

CHAPTER I

THE NEW UNIONISM

THE rapid rise of the unions in the clothing industry is dramatic in itself. The workers who compose them, largely of foreign birth, were for many years notoriously exploited. Their sufferings from overcrowding in the tenements, from occupational diseases, from underpayment, overwork, and seasonal unemployment, formed a favorite theme for the investigator, the proponent of welfare legislation, the social worker. Charity and the law were invoked again and again, without noticeable effect. The periodic revolts of the toilers themselves, spontaneous and well-nigh unorganized, arose with the returning seasons, and spent themselves without permanent gain like furious waves which fall and withdraw again into the sea. For these unfortunate city children there seemed to be no hope. Then came a sudden and unexpected victory. The unions began to flourish. Almost within ten years the clothing workers have come out of the sweatshops and advanced to a leading position in American organized labor.

It is not for their material victories, however, that these unions are worthy of extended study. Other

unions also have won good wages and reasonable hours. The needle-trades organizations are typical, not so much of the general labor movement in the United States at the moment, as of aspirations and tendencies which are rapidly gaining ground. It is their philosophy, their methods, their aims beyond wages and hours, their remarkable educational program, which give them a somewhat peculiar significance. They embody what seems to be a new sort of unionism.

As Sidney and Beatrice Webb have pointed out in their "History of Trade Unionism" there have been many revivals in the labor movement to which the term "new unionism" has been applied. As long ago as 1830 the London *Times* was much agitated by a project to form "one big union" of all crafts throughout the nation, and held up *the Trades Union* as a bogey with which to frighten its readers. At that time the innovators favored associations using purely economic action on an ever-widening scale, as opposed to the old-fashioned friendly and benefit societies. In 1842, after chartism had spent its force and the unions had been weakened by frequent industrial depressions, a new unionism arose whose aim was to build cautiously and moderately an enduring structure, with a sounder financial stability. The classic example of new unionism in England, however, was the movement resulting from the dock strike of 1889. For many years organization had been almost the exclusive prerogative of the skilled craftsmen, the "aristocracy of labor." Now came a

great and successful strike of the unskilled. Socialist influence showed strongly in the agitation. It was class-conscious, and vaguely revolutionary in aim. The unions were characterized by the absence of benefit funds or any of the vested interests which tend to make labor conservative. They were not exclusive, and were thought of chiefly as instruments of economic warfare. At the same time they welcomed state interference in the form of laws regulating everything except the hours of labor, and looked forward to the time when the workers, as voters, should be the predominant power in the state. Since 1889 the new unionism has been a term in constant use in England; although its precise meaning has varied with almost every change in the aspiration of the more aggressive and radical wing of the labor movement.

The new unionism was revived in 1911, when another great strike broke out in the port of London. It began with the National Union of Sailors and Firemen, and soon spread to the dockers, the stevedores, the gasworkers, the carmen, the coal porters, the tug enginemen, the grain porters and others. It is estimated that over 100,000 men took part in a parade which aroused the whole city. In spite of the port authorities, this strike was in large measure successful; but the chief of its results was the formation of the National Transport Workers' Federation, an organization of the numerous unions concerned, for the purpose of future industrial action. It is this powerful and radical union which has since

joined with the National Union of Railwaymen and the Miners' Federation in the celebrated "Triple Alliance," an inter-industrial body which is probably at once the strongest and most intelligently aggressive organization of labor in the world. With one hand it supports the far-reaching program of the British Labor Party, while with the other it threatens direct economic action for the consummation of national ownership and democratic management of the mines and railways. In maturity, therefore, British new unionism has assumed a well defined philosophy and method. It believes in the fullest kind of industrial and inter-industrial organization for economic pressure. It believes in independent political organization for the use of the franchise. Its goal is a socialized society, operating very much in the manner advocated by G. D. H. Cole and the other proponents of national guilds, if we can judge by the programs of the miners.

In America, too, we have heard the term before. Not many years ago it was applied to the Industrial Workers of the World. The characteristics of this organization have been obscured in the public mind by the propaganda of its enemies, who have succeeded in identifying it with bloody revolt and wanton destruction of property. It arose, however, in much the same spirit as the new unions in England. It was a revolt against the narrow and conservative craft spirit of many of the older unions, it appealed mainly to the unskilled and hitherto unorganized, and it called for a recon-

structed society in which the workers, organized by industries, would control production.

The I. W. W. developed along a different line, however, from that taken by the British movement stimulated by Tom Mann and other syndicalists. In Britain, the syndicalists soon gave up the plan of trying to form new industrial unions to compete with the organizations of labor already existing, but rather carried on an agitation for the federation and amalgamation of the old craft and trade bodies. In America the attempt to set up a separate labor movement continued. In England pure syndicalism was abandoned for the use of political action, and for the working out of an adaptation to collectivist theory which is now represented by the guild movement. In America, no compromise with the socialists was attempted by the I. W. W., except in the smaller and less influential Detroit wing. In England, the conscious development of ca' canny, or slacking on the job, did not long continue. In America, the I. W. W. tried to perfect the weapon of the short strike and the strike on the job or the "conscientious withdrawal of efficiency." With the exception of the Detroit group, the American I. W. W. stood for decentralization, and preferred spontaneous guerilla warfare to the building of a strong organization which, because it had something to lose, might become conservative. Perhaps on account of these policies, the I. W. W. has never secured the adherence of many workers for long, save the casual agricultural and forest labor of the West. Its power has

always been overestimated by those who have been afraid of it, and it does not now, if it ever did, offer any such promise as the new unionism in England.

Robert F. Hoxie, in his "Trade Unionism in the United States," contends that unions are not of one or two kinds simply, but assume many forms, according to the function for which they exist. Among these forms he has identified four basic types, to which in some degree all unions in the United States have approximated. *Business unionism*, in this classification, is the kind formed to serve the material interests of its members within the existing industrial structure; its main object is to practice collective bargaining. *Uplift unionism* is characterized by broad humanitarian purposes; its main methods are friendly benefits and mutual insurance; it was prominent during the early stages of union history and was roughly typified during the latter half of the nineteenth century by the Knights of Labor. *Revolutionary unionism* aims to prepare for a new social and industrial order; it is divided into two subsidiary types—socialistic, which lays more emphasis on political action, and quasi-anarchistic, which eschews political action and looks forward to abolishing entirely the state as we know it. The I. W. W. may be taken as an example of the latter. *Predatory unionism* has no large aspirations, but preys on the employer through secret and illegal methods such as blackmail and bribery, sometimes for the benefit of the members, sometimes for the

benefit of the dishonest union official. This type flourished twenty years ago in the United States, but has now almost disappeared.

To the present writers it seems that this classification is not wholly illuminating, because it is not based on a sufficiently dynamic conception of the labor movement. The types are not, after all, quite coordinate. In the light of the intensification of the industrial conflict which takes place with the growth of the capitalist order, neither uplift unionism nor predatory unionism seem fundamental enough types to set beside business unionism and revolutionary unionism. At bottom the labor movement is one, because it represents a protest, unconscious or conscious, against the status of the wage-worker. Whatever the avowed purpose and policies of the union under consideration, its activities are bound to affect the structure of society to a greater or less degree. Its particular creed and method are dependent on a variety of circumstances. Unions holding to creeds and methods which become unsuited to the advancement of labor tend to disappear as the environment alters. As we have seen, the most revolutionary unions employ collective bargaining; the characteristics of uplift unionism are displayed sometimes by business unions and sometimes by socialist unions; predatory unionism is practiced, if at all, by business unions corrupted by boss politics, or by little cliques in revolutionary unions driven underground through suppression.

The most significant distinction, in our opinion, is

that between unions which are unconscious that their efforts tend toward a new social order and so adapt their strategy solely to the immediate situation, and unions which are conscious of their desire for a new order, and so base their strategy on more fundamental considerations. These two types in turn have many variants, but the nature of every variation bears the impress of the primary type. It is the former type, roughly corresponding with Professor Hoxie's "business unionism" which we have chosen to call the "old unionism," and the latter which we have called "the new unionism." G. D. H. Cole has given this distinction a phrasing which brings out its meaning in an objective way. In "The World of Labor" he writes, "Regarded merely as instruments of collective wage-bargaining, the unions are the most powerful weapon in the hands of labor; if they are in addition the germs of the future organization of industry as a whole, their importance becomes at once immeasurably greater."

In spite of the decline of the I. W. W., the new unionism in other forms is by no means waning in the United States. Various kinds of old unions in the course of their natural development are being forced to approach it by one route or another. The conservative Railway Brotherhoods have little by little been obliged to cooperate with unions of the unskilled; the railway "system federation" is a unit through which craft action has been superseded by industrial action; and the enunciation of the Plumb plan is a long step towards the acknowledgment of

the need for a new economic order which can be attained not through collective bargaining but only through combined political and economic action. The United Mine Workers have long been a union industrial in form and practicing industrial rather than craft strikes; socialist influence has been strong within the union, though not dominant in its government. The time is rapidly approaching, as even its conservative officials admit, when no further gains of importance can be made for the members without pressing actively for the nationalization of the mines, a measure already endorsed several times by the convention. Similar tendencies can be observed everywhere in the conservative American Federation of Labor. Thus does the old unionism merge into the new, by force of sheer economic and social pressure.

No strong and important group of unions in the United States, however, has whole-heartedly accepted the new unionism and consciously modeled structure and strategy accordingly, except the unions in the clothing industry. For this reason they may be considered the nearest approach to the pure type now existing in America. They sprang into power about the time of the port strike of 1911 in London, and the course of their development has been much closer to that of the new unions in England than to that of the I. W. W. They arose from mass movements of the unskilled and semi-skilled, carrying the skilled along with them. They have built up a strong and highly centralized industrial structure, but one

sensitive at the same time to the will of the rank and file. They skilfully use collective bargaining, not primarily as a means of gaining material concessions, but as a means of solidifying the workers and retaining victories that will make possible further progress along the main highway. While prepared for the most extended economic action, they at the same time take an active part in independent political action. They do not preach sabotage or ca' canny, but on the contrary assist in every sound project that may improve the industrial machine and increase productivity. Upon the cultural aspects of the labor movement—the press, education, and art—they lay great stress. In short, their whole tendency is in the direction of training the workers for assuming control of production, and of accepting the social and economic responsibility which such control involves.

However different in theory and method, all forms of "new unionism" have had one trait in common. They have always come into being during a period in which the labor movement as a whole seemed to have exhausted its resources and was felt to be in danger of decline if not of destruction. They have all represented a divergence from the established practice, and, more significant than that, all have brought to the movement a new breadth of sympathy and vision, a new ideal, and a new hope. An exposition of the new unionism as exemplified by the clothing workers of America may give further light to those who have been stirred by the expressed

aspirations of British labor and by the present flux and unrest in the American labor movement, and in particular to those who have seen great promise in the ideal of national guilds.