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HISTORY OF TRADE UNIONISM (1833-1839)

ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
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DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMICS

BY

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The significance of the trade unionism of this period is not its contribution to structure or policy of subsequent trade unionism in general, but the circumstances of its appearance. Trade unionism is a nineteenth-century phenomenon, and the common belief is that it is peculiarly an expression of the machine technology that had its rise in the same century. The machine technology eliminated the handicraftsman of yore as an independent producer and left but one way open to him to gain a livelihood--work. In self-defense the handicraftsmen, now workers, sought protection in union. This is a special elaboration of a wider belief first suggested by Morgan and made popular by Marx, that the tools used in making a livelihood on the whole determine the synchronous social structure in its various ramifications. The trade unionism here under consideration refutes this position in that it shows the elimination of the handicraftsman in America and the correlated rise of unionism some thirty to fifty years before the rise of the machine technology.
The peculiar system of industry under which the trade unions of the 30's rose can be designated as the merchant-capitalist system. In Europe this system would be known as the domestic system, a designation which, however, fails to emphasize the chief point of difference between this system and the system which followed and preceded it. The system which followed it is, of course, the factory system, and that which preceded it is the handicraft system. The distinguishing features of the factory system are mechanical power, concentration of related processes under a single roof, unskilled labor, mass production, railway transportation, national and world markets, credit relations. The distinguishing features of the handicraft system were not so much power as manual dexterity combined with simple hand tools, well defined crafts carried on in the home shops of individual craftsmen, highway transportation, custom-order production for a neighborhood clientele, little or no credit. The merchant-capitalist system partook of the characteristics of both systems and fitted somewhere between them. The manual dexterity of the handicraftsman in this system became repetitive hand labor combined with the same old hand tools for most persons. Such skill as remained was concentrated in the hands of specialists. As mechanical power was still generally unknown, the workers carried on their repetitive labor in their homes with the assistance of women and
children. The means of transportation were natural and canalized waterways. The market was interlocal and in some instances national in scope, with the result that business instead of being retail in character, as in the case of the factory system. The wholesale business involved credit operations. This feature, together with the segregation of the skilled from the unskilled workers, made the system capitalistic, though mercantile rather than toll. The inference is that as the means of communication improved, in this case from highways to waterways, the business men began to reach out for trade beyond their immediate communities. This involved them in large-scale operations with security on one hand from the competition of those who were not financially able to do business on a similar scale, and all the advantages of large-scale operations on the other. The eliminated became contractors or workers for those who remained. Both, together, had to meet the competition of the wider area the merchant-capitalist could reach, together with the competition of the unskilled labor that could now be used in the differentiated processes. The workers, of course, felt the change more keenly than did the contractors, for the reduced rates of the contractor were simply passed on to the workers in reduced wages. The unskilled labor used was chiefly rural families, urban housewives and children, and prisoners. Indeed, it is at this time that the fundamental change in prison adminis-
istration occurred, from the mediaval practice of torturing the prisoners to making them useful.

While the central fact in the growth of the trade unions of the thirties was the merchant-capitalist system, an upheaval in prices was the immediate cause of its rise. Andrew Jackson, who had always looked upon the United States Bank as a huge monopoly and as his political enemy, succeeded in crushing it in 1833. The state banks, which had always felt its hampering influence, now began to expand in numbers and in volume of business. From 1834 to 1837, they expanded their number by 194. The New England and Middle Atlantic state banks increased their issues by about 50 per cent during the same time, while the Western and South Atlantic states increased theirs by 100 to 150 per cent respectively. Prices, in some instances, more than doubled. Flour in New York, which was $5 a barrel in 1834, rose to $7 in July, 1835, $8 in April, 1836 and $12 in March, 1837; mess pork, which was $13 to $14 in 1834, rose to $30 in October, 1836; rice in the same period advanced from $2.24 to $4; molasses from 28 cents to 48 cents; sheeting from $8.50 to $12; wool from 30 cents to 50 cents. City lots went up almost in the same ratio as foodstuffs. The assessed value of real estate in New York City was $114,124,566 in 1833 and $253,201,191 in 1836. When the increased cost of living became sufficiently burdensome, the workers apparent-
ly began to analyze the entire new situation in which they found themselves, and organized. By 1836 there were 53 local trade unions or societies, as they were then called, in Philadelphia, 52 in New York, 23 in Baltimore, 16 in Boston, and 16 in Newark. Some locals appeared even in Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, and St. Louis.

After a sufficient number of locals appeared, quite the expected followed: city centrals or trades' unions were organized. The first General Trades' Union came in New York in 1833, even before any considerable increase in prices. Baltimore and Philadelphia followed in the same year. Boston followed in 1834; new Brunswick, Newark, Albany, Troy, Schenectady in 1835; and Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, and Louisville in 1836. All sorts of panaceas and politics were expressly excluded from the concern of these organizations. In Philadelphia the Union went so far as to embody in its constitution a clause providing that "no Party, political or religious questions shall at any time be agitated in, or acted upon by this union."

By expressed word or implication these organizations centered their attention on arbitration, financial aid to member societies on strike, and the boycott in similar circumstances. These, essentially, have been the functions of the city centrals ever since.

The militant side of the unionism of this period is shown by the strikes recorded. Twelve strikes were
found in 1833, 12 in 1834, 67 in 1835, 73 in 1836, and 9 in 1837. The strikes of 1835 were overwhelmingly for a ten-hour day and those of 1836 for higher wages. Prior to this time the normal work day was from sunrise to sunset, but under the advance of industrialism of the time a ten-hour day was demanded. The pressure of work was often complained of, but the chief argument made was that of citizenship. Suffrage had recently been made universal for male citizens by the repeal of the property qualification. The workers argued that they could not exercise their rights intelligently without sufficient leisure. Except in New York, where the ten-hour day had been won in the late twenties, reduced hours were demanded along the entire coast. In Philadelphia the demand developed into something of a general strike, including even public employees. The employers here and elsewhere with some exceptions yielded so generally that the ten-hour day became well-nigh universal for city mechanics. In 1840 President Van Buren issued the famous executive order establishing the ten-hour day on all government works. Only the factory workers continued to work the longer day.

Very much as today, the unions had their counterpart in employers' associations. The associations were organized along trade lines, and some efforts were made to form inter-trade associations. The blacklist and the courts were their common weapons. The master tailors of
New York declared that they would "not receive into their employ any man who is a member of the 'Union Trade Society of Journeymen Tailors in the City of New York'." Court actions are found in this period against the Thompsonville carpet weavers, Geneva shoemakers, New York tailors, and Boston cordwainers.

In matters of immediate concern such as wages and hours, the local societies and trades' unions proved effective weapons. But in wider issues that ultimately affected these, correspondingly wider organizations were necessary. There were the public domain, prison labor, woman and child labor, education in general, the apprenticeship system, and inter-community competition. The disintegration of the trades at this time brought in its train a disintegration of the apprenticeship system, while the relatively easier means of communication made labor as well as commodities mobile. The depression of wages in one community soon told elsewhere. National craft unions were organized to provide protection here. A general federation of unions, based mainly on city centrals, was organized to handle the other issues.

This entire structure, almost a replica of the present-day unionism, collapsed when the panic of 1837 descended. New straws, such as politics, education, cooperation, were grasped for the time being; not until thirty years later was there a recrudescence of such a movement as this.