trade unions in such a perilous, high-risk direction. But Citrine was also aware that a national showdown between the forces of capital and labour was becoming inevitable. He wanted therefore to see the TUC at least make some contingency planning so it would not find itself out-manoeuvred by the government. Late in 1925

he suggested that the executives of affiliate unions should make changes in their rulebooks so that they could at least, after consultation with the TUC general council, call on their own members to participate in sympathy stoppages. 'I was out, by this process, to take the first step towards getting authority more centralised', he explained. 'I felt to take the power vested in the general council would be too great a step to take at one stride. It appeared to me, therefore, that if the executives themselves could be endowed with authority and trusting to the enthusiasm of the moment in time of crisis, there would not be much doubt that they would cede in accordance with the general council's realities.'<sup>21</sup> But Citrine's senior colleagues on the TUC's industrial committee 'refused point blank to entertain the suggestion'. Ben Tillett, veteran union leader and then chairman of the Transport and General Workers Union, even warned him that if he persisted with such an idea he would split the trade union movement from top to bottom.

It would be wrong, however, to suggest that Citrine was seeking to avoid a confrontation by advocating a strategic retreat. As he argued in a speech he made in Tottenham on 8 March 1926, the full text of which is contained inside his fascinating mining crisis diaries:

No matter how we may blank our eyes or try to conceal the facts from ourselves we are always up against the fact that at some point the forces of capital and labour must be arranged in opposite camps. As a consequence there must be the same phenomenon of a test of the relative strength of each side – capital on the basis of production for profit, labour about to get as much as possible for the worker out of the capitalist system and by improving its own capacity for assistance, organising strongly to wrest from capital that surplus now known as profit.<sup>22</sup>

Citrine sketched what he saw as the evolution of trade unionism since its mid-nineteenth-century position of 'defence not defiance' through to 1889 New Unionism and the emergence of solidarity strikes after 1911. 'In my opinion our trade union movement has never given sufficient attention in recent years to finding its own direction', explained Citrine. 'There have been ideas partially articulated by people who did not understand what they would imply. As a consequence of that, coupled with the switching over of the industrial movement into political channels from 1900, there has scarcely been an industrial psychology at all.' He wanted the trade union movement to recognise that

economic liberty must always condition political power. Unless you have an active, virile movement at the point of production, all your political power is valueless. I do not want to be interpreted as trying to preach the doctrine of anti-politics. I am not a fool, I hope, and as long as people are endowed with two hands they should use both and I am perfectly confident that without a strong political weapon, it would be impossible for Labour and the working class to fulfil its destiny and mission so easily as it could by the addition of political power. I am trying to preach the fundamental lesson that the trade union movement as such has become overshadowed by the importance of the political movement and the working class with a remarkable frailty has swung from side to side. I don't want the working class movement to swing away from political power to industrial power as it has done in the last few months. I prefer there should be a clearer recognition of the two different spheres.

The tangled story of the 1926 General Strike has been told many times.<sup>23</sup> What needs emphasising is Citrine's own personal role in the industrial crisis and how it strengthened his existing views about what the role of the TUC should be. In the heated and protracted discussions among members of the TUC general council he often appeared to play a subordinate role to that of the senior figures on the TUC general council like Jimmy Thomas, general secretary of the National Union of Railwaymen, Arthur Pugh from the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation and above all Ernest Bevin, the powerful general secretary of the new giant Transport and General Workers Union. But Citrine was to provide a calm, rational, sensible and sobering influence in the course of what were highly emotional events. The unpublished extracts of his diaries suggest that the General Strike – lasting eight days from midnight of 3 May until 12.20 p.m. on 12 May 1926 – was never really the congenial or stoical affair symbolised by football matches between strikers and the police. There was an underlying tension, a genuine fear of the possibility of the eruption of bloody conflict between trade unionists and the armed forces running through many of its pages. Citrine's earlier pessimistic realism was strengthened during the early days of the stoppage. As he wrote on 5 May:

I sit in the committee and wonder how it is all going to end. We are constantly reiterating our determination not to allow the strike to be directed into an attack on the constitution but while there is any suspicion of this it seems impossible for the government to capitulate

Probably the usual British compromise will be arranged at the finish and whatever we may see in the form of temporary organisation to run services, we must remember that the loss the strike is causing can be measured in millions.<sup>24</sup>

After five days of the strike he noted: 'We can hold out for three or four weeks at the longest. I do not think it possible to continue longer than that. Even the most ardent advocates of the general strike have usually reasoned in terms of a few hours or a days' stoppage at the most.' 'Can we afford to risk complete defeat?', he wondered.

I do not mean defeat in the sense of our movement never being able to recover but to risk the disintegration that may follow rapidly from a return to work in certain sections. The logical thing is to make the best conditions while our members are solid. We must retreat, if we have to retreat under compulsion, as an army and not as a rabble. At the same time we must not get too badly rattled merely because the government is talking big.

Perhaps, however, much to Citrine's surprise and that of his general council colleagues, little evidence was reported from around the country, at least up until 11 May, that those who had been called out on strike in the first wave by their unions were anxious for an early return to work if this meant deserting the miners. 'The men are as firm as a rock', he admitted. So why was the TUC leadership growing increasingly apprehensive about the course of the dispute? 'I think it is because most of us know that no matter how determined our men are now, once the strike has reached its highest point and the maximum of members have been called out, a gradual decline in economic power must ensue', he wrote in his diary. 'Then we shall have dribblings back to work here and there and possibly large desertions.' On 11 May he noted: 'We have kept the destructive elements strongly under control so far but I am afraid that if there is any feeling of the miners being let down there will be strong passions afterwards.'<sup>25</sup> By then, however, pressures for a settlement were growing more intense inside the TUC general council. Citrine quoted Thomas as saying: 'I have given you of my best. I feel there is no more service I can render. I feel it in my bones because I know much more than others know. But having felt that my only effort has failed, I repeat to you that I can make no further contribution.'<sup>26</sup> The calling off of the national strike required an inevitable but unsatisfactory climbdown by the TUC general council. In return for

abandoning its action the TUC won no assurances at all from the government that it would respond in a positive way to Samuel's report recommending an immediate pay cut for the miners coupled with talks to restructure the coal industry. Citrine reflected bitterly in his diary on the cabinet he and general council leaders faced at 10 Downing Street on the morning of 12 May.

I looked at them with mixed feelings – bitterness – when I reflected one of them at least would have butchered our people without compunction on any pretext which offered. I thought to myself what an anomaly it is that there should be such a thing as a governing class. I comforted myself with the reflection that some day that would be altered.<sup>27</sup>

Such private thoughts – not even published in his memoirs – reveal the depths of genuine anger aroused as a result of the General Strike in a man who was normally criticised by the left for being too rational and not emotional enough.

'We have had our general strike. Imperfect as it has been, mechanically and in the evolution of policy, it has been the most magnificent effort of rank and file solidarity, that the British movement has ever displayed', wrote Citrine.<sup>28</sup> But he added: 'Never again will the Congress undertake the custodianship of any movement without the clear, specific and unalterable understanding that the general council, and the general council alone, shall have the free untrammelled right to determine policy.' 'The outstanding lesson of the general strike of 1926 is that authority must be invested exclusively and entirely in the directing body', he added. In unpublished extracts of his diary Citrine expressed his contempt for the behaviour of Arthur Cook, the Miners' Federation general secretary, 'hasty in judgement and full of selfishness', 'inflated with a sense of his own importance although he never loses sight of his humble origin and equipment'.<sup>29</sup> By contrast he expressed his admiration for the stubborn but authentic and tragic resistance of Herbert Smith, the federation's blunt-speaking president. His views of Bevin were not all complimentary either. As Citrine recalled, Bevin 'did not like to suggest it but could anyone doubt that with his unrivalled experience of strikes and the fact that nature had endowed him with a constructive brain, the Deity had specially ordained him to run the first general strike in Great Britain'.<sup>30</sup>

Citrine's earlier analysis of the obstacles to effective trade union unity was confirmed by the outcome of the General Strike. The TUC 'is a loose

aggregation of members held together only by a perception of an identity of interest in some principal matters', he concluded. 'Just what makes up that identity of interest is far too complex to analyse here – trade rivalry, craft identity, demarcation difficulties, individual union disputes, the temperaments and motives of individual men – all cause differences just as they do in any large human organisation.'<sup>31</sup> But he also pointed in the privacy of his diary to another enduring lesson the TUC learned from the experience of the General Strike. 'The worst thing about this dispute and possibly about all of these large disputes in my view is the implication that class bitterness and class hatred are essential to trade unions.'<sup>32</sup> Citrine believed that whatever the outcome, the miners who remained locked out and in dispute would have to 'learn to face the facts'. 'We cannot expect to build up our movement if opinion is to be enslaved by the yells of the mob. If we do, then goodbye to the Labour Movement as an enduring moral and ethical factor', he admitted.

'I did not regard the general strike as a failure', Citrine claimed 30 years later in his memoirs. 'Nor do I today. It is true it was ill-prepared and that it had been called off without any consultation with the unions who took part in it.'<sup>33</sup> But 'the fact is the theory of the general strike had never been thought out', he admitted.

The machinery of the trade unions was unfortunately not adapted to it. Their rules had to be broken to give power to the general council to declare the strike. However illogical it may seem for me to say so, it was never aimed against the state as a challenge to the constitution. It was a protest against the degradation of the standards of life of millions of good trade unionists. It was a sympathetic strike on a national scale.

And he added:

The general strike was an abnormality outside the provision of trade union rules or even British trade union conceptions. It has been used on the continent of Europe before and since but always with a limited objective, albeit sometimes an entirely political one. No general strike could ever function without adequate local organisation and the trade unions were not ready to devolve such necessary powers on the only local agents which the TUC has – the trades councils.

## **The new direction**

The experience of the General Strike and its aftermath strengthened Citrine's conviction on the way the TUC needed to evolve as a national

institution. It confirmed his doubts about the use of coordinated industrial action as a weapon in any wider dispute that might involve a confrontation with an elected government. But the events of 1926 also strengthened Citrine's belief that the TUC needed to move in 'a new direction' that would transform itself into a necessary and respected body in public policy-making both in relation to employer associations and if possible the state. Citrine wanted a modernisation programme aimed at ensuring the TUC was 'indispensable to the affiliated unions; to establish a leadership which they would be willing to follow and to demonstrate the capacity of the General Council was ready to act as the general staff that most progressive trade unionists wanted'.<sup>34</sup> These objectives were to be reinforced by a clear-sighted determination to see the trade union movement 'exert its influence in an ever-widening sphere and not be contained within the traditional walls of trade union policy'. As Citrine explained in his memoirs as he began to establish a grip on the TUC's policy agenda in the aftermath of the General Strike:

Events were moving fast and the widely held belief in the impending collapse of capitalism would not suffice. We must try to expand the activities of the TUC until we could establish an efficient system whereby the TUC would be regularly and naturally consulted by whatever government was in power on any subject of direct concern to the unions.

Citrine acknowledged that he could not proclaim such a strategy 'from the housetops' because he knew it would meet with stiff resistance from many TUC-affiliated unions, who wanted to protect their autonomy from any further moves to centralisation. 'There is an innate conservatism and individualism in the trade union movement, just as there is in other sections of British life', he explained. 'The central bodies of employers, just like the TUC, while always ready to guide and influence the affairs of their constituent bodies, carefully avoid bringing too much pressure and studiously refrain from interference in their members' domestic affairs.'<sup>35</sup> However, after 1926 Citrine pressed ahead on the 'assumption that these were already features' of accepted TUC policy and that it was necessary to 'prosecute them steadfastly not noisily'. The need for greater professional competence in the TUC's administration was not to be an end in itself but a necessary means for ensuring affiliate unions would allow the TUC to act collectively on their behalf over what he hoped would be a widening public policy agenda.

'I am not so egotistical as to assume that my promotion to this position [of general secretary] is due to any superlative personal merit of my own', Citrine told the 1926 Congress as he accepted the position of general secretary.<sup>36</sup> 'Long ago the trade union movement so far as organisation is concerned passed the point when the individual is all paramount. I have realised that and have attempted to apply the lessons which it brings. We are all creatures of a fate to a much greater extent than we know.' Such self-effacement helped partly to disguise his ultimate and ambitious intentions for the TUC. However, Citrine was shrewd enough to realise he would have to move with care and sensitivity if he intended to make sure the TUC general council could grow in collective stature and authority over affiliate unions. But at no stage was he prepared to risk a public confrontation with union leaders over such a fundamental issue. 'I tried steadily to take the initiative in all those questions of general policy which were of common interest', he admitted. What Citrine would really have liked to have created was a strong and dominant TUC which could act as an effective counter-vailing influence to the Confederation of Employers' Organisations and the Federation of British Industry. As he admitted in his memoirs, the real problem was not trade union structure but power – 'the power to act on policy issues in a cohesive manner'. 'This could be done only by a central body representing all the unions', he explained.

People who thought like myself had for years been talking about a general council for labour. 'All power to the general council' they declared. Such slogans seemed not only eminently desirable but just plain common sense. Alas! We did not realise how conservative a force the trade union movement could be in relation to its own affairs. Our unions could draft plans in the course of a few sessions to put the whole world right. But the general council had to be extremely careful not to try to press them into making internal changes they did not care for. We had to carry the unions with us and retain their good will.<sup>37</sup>

Over the next 13 years from the General Strike to the outbreak of the Second World War, Citrine sought to modernise the TUC in a single-minded attempt to turn the organisation into an indispensable Estate of the Realm, the sole representative collective voice of organised labour in its relations with governments and national employer associations. In his ambitious strategy, he worked effectively in harness with Bevin

although both men's strong personalities were hardly compatible. As Bevin's biographer, Alan Bullock, explained:

On every big issue they had been in agreement and their combination of talents in pushing a policy through the TUC was invincible. Their gifts were unusually complementary: Citrine lucid and methodical, drawing upon his famous note-books for the facts, Bevin ranging and impressionistic, throwing out ideas; the one a master of exposition, the other of conviction and imagination.<sup>38</sup>

It was true, as Bullock explained, that the two men agreed on the big issues without any need for them to arrange any preconceived planning on a common strategy. Somehow they found a way of working together for the greater good of the TUC despite their obvious personal and mutual antipathies. In Bullock's phrase, it was 'one of the most successful involuntary partnerships in modern politics'. But it is also clear that Citrine could also usually count on the support of a number of other substantial trade union leaders on the general council, notably Charles Duke and Arthur Hayday from the General and Municipal Workers Union and Arthur Pugh of the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation.

The political atmosphere in the immediate aftermath of the General Strike hardly seemed conducive to the emergence of the kind of close and constructive relationship between the state and the TUC that Citrine sought as his long-term objective. Whatever his private feelings might have been about healing the wounds, Baldwin proceeded to introduce highly restrictive anti-union legislation in the shape of the 1927 Trade Disputes and Trade Unions Act, which was even opposed by Arthur Steel-Maitland, his Minister of Labour. This petty and punitive measure banned civil service trade unions from belonging to the TUC. It also changed the procedure of contracting-out to contracting-in for a union member's payment of the political levy in a move designed to hit Labour Party finances. In addition, the measure outlawed any form of solidarity actions or strikes that were 'designed or calculated to coerce the government, either directly or indirectly by inflicting hardship on the community'. The legislation also limited the use of picketing in industrial disputes.<sup>39</sup> It was no consolation to Citrine and his TUC colleagues to know Baldwin's cabinet were divided over what it should do and might have passed an even more draconian measure to avenge the General Strike if hawkish ministers had had their way.

The TUC and the Labour Party formed a joint action committee to oppose the 1927 Act. Citrine questioned openly whether Baldwin

approved his own government's Bill. 'There is a general feeling abroad that the government has been rushed into this mad act by the extreme element in the cabinet – the damn the consequences brigade. Mr Baldwin is obviously not comfortable about the position', he argued. 'The plain truth is that the government's Bill is a smoke screen behind which a gas attack on the workers has been prepared. The Bill is not a product of statesmanship – it is a nightmare of men who have abandoned reason. It has been rushed forward not to meet a national emergency but as part of the preparations for the coming struggle at the polls.'<sup>40</sup> Citrine suggested the measure could 'have no permanent place on the statute book for it is not an expression of the people's will, it is unEnglish in character; it was conceived and is being forced through the House in a spirit alien to that which must guide our Parliament if it is to live'.

Citrine's intemperate language did not suggest he was in the mood to become the articulate advocate of a managed corporatism between the state and the TUC in 1927. In a later bulletin he spoke in a way that belied the left-wing picture of a grey functionary in search of industrial consensus. As Citrine asserted:

People run away with the idea that the English Tories' idea of frightfulness is after all a mild one. They have not openly murdered workers, or set fire to their houses or bombed their villages. These things are only done abroad. That is because in England the governing class can get what they want without crude violence of that sort. They are more subtle. They can speak words to cover unfair acts. They can offer prizes while they take liberties. They can talk of conciliation while they are busy reducing wages.<sup>41</sup>

It is true that the 1927 Act turned out in practice to be much less oppressive to the trade unions than they had initially feared, but it was to remain a constant source of irritation to the TUC until its eventual repeal by the Labour government in 1946. Even during the Second World War Churchill was not prepared to accede to the demand that the measure should either be shelved or repealed despite persistent TUC lobbying. The Act was always regarded by the TUC as a vindictive use of state power against the interests of organised labour. For nearly 20 years it was a festering symbol of the estranged relations that continued to exist between the TUC and the government no matter what obvious improvement there was to be during the 1930s.

Despite such hostile legislation, however, Citrine was determined to promote a more conciliatory form of trade unionism after 1926 within the voluntarist framework of the British system of industrial relations. He believed the General Strike had put an end once and for all to any romantic yearnings about the efficacy of direct action that might have lingered on inside the TUC as a syndicalist alternative to the use of parliamentary lobbying and application of political pressure on governments. In the relatively calmer atmosphere of the late 1920s Citrine argued that it made sense to try and make 'the worker's organisations an integral part of the economic machinery of society'; 'to allow them to be used as instruments of social upheaval will be fatal to our hopes of ordered progress', he believed.<sup>42</sup> In Citrine's opinion, the moment was ripe for the promotion of his own ideas in the expectation he would receive willing support for them not just from most affiliate unions but progressive employers and perhaps eventually even a paternalistic state that Baldwin claimed he wanted to establish.

For the first time in its history, the TUC had a man as general secretary who was keen to adopt a more active and far-sighted strategy that would assist the trade unions in abandoning their normally reactive and defensive role and demonstrate their relevance as willing partners in a process of industrial rationalisation through cooperation with employers. Citrine first spelt out what he had in mind by New Unionism in a signed article, published in the *Manchester Guardian* in November 1927.<sup>43</sup> He believed trade unionism had 'reached the end of a definite stage in its evolution'. It had established 'a virtually unchallenged control of the organised power of the workers'. Trade unionism had 'attained a position of great authority'. 'It has become a power in the land with a growing consciousness of purpose to which increased responsibilities and obligations cannot fail to be attached', explained Citrine. The next stage in trade unionism's evolution now depended 'upon a general recognition of the changes taking place in industry and of the part which the workers' organisations were qualified to play in the promotion of efficiency, economy and scientific development in the productive system'.

Citrine tried to reassure any doubting trade unions that the new direction he envisaged for the TUC would involve no break with past practice. 'It is a travesty of industrial history to represent the unions as carrying on an incessant conflict with employers with the object of making the present system unworkable', he pointed out. It was 'almost entirely due to the unions that joint consultation and negotiation had been established across most industries and trades to settle industrial

disputes'. Citrine argued that the main purpose of trade unions in the past had been to get the best out of the existing system for their members, to defend workers' living standards against employer attacks, to improve those standards wherever possible and to meet 'the dictatorship of irresponsible capitalist groups by the organisation of social and economic power among the workers'. Up until the 1920s, Citrine explained, trade unions had pursued very much a hand-to-mouth policy, responding to events without any clear and comprehensive plan in mind. But now there was a 'steady growth of conscious purpose among the unions and an equally marked tendency towards the concentration of authority in the hands of a central body representative of the whole organised movement'.

Citrine believed this development could be seen in the growing powers that were being provided to the TUC by its affiliate unions 'not only to intervene in industrial disputes in which some vital question of principle affecting the unions as a whole is involved but also empowering the general council to undertake negotiations on general basic principles and to coordinate the policy of the unions on general questions'. 'Vested with these powers, it is clearly within the province of the general council to formulate its ideas in a concrete and practical form for the guidance of the organised movement in the immediate future', he argued.

But Citrine did not envisage greater power being provided for the TUC simply as an administrative means for imposing a more centralised authority over the way trade unions behaved. He argued that what he had in mind was a more far-reaching industrial objective for the trade unions. He believed they should 'actively participate in a concerted effort to raise industry to its highest efficiency by developing the most scientific methods of production, eliminating waste and harmful restrictions, removing causes of friction and avoidable conflict and promoting the largest possible output so as to provide a rising standard of life and continuously improving conditions of employment'. Citrine wanted trade unions to become positive partners with employers in their plans for industrial change. He reasoned it would be unthinkable if trade unions were obstructive or took a merely negative attitude, because they could not prevent the profound changes going on in the organisation and control of industry and would effectively silence themselves in claiming a share in the responsibility of guiding developments.

'The way to a new industrial order is not by way of a social explosion but by a planned reconstruction in which the unions will assume a larger share of control in directing industrial changes', reasoned Citrine. He

pointed to the vast changes taking place 'in technology, in management methods, in the enlargement in the scale of production, finance and organisation as well as the growth of scientific research, psychological investigation and enlightened common sense that were being applied to work out the principles of a more efficient, economical and humane system of production'. This was summed up by the term 'the rationalisation of industry', which he claimed was spreading rapidly in highly industrialised communities. 'Standardised products, simplified processes, scientific planning of workshops, labour-saving machinery, improved management techniques' were to be rationalisation's guiding principles.

The sheer scale of Citrine's ambitions for the trade unions appeared to herald a radical breach with past TUC practice. But ever the practical man of action, Citrine sought to translate his trade union objectives into reality through the development of a voluntary, practical dialogue with employers. The initiative for such a move was taken at the 1927 Trades Union Congress. On that occasion George Hicks, general secretary of the Amalgamated Union of Building Trade Workers, agreed with Citrine to use the opportunity provided by his TUC presidential address to call for the establishment of an 'industrial peace' through joint consultation between the TUC and representative employer organisations which he hoped could lead to cooperation in 'a common endeavour to improve the efficiency of industry and raise the workers' standards of life'.<sup>44</sup> Citrine was mainly responsible for the drafting of that part of Hicks's conciliatory speech. Unfortunately it brought an immediate but negative response from the National Confederation of Employers' Organisations and the Federation of British Industry who saw no good reason why they should want to seek a closer understanding with the TUC after its defeat in the General Strike.

However, on 23 November 1927 a more positive employer reaction came in a letter to the TUC general council from 24 senior industrialists led by Sir Alfred Mond (later Lord Melchett), chairman of Imperial Chemical Industries. He proposed that an industrial conference should be held with the TUC to discuss issues of industrial reorganisation and industrial relations. Despite predictable opposition to such an offer from the Communist Party and Arthur Cook, the Mineworkers' Federation general secretary, the TUC general council accepted Mond's personal invitation for such a meeting. The first joint session was held on 12 January 1928 at Burlington House in London. Mond headed the employer delegation while Ben Turner, general secretary of the National Union of Textile Workers, led the TUC contingent as that year's TUC president. Citrine made it clear from the outset of what came to be

known as the Mond–Turner talks that ‘he believed it was possible to achieve a higher standard of living even under the present system without prejudice to their conception of the future system of industry. There must be no thought of excluding any topic whatever from discussion that the workers’ side thought relevant. There might ultimately evolve from this conference an organisation which could speak for the whole of industry.’<sup>45</sup> He added:

I am one of those people who have talked in my time as vehemently and indignantly about the evils of capitalism as anyone who has stood on Labour platforms but I recognise that a time must come in the history of the industrial movement of this country when it tries to translate into practical achievement some of the shibboleths and slogans it has uttered from Labour platforms ... I can see no joy to the workers of this country in an early collapse of the capitalist system.

Citrine believed the Mond–Turner talks could mark a turning point in relations between the TUC and employer associations. If progress was not made, then the dangers of the unions moving leftwards into a confrontation strategy would become more likely. A substantial majority of the TUC general council was not disheartened by the lack of any tangible progress after their first meeting with Mond and his colleagues and they agreed by 18 votes to 6 against to continue with their discussions. An attempt by the TUC left to question Mond’s good faith because of his alleged sympathy for Mussolini’s Fascist regime in Italy, failed to persuade Citrine and his colleagues to abandon the talks.

The TUC general council pointed out that the list of items on the agenda of the joint talks were ‘the things the trade union movement had been claiming for years to have some voice in but for years that right had been denied’.<sup>46</sup> A policy document was presented to the 1928 Congress by the general council, calling for the establishment of a full-scale Industrial Conference. Among its recommendations were a call for the establishment of a national industrial council made up of TUC representatives and the two national employer associations which was to meet quarterly to discuss industrial issues. Joint conciliation boards were also favoured to resolve disputes at industry level. But the first practical aim of the Mond–Turner talks sought to secure employer recognition for trade unions based on the principle that those who participated in production should also participate in the prosperity of industry. The planned agenda was to cover a range of issues of concern to the trade unions. These also consisted of collective bargaining, security of

employment, the raising of the status of the industrial worker, moves to prevent the victimisation of workers, legal regulation of working hours, the formation of works councils, the provision of company information to workers, an investigation into the potential causes of disputes, the extension of the function of industrial courts, more factory legislation, improved health and unemployment insurance, provision of machinery to enable workers to make suggestions and constructively criticise employers.

Other areas for possible joint action were to cover unemployment, the distribution of the proceeds of commodities and services with a 'high wages policy', consideration of plans for participation in industry, payment by results and minimum wage principles as well as the organisation, technique and control of industry. It was also proposed to cover industrial rationalisation – restructuring to improve efficiency, flexibility, elasticity and testing of experimental conditions, the effect of unnecessary internal competition, sheltered industries and distribution. Financial issues were to be covered, including the future of banking and credit, taxation and local rates and the financing of industry. In addition, institutional questions were to be placed on the agenda such as the possible creation of a national industrial council and a permanent standing committee to meet for regular consultation on matters affecting industry, the coordination of presentation and if necessary the provision of further machinery for continuous investigation into industrial conditions. International questions were not to be neglected either, such as the problem of competition with countries with lower labour standards, the future of trade agreements and labour conventions.

In its report to the 1928 Congress the TUC general council pointed out the trade unions faced three clear strategic options. One was to adopt a revolutionary strategy to break the capitalist system. But the report added that this had been 'decisively rejected as futile, certain to fail, and sure to lead to bloodshed and misery'. A second option was to stand aside and do nothing, telling employers to get on with their own job while the unions pursued their sectionalist aims for improvements. 'The objections to this course are that it is entirely inconsistent with the modern demand for a completely altered status of the workers in industry, a confession of failure for unions to say they are going to take no hand in the momentous changes that are taking place in the economic life of the nation', argued the Citrine-inspired document.<sup>47</sup>

The TUC favoured what it called 'the third option'. This aimed to provide the organisation with 'a voice as to the way industry is carried on, so that it can influence the new developments that are taking place

– the unions can use their power to promote and guide the scientific reorganisation of industry as well as to obtain material advantages from that reorganisation'.<sup>48</sup> Citrine fought hard to convince the delegates that they had nothing to fear from conversations between the TUC and Mond and his business allies. He described the joint document they had issued as 'a logical, common sense, sequential step in the development of trade unionism', although it would not achieve the millennium. Citrine claimed what the TUC was doing was consistent with international trade union developments. As he argued: 'World trade unionism stands at the present time for the voice of the worker in the administration and control of industry, to be heard in the councils of the employers.' But he added: 'I say emphatically to talk about exercising control of industry without meeting the employers to discuss that control, is a figment of the imagination. We cannot await the advent of the breakdown of capitalism before we start marching towards control.' Citrine faced some stiff criticism for his arguments, particularly from James Brownlie, president of the AEU engineering union, who accused the TUC general council of going beyond its remit over the Mond–Turner talks. He wanted to amend their report by postponing a decisive decision on approving it until affiliated union executives had determined what they should do. Brownlie was supported by his AEU colleague Swales and even Hicks who appeared to have dropped his earlier enthusiasm for the initiative of joint discussions. Outright resistance came from Cook and A. G. Tomkins from the Communist-dominated Furnishing Trades Association. But Bevin and Thomas both strongly backed Citrine's stand. The AEU's proposed amendment was defeated with 2,921,000 against and 768,000 in favour.

In the aftermath of the 1928 Congress, further meetings were held between the TUC's industrial committee, now chaired by Tillett, and Lord Melchett's employer group on the subject of unemployment. A joint committee was established to examine the facts. This was followed by a joint conference between the two sides held on 12 March 1929 to finalise a joint statement on unemployment. However, the Mond–Turner talks – begun with some hope of a new approach – were eventually to founder in the face of employer indifference and intransigence. Allan Smith, chairman of the Engineering Employers Federation, led a rearguard action as both the main employer bodies refused to take a positive view of such discussions. Citrine's hopes of 1927 gradually ebbed away.

Citrine recognised that a serious problem for the TUC's efforts lay in the lack of any coherent and powerfully centralised employer association

to which the TUC was able to respond in an effective manner. As he noted in January 1928:

It clearly looks to me as if it will be necessary ... that an organisation must be created on the side of the employers to which firms will receive their authority as they proceed ... There is no body on the employers' side able to speak authoritatively on behalf of the whole of industry ... We have to create a joint body (between the TUC and employers) but we have to get the authority for the separate body. This may be a long job ... It may be, of course, that the body we form will be only a purely advisory or consultative one. Nothing we say will be in the position of binding the respective constituents. I am afraid that is the position which we will be faced with for a long time.<sup>49</sup>

However, the lack of much progress as a result of Mond–Turner did nothing to discourage Citrine away from his modernisation strategy. He would have liked to see the acquisition of greater centralising powers over its affiliate unions. 'My own view is that the proper course for the TUC to pursue, while all the time trying to foster the idea of closer association and amalgamation as it is doing today, is gradually to absorb function after function of the unions which the unions have hitherto exercised imperfectly or not at all but which are nevertheless common to all the unions.'<sup>50</sup> He went on: 'If trade unionism is evolving and widening its scope, it follows that new functions will appear and it is the bounden duty of some central body such as the TUC to take over those functions and perform them for the unions, leaving the unions to pursue their traditional functions and those which they are best qualified to perform.'

Citrine continued to envisage an increasingly influential role for the TUC in the life of the modern state. He believed the TUC needed to establish a distinctive role for itself in the political economy beyond its close relationship with the Labour Party. 'We must get away from the idea that the Labour party is an alternative to trade unionism', he reasoned.

It is evidence of muddled thinking and is simply silly. I have heard speakers urge, before the election, that all that is necessary is to give a vote to the Labour party. What is the effect of this on people's minds? Why should a man pay about 1s a week to a trade union if he can secure his emancipation by the easy means of placing a cross on a ballot paper every few years? The Labour party is not an alternative

to trade unionism. It has its own functions and is a valuable asset to us. The TUC, whether there is a Labour government in office or not, will pursue its legislative function. It will be bound to regard any government in office as a body to whom proposals have to be submitted by the trade union movement.<sup>51</sup>

Citrine's vision of effective and responsible trade unionism required the creation of a professional full-time staff to service the TUC's own organisation. In 1924 its head office still had a staff of only 14; by 1930 its number had been increased to nearly 40. He accepted that the general council could not

hope in present circumstances for years to rival the efficiency, adequate staffing and the elaborate arrangements made for dealing with the employers' business. When I was told the Federation of British Industries employed over 200 people in its office, I confess I did look forward to the day when this Congress might do the same thing and the Congress might be undertaking duties for the unions which would justify the employment of that number of people but those days are a long way off.<sup>52</sup>

Professor Hugh Clegg described Citrine's approach as 'elitist' in contrast to nineteenth-century trade unions who had 'relied on the solidarity of the members to regulate industrial relations'.<sup>53</sup> Under Citrine the emphasis was focused on the skills of negotiation and those who believed that such a strategy was best carried out by full-time officials and union executive members. The spread of bureaucracy, the greater centralisation of power in the unions and the move to national industry-based collective agreements – all intensified the pressure for following the Citrine version of modernisation. Unfortunately for the TUC, in the last years of the 1920s cooperation with companies had not turned out to be a successful option because of the negativism and indifference displayed by employer associations. But this did not stop the increased competence of the TUC office to develop its activities.

However, there was another strategy raised by the TUC after 1926, which was to have perhaps more long-lasting significance. Citrine was determined to carve out an autonomous and accepted role for the TUC in the wider political economy, whatever the attitude of the Labour Party might be towards it. In an important memorandum written in June 1927, Walter Milne-Bailey, head of the TUC's new research and economic department, spelt out what this would mean in practice. The

TUC was to have its own coherent and decisive public policy strategy quite separate and distinctive from that of the rest of the Labour Movement. As Milne-Bailey argued:

It has appeared to outsiders that the unions first set the political movement on foot in order to assist industrial methods in achieving industrial objectives but that political aims and in particular socialism have become more and more important until at length they have swallowed their progenitor and now completely rule the working class movement, its philosophy and its methods. This view is silly – for the unions have gone on negotiating and otherwise taking an active part in the day-to-day problems and administration of the industrial process.<sup>54</sup>

While Citrine was trying to develop a more positive role for the TUC through cooperation with progressive employers and building up its capacity to deal with public policy issues, he was also determined to establish the organisation as a respectable and responsible body in the country's industrial life by the repudiation of any Communist-dominated left strategy or a return to the syndicalist tendencies of the early 1920s. Under his leadership the TUC set its face against political and industrial extremism. Citrine's hostile attitude was most apparent in his increasingly bitter opposition to the role he believed the Communist Party was playing inside industry and many trade unions. He was certainly assisted in his personal antipathy by the 'social Fascist' or 'class against class' phase of Communist strategic thought as the Soviet Union moved more firmly under Stalin's iron grip after 1928 and compelled the British party to fall into line behind an aggressive strategy that denounced organisations like the TUC as the enemy of the working class. The virulence of Citrine's resistance to both the Minority Movement and Wal Hannington's National Unemployed Workers' Movement reflected a deep antagonism towards Communism that was to last throughout his public life. In a series of signed articles, published in 1927 and 1928 in *Labour* magazine, Citrine attacked what he described as 'the cancer of Communist influence' inside the trade unions. 'Trade unionists generally do not realise the extent to which a deliberately organised attempt has been made to capture the trade union movement and to exploit it for a revolutionary subversive purpose', he argued.<sup>55</sup> 'The well-known tolerance and breadth of view concerning all creeds and forms of economic theory have made it slow to join issue with Communism.' But Citrine warned: 'We have seen our movement

distracted and confused by savage criticism and weakened by a wholly unwarrantable influence in our affairs.' However, as he asserted: 'The knowledge that people who pay lip service to 100 per cent trade unionism and who shout loudly about the proletariat are little more than the worn and monotonous gramophone records of their master's voice from Moscow is preventing earnest trade unionists from being deceived by the forces of disruption.' Citrine's initiative was seen by him as a wake-up call to the trade unions to face up to the dangers of Communist subversion in their own organisations. In fact, his views were shared by most trade union leaders at that time who disliked the personal abuse being thrown on them by the Communists for their behaviour during the General Strike. At the 1927 Congress delegates voted overwhelmingly by 3,746,000 to only 148,000 against, to condemn Communist efforts to infiltrate the trade unions. They did so after listening to a characteristically clinical demolition of Communism in the unions from Citrine in which he identified the links between the Minority Movement and the Communist International and made it clear he would 'fight against anything which implies a duality of loyalty to the trade union movement'.<sup>56</sup> In the following year some left-wing delegates tried to force a reference back of the general council's report, because the TUC had forbidden Minority Movement members from attending the annual trades council conference. But their move was heavily defeated on a show of hands without even the need for a card vote. However, despite this massive rejection of the Communists at Congress, Citrine's sense of urgency about the danger they posed to the trade unions does not appear to have been shared by all affiliates. The TUC launched an inquiry into the 'dangers of disruption'. It reported in 1929 that 92 out of the 124 affiliate unions who had cooperated with the exercise had said they had no evidence of disruptive elements in their own organisations in 'greater or lesser degree'. While only 16 said they were having a 'bad effect' on their activities, a mere 8 unions considered them to be 'serious'.<sup>57</sup> The TUC inquiry admitted that many unions had shown 'considerable reluctance' to supply any details of disruption. 'We are glad to report with the exception of one or two cases the disruptive elements in the trade union movement instigated by the Communist party and the National Minority Movement are having a less and diminishing influence', the inquiry concluded. It suggested the unions themselves were 'capable and equal to the task of dealing with this matter of disruptive activity in their own way'.

However, the Communist 'problem' in the unions continued to concern Citrine for the rest of the inter-war years. 'The patience

displayed by the trade union movement towards the disruptive activities of the Communist party is known world wide', he told delegates at the 1929 Congress.<sup>58</sup> 'There is no other trade union movement in the world that has displayed anything like the patience or the reluctance in coming to conclusive measures than our British trade union movement has done.' Citrine pointed out that the TUC had only finally acted against the Communists as a last resort after 'several years of an organised and subsidised system of propaganda used against it'.

Citrine was equally critical of the attitude adopted by the Soviet Union towards the TUC. He worked assiduously for the abolition of the Anglo-Russian Committee, which had been formed in 1925 with him as one of its joint secretaries.<sup>59</sup> In October of that year, Citrine travelled on a TUC delegation to the Soviet Union where he was unimpressed by what he saw and unsettled by the oppressive atmosphere. When Soviet trade union leaders began to attack the way the TUC had conducted itself during the General Strike, Citrine reacted angrily. As he told delegates at the 1927 Congress, the Russians were operating

from the conception of the absolute right of [their] movement to dictate its policy to the rest of the world. The conception of the British trade union movement is radically different. Our movement has been built up on the principle of autonomy for its units nationally and internationally and on the authority of the British trade union movement to decide its own methods of progress.<sup>60</sup>

Citrine's speech was later described as a 'carefully phrased, unemotional and restrained discourse, free of invective, grandiloquence or tub-thumping'.<sup>61</sup> Nevertheless, it was highly effective in isolating left-wing opinion inside the TUC. The four to one majority among the unions in support of the TUC's position indicated widespread backing for the decision to cut the TUC's connections with the Soviet trade union movement.

### **A divided movement**

By the end of the 1920s the TUC was in a confident mood. It had emerged from the trauma of the General Strike and developed under Citrine's guidance a moderate but wide-ranging strategy, repudiating the left and seeking conciliation where possible with sympathetic employers. But mass unemployment, a relatively hostile state, indifferent employers and a suspicious Labour Party, were obstacles to TUC modernisation.

However, the return of the second minority Labour government after the indecisive September 1929 general election encouraged Citrine into believing this would lead to the successful implementation of a more radical economic programme and closer cooperation between the TUC and the state. In its early months of office TUC leaders were well pleased by the government's performance. But Citrine was left in no doubt from the beginning that Chancellor Philip Snowden and the Treasury were not going to take much notice of TUC pressures for action. While he was to remain personally sympathetic to Ramsay MacDonald even after the formation of the National government, and continued to be so until the former Labour Party leader's death in 1935, Citrine was less than impressed by Snowden. 'I found him to be unexpectedly pompous, rigid, devoid of imagination and frigidly orthodox', he noted in his memoirs.<sup>62</sup> 'He had acquired the reputation of being the financial expert of the Labour movement. He could throw figures about in the millions on the platform with the best but I found that at close quarters he was by no means so capable.' For his part Snowden hardly bothered to conceal his contempt for Citrine and the TUC general council.

Over the next two years the minority Labour government and the TUC found it increasingly difficult to reach any common understanding on what needed to be done to rescue the British economy from deflation and the icy grip of the world depression which followed the Wall Street crash in October 1929. There was trouble from the start in convincing MacDonald and many of his senior cabinet colleagues on the need to consult and even inform the TUC on policy in a manner union leaders believed to be appropriate. Citrine wanted to have regular, consultative meetings held between the TUC and the government but MacDonald rejected such a suggestion, perhaps fearing the charge of TUC dictation. Nor would the government make use of the National Joint Council between the party and the TUC to coordinate policy. Margaret Bondfield, Minister of Labour, and J. R. Clynes, the Home Secretary, even refused to allow the TUC see draft legislation of relevance to the trade unions. Moreover, Citrine was irritated by the government's inconsistency in not consulting the TUC on the appointment of union representatives to public committees and inquiries. It seemed the Labour government was as unsympathetic as Baldwin had been to acceding to the TUC's desire to secure a strategic role as an important interest group in public policy-making in line with Citrine's New Unionism.

The inability or refusal of the Labour government to respond in a positive way to the TUC began to increasingly trouble Citrine and his colleagues. No progress was made at all with their efforts to secure a

repeal of the hated 1927 Trade Disputes Act and MacDonald did little to endear himself to the TUC general council by the offhand way in which he dealt with them over the issue. Nor did the government make any progress of satisfaction on the TUC's wish for a ratification of the Washington convention which proposed the introduction of a maximum 48-hour working week and an eight-hour day across industry. But the main cause for growing division between the TUC and MacDonald concerned the government's handling of economic policy and, above all, mass unemployment. While it may be true to say the TUC produced no coherent and credible economic alternative to the Treasury's orthodox approach between September 1929 and August 1931 aimed at reducing the dole queues, critics are wrong to suggest that the trade unions were neither realistic nor credible in their attitude to what was becoming the country's gravest problem. In 1929 the TUC general council agreed to Citrine's proposal to establish a ten-strong economic committee of its own under the direction of Walter Milne-Bailey, a response to the discussions being held with employers. Its first task was to draw up a memorandum for submission to the Macmillan committee on finance and industry which MacDonald had created in November 1929. The TUC followed this up by preparing economic proposals to present to the Imperial conference in September 1930. The outcome of that particular exercise provoked internal differences of opinion inside the TUC when it appeared Citrine and Bevin were prepared to, at least, examine the merits of tariff protection and question the virtues of free trade. Under the pressure of events, the TUC's economic policy thinking was going through an agonising change of direction despite substantial opposition from Labour free trade traditionalists and the Communist left. However, at the same time the TUC leadership was growing increasingly disillusioned with the cabinet's acceptance of Snowden's cautious handling of the economy, which was doing nothing to reduce unemployment. Citrine and Bevin had accepted MacDonald's request in 1929 to join his Economic Advisory Council but this turned out to be an ineffective response to the growing economic crisis even if it enabled TUC officials to consort with the economist John Maynard Keynes.

In fact, the TUC was starting to develop a distinctive economic strategy of its own. The signs of the TUC's new approach were evident in the economic committee's 1930 document, setting out the strategic options facing the UK in the face of worsening economic conditions with soaring unemployment. It suggested the country could either link up with Europe in the creation of a new trading bloc, establish a similar arrangement within the British Commonwealth or form a closer

economic relationship with the United States. The committee in 1930 favoured the development of a Commonwealth bloc in parallel with an extension of the League of Nations into economic governance. This would have involved initially regular economic conferences such as the forthcoming one to be held in London. These meetings would be made up of government, employers and trade unions appointed by all the Commonwealth countries on the lines of the 1927 world economic conference. An inter-commonwealth economic secretariat was also proposed, similar to that in the League of Nations. In an appendix to its 1930 report the economic committee denied that the TUC favoured the introduction of either protection or Imperial free trade. But its critical language cast doubt on the assumption that free trade still remained intact.

Every nation and in practice if not in theory every party has long since abandoned the notion of complete freedom of trade (which incidentally would necessitate freedom in buying and selling labour). In almost every aspect of economic life regulation and conscious control of economic factors and forces is the accepted policy. Differences only concern the amount of regulation and control. It may or may not be desirable to hold up world-wide freedom of trade as an ultimate ideal but it is not and cannot be a working aim in the immediate situation of the world today. To the trade union and labour movements it can hardly be an ultimate ideal ever, since these movements rest on the belief that there should be conscious control of economic and political factors that can be controlled in the interests of human welfare. The notion that human welfare is, by some dispensation of providence best advanced by a complete absence of restrictions on 'freedom of trade' did not survive beyond the early years of the 19th century.<sup>63</sup>

The TUC document proposed a number of alternatives on how groups within nation states should establish economic links and work cooperatively together for the mutual advantage of their members. This, it argued, could cover agreements for the extraction of raw materials and minerals and perhaps conditional loans to purchase particular goods. The TUC gave the example of US investment in the Soviet five-year plan as one to admire. State control of raw materials as well as restrictions on labour immigration were also proposed. The TUC then added there might be an imposition of tariffs. On that option, the document was emphatic: 'Economic theory condemns the general policy of tariffs but

political rather than economic considerations are usually the determining factor ... it is all a matter of expediency in a given situation.' Although the committee did not recommend protection it believed the whole question needed to be 'looked at without prejudice and in the light of present day conditions'. But such ideas, however tentatively expressed, aroused widespread opposition inside many unions. At the 1930 Congress the TUC's economic report was almost defeated when 1,401,000 voted for its reference back with 1,878,000 supporting it. Bevin argued that the report sought to put before the Labour government a proposal for 'a definite economic organisation' inside the Empire. This would be an investigative body. But he added:

It is a departure from the old method of leaving to the City of London the operation of the old monetary and free trade laissez faire system and saying that the devil can take the hindmost and we must develop the world for profit only. It is not a question of jumping to tariffs as being a solution to the problem. Tariffs are only the froth; they are merely the kind of thing lazy minds jump to. We have taken a different way. We have gone to the foundation.<sup>64</sup>

Loyalty to the Labour government among the trade unions, however, remained substantial despite deep differences of opinion over economic policy and personal animosities. The TUC was furious at the way the government created the Holman Gregory Commission on unemployment insurance without its participation or even asking for its advice on the body's terms of reference. Citrine and his colleagues were equally upset by the commission's resulting recommendations which said unemployment benefit should be limited to only 26 weeks in the year, contributions raised, level of benefit cut and a means test introduced. In the event, MacDonald decided not to implement such harsh proposals but the whole affair led to a further deterioration in TUC-government relations. However, many union leaders were still reluctant to take their growing anxieties to Snowden's handling of the economy to outright public resistance. The charismatic Oswald Mosley found his direct challenge to the party leadership over its economic strategy at the 1930 Labour conference brought him little support from the trade unions. Indeed, before the onset of the August 1931 crisis, the TUC was keen to cooperate as far as possible with MacDonald's government despite its mounting worries about where it was going. As Professor Hugh Clegg noted: 'To take decisive action, the union leaders and members would have had to believe that something could be done to increase

employment in the circumstances of 1930. As it was, most of them appeared to accept the depression as a natural disaster, an "economic blizzard" which they must wait to blow itself out.<sup>65</sup> Charles Beard from Bevin's own union and 1930 Congress president even declared: 'A long time ago many of us gave ourselves to the Labour party and we have no regrets. For myself, I still fully trust the Labour government. Furthermore, in these times of tense danger, I stand by the captain – by James Ramsay MacDonald.'<sup>66</sup>

However, the TUC was not prepared to cooperate with any government in crisis measures that would have meant cutting the size of the unemployment insurance fund as well as the level of unemployment benefit. Citrine and his colleagues may have lacked the economic knowledge or political strength to provide an acceptable alternative to Snowden's deflationary approach but they knew that they could not tolerate a strategy that involved further contraction in the economy and cuts in public spending which would lead to yet further unemployment and a squeeze on the living standards of the jobless. But it is hard to avoid reaching the conclusion that if MacDonald and his senior cabinet colleagues had taken the TUC general council fully into their confidence, treated them with understanding and respect and listened carefully to what Citrine and Bevin had to say, they may have found a much more sympathetic TUC facing them when the crisis of August 1931 erupted. It is quite possible that the damaging split that was to reverberate through Labour history for the next 50 years could have been avoided with some tact and sensitivity.

Nobody in the TUC really doubted that the government faced a grave situation. But at the TUC's 20 August 1931 meeting with the cabinet sub-committee and Labour's national executive at Transport House MacDonald failed to tell union leaders the exact details of what he intended to do. Snowden informed Citrine his proposed economies would include a reduction in the unemployment insurance fund, as well as cuts in the wages of civil servants, teachers and armed forces. But no proposal to cut the unemployment benefit rates was suggested at that stage and no indication was given of how Snowden's concept of 'equality of sacrifice' would work in practice. Citrine, speaking for the TUC general council, told MacDonald and Snowden that although the trade unions were ready to 'assist the government in the national emergency that had arisen', its apparent approach to the problem was 'of a character that would only lead to the accentuation of our economic difficulties'. Later that same evening the TUC economic committee met the cabinet and proposed alternative policies. These included the call

for a graduated levy on profits, incomes and earnings covering all sections of the community in proportion to the ability to pay as well as a temporary suspension of the Sinking Fund and a tax on all fixed interest bearing securities and other unearned income. Citrine himself argued personally for a break with free trade and the creation of a revenue tariff to halt the fall in prices, but the TUC general council would not agree to this, saying any such decision must await the verdict of the forthcoming Congress in September.<sup>67</sup>

MacDonald was unimpressed by the TUC's alternatives. He wrote to Citrine on 21 August rejecting their proposals. 'Nothing gives me greater regret than to disagree with old industrial friends but I really personally find it absolutely impossible to overlook dread realities as I am afraid you are doing', he explained.<sup>68</sup> But as he noted in his diary: 'The TUC undoubtedly voice the feeling of the mass of workers. They do not know and their minds are rigid and think of superficial appearances and so grasping at the shadow they lose the bone.'<sup>69</sup> The TUC's critical intervention had, however, proved decisive for the future of his government. It stiffened the opposition from Arthur Henderson and other cabinet members to the deflationary measures the Treasury was proposing to restore overseas financial markets' confidence in sterling. In its report submitted to its September 1931 Bristol Congress the TUC spelt out its alternative. It said it had refused to accept the Bank of England's analysis of the crisis, arguing that the August run on the pound stemmed not from the specifics of the UK economy or fear of a budget deficit, but from the borrowing and lending policy of those City of London finance houses which had been deployed to save the ailing German banks from collapse. In its 1931 autumn statement the TUC proposed a number of long-term policies to deal with the country's economic problems. These called for the modernisation and restructuring of basic industries, reducing the burden of international debt and reparations and international action to raise the world level of wholesale prices. The TUC also called for devaluation as 'the most effective means within the power of this country if we have to act alone'.<sup>70</sup>

Union leaders were unanimous in their opposition to MacDonald's decision to create a National government with the Conservatives and Liberals as a way out of the crisis. On Wednesday 24 August a joint meeting was held of the TUC general council, the Labour Party executive and the consultative committee of the parliamentary party on how to respond. 'The trade union leaders are full of fight', Hugh Dalton recorded in his diary.<sup>71</sup> All of them repudiated the creation of the National government in a joint statement issued on the following day. 'The policy

of the Labour Movement for national reconstruction and international cooperation, including a reconstruction of the problems of debts and reparations, provides the only basis for the restoration of credit and re-establishment of world prosperity', it declared.<sup>72</sup>

Citrine and the TUC certainly played a decisive role in the downfall of the second Labour minority government. But their resistance to Snowden's austerity proposals was more than merely a matter of detail. By August 1931 many in the TUC were ready to contest the Treasury position. In fact, the National government took immediate action to deal with the crisis. Sterling was devalued and Britain left the Gold Standard. This was followed in 1932 by the introduction of Imperial preference. Those drastic changes in government policy demonstrated other options were available to dealing with mass unemployment than merely cutting benefit levels. At the 1931 Congress Citrine declared: 'The strength of this TUC lies in the fact that it can detach itself from political expediency and look economic facts in the face.'

We were faced with the position either of accepting or rejecting the programme of cuts and leaving to trust the operation of the principle of equality of sacrifice for other sections of the community. We wanted to assist the government. None of us wanted to embarrass them more than they were obviously embarrassed at the moment. But when you are faced with a policy against which you have been fighting for years and which you know will be disastrous, no course is left open to you but unequivocally to say as the general council said – we cannot subscribe to this policy ... For years we have been operating on the principle that the policy which has been followed since 1925 in this country of contraction, contraction, contraction, deflation, deflation, deflation must lead us all, if carried to its logical conclusion to economic disaster and acceptance of this policy in the judgement of the general council would have tied us and anchored us to that principle and logically we could not later resist it when it spread to other channels.<sup>73</sup>

Citrine rejected the accusation that the TUC had tried to dictate to the Labour government. He insisted there had been no attempt by the TUC to impose its will but union leaders had been asked for their advice and they had merely given it. The TUC threw all its strength behind the Labour Party in the 1931 general election, but the outcome proved to be a disaster.

## A new beginning

In the aftermath of Labour's defeat the TUC decided to take a much more direct role in the party's decision-making through the revived National Joint Council which was established in December 1931. The body was to act as a coordinating body, 'to consider all questions affecting the Labour Movement as a whole' and 'to secure a common policy and joint action'.<sup>74</sup> The TUC general council held a majority on the revamped body, taking seven seats with three each allocated for members of the party's national executive and the parliamentary Labour Party. In a memorandum of collaboration drawn up in March 1932 an attempt was made to establish strict lines of consultation between the constituent bodies. These changes were acknowledged to provide the TUC with at least the opportunity to exercise a much more effective influence inside the party than it had done during the 1920s. It is not surprising that the historian Henry Pelling called Labour 'the general council's party' after 1931.<sup>75</sup> But Citrine was pessimistic about the immediate political outlook. Tom Jones recorded in a letter to his sister in November 1932 that Citrine 'complained that the [Labour Party] leaders were old and safe and "official" and that no young men seemed to be coming up to take their places – the "missing generation" again'.

Citrine has a group or groups at work on banking policy, railways, electricity, coal in preparation for the next Labour government and is hoping to get as far as to draft Bills which they can bring in at once on these subjects. Their disappointment with the last Labour government is leading them to believe they can, qua TUC and Labour Party Executive, choose PM, choose Cabinet, thrust policy into their hands in the shape of Bills and thus avoid being let down again.<sup>76</sup>

This did not initially guarantee agreement on a reformist domestic policy. On the contrary, in the early 1930s Labour moved briefly to the left and even moderate figures like Clem Attlee seemed temporarily to lose faith in the parliamentary system. Neither Citrine nor Bevin subscribed to such an opinion. Instead they sought to expand on the ideas the TUC had been developing during the period of the second Labour government.

The TUC's efforts in the 1930s to create a coherent and credible economic strategy were not, however, particularly successful. Citrine had been impressed by the early successes of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Indeed, the 1933 Congress passed a resolution on industrial recovery

that called on the National government to draw on the US experience by introducing public works schemes and taking 'all possible measures for increasing the purchasing power of the masses'.<sup>77</sup> Citrine was to see the New Deal at first hand during visits he made to the United States as TUC fraternal delegate to the American Federation of Labor convention in 1934 and again in 1936. He did not believe the depression would remain unsolved until the arrival of socialism but he was convinced sustained recovery would depend on international cooperation and not through the action of one country alone. As he explained in 1938:

I refuse to subscribe to the fatalism which regards economic depressions as being outside the power of nations to control. The international trade union movement can never accept the doctrine that unemployment, with all its evil consequences and current trade depressions, is preordained and cannot be in large measure averted if only there is the necessary common sense and determination among the peoples and the governments to make the attempt. I believe that even within the capitalist system there is sufficient flexibility and adaptability to overcome the worst consequences of a trade depression, if only the broad lines of economic policy laid down by trade union and Socialist movement are generally applied.<sup>78</sup>

In the early 1930s Citrine was keen to put some substance into the TUC's vague aspirations for planning and state ownership of industry. Detailed policy documents were published by the TUC on the socialisation of cotton and iron and steel which were adopted at the 1934 Congress. Citrine wrote a foreword to Labour's 1936 plan for the 'socialisation' of the coal industry in which he argued that all documents on public ownership were 'considerably more than of mere academic importance, since they will furnish the plans from which a Labour government will work in reconstructing the great basic industries of the country'.<sup>79</sup> The public debate about state ownership of industry was concentrated on what role if any should be played by workers and trade unions in the running of private enterprises when they were nationalised.

## **Facing dictatorship**

However, it was on defence and foreign policy that Citrine and Bevin exercised a crucial influence over the Labour Movement during the 1930s. This was eloquently reflected as early as Citrine's 1933 report to Congress on 'Dictatorships and the Trade Union Movement'. As

president of the International Federation of Trade Unions since 1928, Citrine had witnessed at first hand the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazis in Germany on his visits to the IFTU's head offices in Berlin. Citrine held no illusions about the danger to European peace posed by such a radical Fascist regime. The TUC report contained a graphic account of the Nazi's ruthless suppression of the German trade union movement in the summer of 1933. But Citrine went much further than this by seeking the TUC's condemnation of all dictatorships whether they were of the right or the left. He believed the TUC must also oppose Stalin's Soviet Union. His sturdy defence of trade union freedom indicated that Citrine was not to be misled about the political realities of a country that found many uncritical admirers at that time on the British left. His hostile feelings about Soviet Russia were strengthened in 1935 when he paid his second official visit there and spent over two months travelling to different parts of the country, including the Ukraine and the Caucasus. While prepared to admire Soviet economic planning, Citrine was critical of much of what he saw in the Soviet workplace as well as in the country's housing. He published his diary of the 1935 visit which went through five editions despite hostile criticism from the Communist Party.

However, after September 1933 Citrine's main preoccupation was with the growing menace to European peace posed by Hitler, and to a lesser extent Mussolini in Italy, and on how they were to be dealt with. Citrine held little hope in the effectiveness of economic sanctions alone through the auspices of the League of Nations as a deterrent unless they were backed up by a credible threat of the use of military force. At the 1935 Congress, he went so far as to warn delegates what would be involved in any attempt to stand up to Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia by asserting:

There is only one way of dealing with a bully and that is by the use of force. Moral resolutions are no good. It may mean war but that is the thing we have to face. There is no real alternative now left to us but the applying of sanctions involving, in all possibility, war. But I say this. If we fail now, if we go back now, war is absolutely certain. I ask you what will happen to Germany, if Italy can treat with contempt the nations of the world who have pledged their word to preserve peace? Do you think you are going to restrain a Hitler Germany from carrying out its projected plan of attack upon Soviet Russia?<sup>80</sup>

At the 1937 Congress Citrine again spoke out forcefully that war would have to be faced if the TUC was serious in its opposition to Fascism:

The British people awaken to dangers as a general rule very late. In their tolerant way they do not want war with anybody and they cannot believe anybody wants war with them. But bit by bit the weakness, the hesitations and the refusals of our government to face the Fascist aggressors is disturbing our people and sooner or later we shall have a cry from the general public that the limits of restraint have been reached and despite itself the government will be compelled to act.

Citrine accepted that the best defence would be collective security through the League of Nations but he warned it might be too late for that and one or two countries might have to shoulder the responsibility of resistance to Fascism. This meant the trade unions would have to accept 'some measure of rearmament'.

Labour is planning for power; we are hoping to become at no distant date the government of this country and when we come into power it may be that almost our first problem will be to face an international crisis. We cannot wait for that time before framing our policy and indicating to our people despite the possibilities and probabilities of misrepresentation that we have a moral duty to perform and that by recognising the disturbed state of the world, this Labour Movement will not be indifferent to the defence of its own shores.<sup>81</sup>

Citrine explained:

I am no Jingoist and I am no imperialist. I was opposed to the war of 1914–1918 all the way through and I regard the prospect of war with no more equanimity than anybody here. With two sons, one 22 and one 19 years of age, I know what is in store for my boys and I ask my critics kindly not even to assume different motives from their own. We want to prevent war but we do not believe we can prevent war by lying down to aggression. Sooner or later this country will demand effective resistance to aggression. Some risks are inevitable and it is a question of measuring the relative risk and measuring the danger. I do not believe we can run away from it. The situation today demands that this movement should make up its mind and if we have to come to the conclusion that some measure of rearmament is necessary in

view of the situation in which we find ourselves then commonsense dictates that that rearmament cannot await the advent of a Labour government.

Citrine brought a realistic internationalist perspective to his hard-headed attitude to the menace of Fascism. As president of the International Federation of Trade Unions, he sought to mobilise trade unionism across democratic Europe in the cause of collective security. In his speech to that organisation's 1936 conference in London, he explained:

To say that our movement is opposed to war in all circumstances is, in my opinion, dangerously delusive and misleading. It is dangerous because it creates in the minds of the peace-seeking peoples an illusory confidence, and it is delusive because on the principles we have laid down for our guidance in international policy, circumstances may raise in which we may find ourselves called upon to make war for the enforcement of peace and the maintenance of public law.<sup>82</sup>

Citrine always argued for collective security through the League of Nations but he also backed 'regional pacts of mutual assistance' which supplemented and strengthened that commitment. His idealistic and passionate resistance to Fascism belies the common image of Citrine as the cold-blooded bureaucrat. What is often overlooked is that his realism was exceptional in the Labour Movement during the 1930s. Only Bevin and Dalton really shared a consistently similar outlook. His 1936 peroration provided an eloquent example of Citrine's perception of what he believed the looming struggle would be all about. As he told the IFTU's delegates:

It is necessary for us, not only to be on our guard against Fascism, but to be resolute and persistent in our efforts to destroy it. Fascism is growing in various forms in many of the countries represented in this assembly today. We must be vigilant to check suspicious tendencies in this direction wherever they appear. It is a crime against civilisation to allow this monstrous system to continue which deifies the state, destroys personal freedom, and the institutions of democracy and rules by contempt of the most sacred rights of mankind. Plainly a struggle to the death has arisen between this system [Fascism] and the ideals of freedom and human rights which our Movement represents. We have done much, we can proudly claim, to arrest the progress of Fascism and to relieve the hardship of its victims. We can do more to

help those in Germany, Austria and Italy carry on the struggle and brave prison, the torture chamber, and death itself, rather than suffer the degradation of life under this brutish dictatorship.

By early 1938 Citrine was predicting European war. 'Sooner or later the democratic states would be compelled in their own interests to call a halt to Fascist aggression', Citrine argued.

The tendency for nations to take refuge in isolation and to recede from reliance on collective security through the League of Nations was deplorable. It played right into the hands of the dictators. Within the framework of the League there was ample opportunity for the conclusion of agreements between nations which should be open to all to join and want to ensure that collective security would be a reality.<sup>83</sup>

It is not surprising that Citrine was prepared to collaborate with Conservative anti-appeasers like Winston Churchill during the 1930s and speak with them on public platforms against the government's policy towards the dictators. While it may be argued that Citrine as well as Bevin was less emotionally engaged with the Republic's cause during the Spanish Civil War (1936–39) and more favourable to the non-interventionist position than many on the British left, the TUC general secretary was prepared to modify his deeply felt anti-Communism in the wider cause of confronting the dictators. After 1937 he came to accept the urgent need for the formation of a Grand Alliance between the western democratic countries and the Soviet Union. As he told delegates to the IFTU's conference in Zurich on the eve of the Second World War:

One paramount aspect of our task is to use the utmost influence of our movement to assist in the re-creation of a genuine Peace Front ... I must emphasise particularly the importance we attach to the cooperation and collaboration of the USSR in the establishment of a firm alliance of the peace-seeking nations. It is not only essential to have the Soviet Union with us in building up an unbreakable front against aggression and to assist in the defence of every threatened nation exposed to imminent invasion and conquest. Russia's help is necessary too, in the accomplishment of the fundamental aim of organising the life of the world for peace, disarmament and improvement of social and industrial standards in all countries by measures of international cooperation.<sup>84</sup>

In his unyielding resistance to Fascism Citrine ensured the TUC adopted a highly moral and idealistic position. It still remains one of the proudest of the TUC's achievements in the last century.

## **Towards an Estate of the Realm**

Throughout the 1930s Citrine sought to extend the influence of the TUC over the policies of the National government. The trauma of August 1931 did not convince him that the trade unions should return to the militancy of the early 1920s. As Beatrice Webb noted in her diary, Citrine 'pins his hopes on the national/international collaboration of capital and labour forcing up the standard of living of the workers in one country after another. He distrusts the labour politicians that have no capacity and cannot do business on equal terms with employers or financiers.'<sup>85</sup> 'The crisis has not attracted Citrine away from cooperation with leaders of industry', she explained. The TUC's strategy was to combine 'industrial cooperation with employers' with 'a determined resistance to any big lowering of the money increases of the working class by cuts in the dole or means test etc or reduction of wages'.<sup>86</sup> Citrine was determined to ensure the TUC did not back away from any involvement with the National government even if it disagreed with its economic policies. This was apparent as early as 1932 when MacDonald asked him if he would nominate TUC representatives to attend the Imperial Conference in Ottawa. Citrine nominated himself along with John Bromley from ASLEF, the train drivers' union, and that year's TUC chairman. Such an invitation, coming only a few months after the August 1931 crisis, indicated that, for their part, MacDonald and his cabinet colleagues had no desire to drive the TUC on to the margins of public life although they were not prepared to acknowledge that the trade unions might be useful partners in macro-economic management.

In fact, throughout the 1930s the TUC and the state were to remain in cautious, uneasy, intermittent contact through differing levels of consultation and involvement. At no stage was there much prospect that the National government would offer Citrine and the TUC the opportunity to become a fully-fledged Estate of the Realm. Citrine's more ambitious vision was to remain unrealised. But on the other hand, it would be wrong to suggest the TUC was kept completely out in the cold. Tentative moves towards a rapprochement, or perhaps more accurately a limited *modus vivendi*, did take place between the state and organised labour after 1932.

In his classic study of the relationship between trade unions and the state published in 1934, Milne-Bailey suggested that the TUC under Citrine was already becoming 'a semi-public institution, with interests and duties transcending those concerned directly with the vocational side of life'.<sup>87</sup> By that time, he claimed, the TUC was recognised by the government as the body that represented the wider labour interest. The trade union movement was now 'through organised consultation and even in some cases through administrative and controlling bodies, fulfilling definite, constructive functions', argued Milne-Bailey. He went on to suggest that the country's economic evolution made it possible for the trade unions 'to supplement and even supersede their earlier, limited and on the whole negative, policies by positive, constructive policies based on a wider conception of vocational aims and functions'. Milne-Bailey argued that this would bring about a transformation in trade union institutions as the *laissez-faire* capitalist system was gradually transformed into a planned economy. Trade unions could no longer be concerned solely with job control. He believed they must be given full recognition and offered participation in the 'new capitalism'. Milne-Bailey envisaged trade unions becoming 'increasingly responsible for the entire function of labour supply and regulation'. 'The result might ultimately be that collective contracts for specified jobs became the normal method, the union allocating labour and settling conditions, including the division of the contract price', he explained. Milne-Bailey recommended the creation of joint industrial councils, works councils and the like, covering every aspect of work and welfare in individual establishments but not interfering in the executive management of the company or the technical and commercial administration of the undertaking. Milne-Bailey suggested trade unions should secure industrial representation on the boards of state-owned companies when they wanted it, although he accepted they should seek no more than a minority stake in such a structure. His aim was to see a decentralisation of power and decision-making to the trade unions. 'It is not be the ruthless forcing through of legislation and the machine-gun fire of "Orders in Council" that democratic institutions can be truly reformed but rather by the devolution and splitting-up of authority.'

Milne-Bailey rejected fashionable notions of the time such as unelected chambers of functional interests like those to be found in Mussolini's Italy. Final responsibility for public policy must always lie in the last resort with elected governments through parliament elected by citizens and not by economic or other special interests. The most he envisaged in a move to corporatism was the creation of a network of

consultative bodies involving the trade unions who could give expert advice from their own special knowledge and experience. This would mean the formation of a National Economic Council to represent the country's main industrial and commercial interests, including the trade union movement. Such a body would enable parliament to be made 'continuously aware of the views and criticisms of the chief economic institutions'. As Milne-Bailey wrote:

Either at the request of the government or on its own initiative the Council could advise on problems as they arose, propose legislation for the consideration of Parliament, criticise measures under discussion and carry on continuous investigation into economic questions generally. The trade unions, being adequately represented on this body, would feel that they were participating in the work of government in a valuable, creative way and not merely in a negative fashion, at the points where their special experience was of most use.

His proposed Council would also be given certain administrative and regulatory functions to relieve the ordinary machinery of government of a good deal of its work. Milne-Bailey envisaged the development of a range of functionalist associations that were semi-autonomous from the state with specific functions that did not usurp parliamentary democracy. The TUC general council would be recognised as 'the authoritative body to advise on behalf of organised labour'.

As the area of interest and expert knowledge narrows, the more specialised institutions will be the appropriate advisory bodies. The trade union organisations then, will be neither agents of the state nor entirely outside bodies playing a critical and hostile role. They will remain autonomous institutions within the general framework described but with functions that link them to the state in a consultative and constructive way.

As the country's major industries were transformed into public services, the trade union movement would assume new functions within each industry. In Milne-Bailey's opinion the trade unions had passed through a period of the state's open hostility into a period of 'puzzled and fearful toleration'.

The innate strength of the movement has defied suppression and won an unwilling recognition but it has not established a positive status

and constructive functions. Industrial conflict has become a menace to the state but no effective steps have been taken to resolve the clash by finding an agreed basis on which trade unionism can fit into the economic life and institutions of the community without sacrificing its independence and freedom.

In the 1930s the unions should be part of a democratic process to impose a check upon the tyranny of would-be dictatorships and compel a decentralisation of powers. There is little doubt that Milne-Bailey's analysis of modern trade unionism was shared by Citrine, even if it was not one that was welcome to the government.

Any closer relationship between the TUC and the National government, however, remained problematic. In 1935 Citrine and Arthur Pugh were offered knighthoods by MacDonald which they accepted, a move that incensed many in the TUC. Citrine faced personal censure at Congress that year for agreeing to such an honour from 'the hands of a government which is not established in the interests of the workers'.<sup>88</sup> Citrine defended himself vigorously in a heated debate at Congress but nearly a third of the trade union block votes went against him, indicating an undercurrent of unease that went well beyond the core of the trade union left. But Citrine was unrepentant about taking the honour. As he explained in his memoirs:

Through us our movement had been proclaimed, both by King and government as one whose members were citizens deserving of one of the highest honours that the state could convey. How could this fail to affect the minds of the thousands who know little about trade unionism and to enhance its status and privilege?<sup>89</sup>

The knighthoods awarded to Citrine and Pugh reflected a growing readiness by the National government to at least provide some recognition to the TUC. This was also apparent in 1935 when Baldwin sought out Citrine's views on disarmament. It happened again during the 1936 abdication crisis Citrine and his wife were invited to Chequers for the weekend by the prime minister, keen to hear the attitude of the TUC on the delicate matter of the relationship between King Edward VIII and Mrs Simpson. Official approval for Citrine himself could also be seen in his appointment by colonial secretary Malcolm MacDonald to a Royal Commission established in 1938 to investigate social and economic conditions in the West Indies. This followed Citrine's suggestion that an advisory committee should be established by the government jointly

between the Ministry of Labour and the Colonial Office to include the TUC. Public socialising by Downing Street was less in evidence with the TUC when Neville Chamberlain became prime minister in November 1937. 'He appeared at that time to be utterly devoid of human sentiment. Like Poo Bah in the Mikado he seemed to have been born sneering',<sup>90</sup> Citrine recollected. However, he also had to admit that of all prime ministers he had to deal with, Chamberlain turned out to be the 'frankest'. Citrine established an informal and private understanding with the prime minister which helped him to establish his authority on foreign affairs on the National Council of Labour, although it never turned him into an appeaser.

On domestic affairs the TUC made only modest progress during the 1930s in establishing any kind of influence or pressure on the government. At no stage during the period did the TUC manage to convince the Treasury to deal more effectively with unemployment in the depressed regions. However, union leaders themselves were to have less than a glorious record on that issue. For the most part, the TUC remained rigidly on the defensive, anxious to protect the unemployment benefit system from government attack and oppose the introduction of a divisive means test for those without work but unable or unwilling to indicate ways to solve the problem. At times the TUC seemed more energetic in resisting rank and file protests than pressing alternative strategies on government ministers. In 1932 Congress even refused to admit a deputation of unemployed workers into its proceedings. It was to remain hostile to the organised hunger marches and suspicious that the protests were merely front organisations for Communists and other left-wing militants. The TUC's doubts about popular agitation were not entirely without foundation. Citrine was suspicious of those who called on the trade unions to challenge the government by direct industrial action over the unemployment issue. At the 1936 Congress he confronted the left's arguments head-on by opposing an unemployment march to London. It may not have been a popular case to expound but Citrine made it all the same. As he told delegates:

When you have brought some thousands of men at very considerable expense down to London you have shot your bolt ... at the end of it what is there? There has been march after march in the post-war period on the House of Commons and at the moment of speaking I cannot recall any considerable impression that has been made upon the House by that sort of demonstration. I may be wrong but I do not recollect it. If others do, they have a better memory than I have. We

decided we must confine our activities to what might be called the agitational aspect of the question. We decided as citizens, as politicians, as trade unionists, we would raise our voice wherever we could against the regulations and try to convert the general public to our point of view. That, in the long run, will be the soundest course. If we cannot by reason and by argument, convince the people of this country that the unemployment regulations are inequitable and that they mean misery and poverty for hundreds of thousands of our people, we can never expect their backing if we try to force Parliament by extra-constitutional means.<sup>91</sup>

In fact, the TUC with other organisations made some headway in convincing the government to reform its harsh administration of unemployment assistance but Citrine was surprisingly reticent in his memoirs over the TUC's unimpressive record over the unemployment issue.

But after 1936 the TUC began to stage a significant recovery. Trade union membership began to grow again, partly helped by the TUC's own emphasis on recruitment campaigns. This was not always appreciated by affiliate unions. Citrine wanted the TUC to help organise a drive for unionisation among women as well as service workers in London's outer suburbs, but this was turned down by the unions. However, the TUC focused activities on encouraging union organisation among nurses, young workers, domestic servants and white-collar staff, linked to efforts to secure protective legislation for them. The TUC's Youth Charter called for the introduction of a 40-hour working week, minimum wage rates for 14–16-year-olds, provision of training facilities for the young and the abolition of apprenticeship premiums and fee-charging agencies. The TUC also mobilised action in support of statutory holidays for workers.

In September 1938 the TUC celebrated its 70th birthday. Citrine took that opportunity to assess how far the organisation had changed during his period as general secretary. 'The tendency nowadays is for unions to look more and more to the TUC for guidance and help, not only in matters of major trade union policy, but in many of the matters which are more particularly of domestic concern to individual unions', he claimed. Citrine believed the General Strike, like the Great War, had shown the trade unions the 'necessity for unity of command'. But he went on to deny that the general council enjoyed any powers in excess of anything with which the TUC affiliate unions had endowed it. As Citrine explained:

The TUC exercises and can only exercise only such authority as the unions are ready voluntarily to delegate to it. This, in turn, is conditioned by the depth of conviction which they may have that the authority already vested in Congress has been wisely used. Any attempt by the general council to usurp an authority which has not been freely conceded, would be fatal to the continuance of the trend which is steadily developing to make the general council a really effective general staff for trade unionism. The general council is unlikely to try to usurp any powers which have not been willingly and consciously conceded to it by the affiliated unions and thus impede and frustrate the steady development which will one day make the general council a really authoritative general staff.<sup>92</sup>

Citrine would have liked to see the creation of a TUC general council that could respond more swiftly to political, economic and social events. He insisted it was not always possible to have consultations in the extended manner the TUC rules provided for.

Someone has to take responsibility for making decisions, and in the nature of things on matters of broad policy, the general council of the TUC must assume this duty. It is a natural corollary of this that the general council must be able to gain access to the essential facts and data and must be supplied with the most accurate information upon which to base its decisions.

He pointed to the growth of industry-wide collective bargaining and the widening and broadening of arbitration, conciliation and dispute settling machinery. This trend required trade unions to grow more professional with the appointment of specialist officers able to argue effectively before joint industrial councils, conciliation boards, industrial courts, senior civil servants and ministers. Citrine believed the older generation of union officials, who had lacked much formal education, were limited in what they could achieve. But now the trade unions had at their disposal 'people whose educational qualities, cultural background and trained minds were equal to the best which employers and governments could command'. This did not mean, he hastened to add, that a university education was a substitute for 'those natural qualities of initiative, resourcefulness, common-sense and other characteristics which are summed up in the word personality'.

Citrine was keen to emphasise in 1938 how much the individual trade unions were equipping themselves for the new world with large admin-

istrative offices and modern techniques of management. 'Many of us have known at some time or other in our younger days the general secretary of a union who was doing the work of an office boy in opening envelopes and licking stamps', he recalled.

There are very few general secretaries today who can afford the time to indulge in these hobbies. Go to a modern, well-equipped trade union office and you may easily imagine you are in one of the most efficient commercial offices in the kingdom. Internal telephones, dictaphones, buzzers, synchronised clocks, noiseless typewriters, electric duplicating machines; all these meet the eye.

One of Citrine's achievements was to encourage such modernisation, not merely as an end in itself but as a necessary means to enhance the role of trade unions in the eyes of those they had to deal with in government departments and company boardrooms. As he explained:

Many a government official or leading industrialist has visited a trade union office for the first time in a slightly supercilious mood but has gone away rather surprised and chastened. The absence of unnecessary noise and bustle, the efficiency of the staff, the arrangement of the offices, impress him. And this is good psychology because we are rather apt to judge on first impressions. Anything which gives the impression that the trade union movement is old-fashioned or inefficient is detrimental to the interests of the workers as a whole.

In 1938 Citrine claimed the trade unions were 'more powerful and influential than at any other period of their history' because they had proved they could adapt to new conditions. He envisaged them becoming not only more effective collective bargainers on pay and benefits but also securing greater influence 'in the problems of industrial management and the actual conduct of industry itself'. 'Gradually the trade union movement is embracing within itself the technicians, administrative and supervisory workers as well as the craftsmen and manual labourers. Sooner or later the democratic control of industries will come within the realm of practicality.'

On the outbreak of war the TUC under Citrine had clearly grown in its national influence and importance since his election as general secretary. Its own report on its activities during the first six months of 1939 revealed its close involvement in the rearmament programme, the making of air raid precautions and the introduction of national military

service. The TUC's position was undoubtedly helped by the impressive expansion which was then taking place in trade union membership. Between September 1937 and September 1938 TUC net affiliated membership increased by half a million. The TUC indicated this improvement was due partly to 'the growing appreciation by every section of the community of the valuable part which a well-organised, democratically-controlled trade union movement can play in national affairs', as well as the spread of a more favourable image of trade unionism through modern techniques of propaganda and publicity.<sup>93</sup> But the TUC was also concerned to emphasise the importance of recruitment in trade union expansion. 'From first to last we have to organise, organise, organise', declared its report. The TUC offered assistance in developing demarcation agreements between affiliate unions to avoid destructive competition and it initiated trade union recognition agreements.

But the TUC's power and influence continued to be severely limited by what its affiliate members were prepared to tolerate. Citrine tried by stealth to acquire greater centralising control but he was always well aware of the restraints imposed upon him by the structure of trade unionism. This did not, however, mean that he could not lead. The passing of the years had enhanced his own personal authority on the general council. But the TUC remained much more of an 'ordinary pressure group' than a fully-fledged Estate of the Realm. This was mainly because governments between the wars did not envisage a dynamic role for either the TUC or employer associations. The Ministry of Labour's purpose was 'not to transform national organisations into governing bodies but individual industries into self-governing entities over which government could judiciously watch in order to safeguard the public interest'.<sup>94</sup> There was little enthusiasm for the kind of responsible public policy unionism envisaged by Citrine and Milne-Bailey. This is why Bevin was exaggerating when he claimed in his 1937 Congress presidential address that the TUC had become 'virtually an integral part of the state and its views and voice upon every subject, both international and domestic, is heard and heeded'.<sup>95</sup>

The Chamberlain government declared war on Nazi Germany on Sunday 3 September 1939 as delegates gathered in Bridlington for the TUC's annual Congress. It was decided to confine proceedings to two days. Citrine spoke with a passion and authority of the coming conflict. He told his audience in particular of what the war would mean for the working class:

I remember the period of 1914–1918 and the glowing promises held out. I would be a traitor to myself if I enunciated phrases of that kind. I believe the working class in this as in every other country, will attain such a measure of success in the prosecution of its ideals, as it is powerful enough and determined enough to work and fight for. I make no promise beyond this. If this movement of ours is solid and united, we may emerge from this great struggle a finer people, a better people, a people who can shake the hands of other nations with mutual confidence and hope, that this terrible holocaust into which we have been plunged will be a thing of the past, never to be repeated. No one can foresee the destiny of nations. No one can predict at the outset of a conflict what may emerge. Dark and evil forces may show themselves in this period. But it is for us to keep our eyes fixed firmly on the goal which Labour has always had before it and to ensure that when finally Nazism has been defeated, when the power of the aggressors has been crushed, we emerge as a Movement with better prospects and greater power than we have ever known previously.<sup>96</sup>

With only two dissenting voices Congress delegates voted overwhelmingly to back the declaration of war against Nazi Germany. Citrine and the TUC had been vindicated by the turn of events. Since February 1933 Citrine had consistently warned of the dangers of Nazism. The man and the institution he served were as one. As Congress delegates dispersed from Bridlington in that first week of the war it was to be the start of what turned out to be the Labour Movement's finest hour in the twentieth century. Citrine deserves to be remembered as a man who played a crucial role in preparing the TUC for the testing times ahead. Under the anvil of war, Citrine's TUC was to come into its own.