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FOREWORD

We are delighted to be publishing once again work by someone who is not a member of the Communist Party History Group; we hope to receive more such manuscripts, Mr. Challinor challenges the interpretations of a key period in trade union history which have been made by authors of very different viewpoints. His study should interest active trade unionists as well as historians of the Labour Movement, for he is concerned with the origins of 'the tension between the leadership and the rank-and-file'. At a time when the history of the working-class movement has achieved complete academic respectability, it is important that the unorthodox view should be published.

ALEXANDER MACDONALD AND THE MINERS by Raymond Challinor

PART ONE.

MINERS' TRADE UNIONISM 1862-5

In the 1860's, the miners faced the problem of how to build a national organisation- There existed, at the time, a number of local and county unions,- Periodically; they would meet, discuss common problems, and endeavour to formulate a common policy. But usually they failed. The powerful pull of local separatism condemned them to impotence. Yet, if somehow unity was to be achieved, it raised the questions: In what way? For what purpose? Most people possessing confused and conflicting conceptions, were unable to give a clear answer. It took the activities and arguments of almost 30 years before the issue was finally resolved, with the formation of the Miners' Federation in 1889.

The British Miners' Benefit Society

The first milestone along this lengthy and tortuous road was the British Miners' Benefit Society, This was not so much a trade union as an attempt, by performing some of the functions customarily associated with trade unions, to render the formation of an organisation on a specifically working class basis unnecessary. The Society's three declared aims were (I) to promote the application of science to mining, a means of lessening accidents and improving efficiency; (II) to improve the standard of education, thereby giving miners enlightenment, a spur to self-betterment that might make them strive to lessen the squalor and degradation for which mining communities were notorious; and (III) to provide an insurance scheme so that the provident could take precautions against possible injury and death. The Society's sponsors could not

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envisage any responsible person, whether employer or workman, disagreeing with its worthy aims. Led by members of the aristocracy, it expected to be regarded as a noble example of philanthropy. Besides improving the miners' lot, it was intended to foster social and industrial harmony.

The rules of the British Miners' Benefit Society were first published in November 1862. * Control of the Society was to be in the hands of the Council, a body selected entirely from honorary members, who paid 10 shillings annually or £5 for life membership. Rule 9 stipulated the Council would meet monthly, with a quorum of only three. Obviously, ordinary working miners would have no say in the running. So that it could never drift in the direction of industrial strife, command of the Council was securely placed in the hands of Lord Raynham, Lord Kingsdale, General Zaba and other distinguished persons. All this, it was thought, would have another advantage: led by people of such high standing, the miners, who were to be benefit members, could be confident their money would be safe. They could pay their 3.5d a week assured that in the event of injury, they would get 10d a day for six months or, if they were killed that their widows would get 4s a week for the rest of their lives.

The Society regarded itself as being superior to other schemes. Many local relief societies were actuarially unsound. Some were run by inexperienced and incompetent officials. Administrative costs tended to be high, and there were instances of officials absconding with the funds. Moreover, because of their small scale of operation, a sudden catastrophe, resulting in a large call on funds, often overstrained resources. When local societies went bankrupt, not only did it cause hardship but also created a climate of uncertainty that made workers reluctant to save. That highly esteemed virtue of thrift was consequently damaged,

With the constitution finalised, Lord Raynham and his entourage toured the coalfields to explain the advantages of his Society. He received an enthusiastic reception in South Staffs, the North-east and Lancashire, A typical meeting was that at Wigan on December 14, 1862. Miners journeyed from miles around to hear him. They started off from Chorley at five in the morning, led by a band that awoke the whole township, "almost every door was open, much resembling Brussels on the morning of the battle of Waterloo." **

The British Miner and General Newsman, November 22, 1862

** The British Miner, December 20 1862

In Wigan, the Mayor, who was also a coalowner, presided, while the town clerk and magistrates sat on the platform. In the audience were 15,000 colliers. They listened attentively to Lord Raynham when he denounced drinking and gambling as evil pastimes. They applauded when he pleaded for improved conditions. They all agreed with his lordship when he called for greater safety, not only for the miners' sake but to protect the owners' property.

The cordiality of the immediate response to his message did not prepare Lord Raynham for the hostility that was to follow. The Colliery Guardian, an influential trade journal, sneered at "the philanthropic lawyers, patriotic noblemen and such-like ornaments of society" wandering around the coalfields. * At best, they were well-meaning interlopers, meddling in an industry when they had no special knowledge. It was feared their enthusiasm would wane as quickly as it was awakened. Their departure might leave the British Miners' Benefit Society to develop into a fully fledged trade union. Some coalowners also objected because it competed with their own sickness and benefit clubs- These were means of lessening labour mobility, since a man would lose all the money he had contributed to the scheme if he left the particular colliery, as well as being a way of augmenting profits. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that miners were sometimes dismissed when they joined the British Miners' Benefit Society instead of remaining in their masters' clubs.

Objections on the same grounds came from the men. Just like the employers, workers had their own benefit clubs, which often functioned as trade unions. They viewed Lord Raynham's as a rival scheme, a competitor for members. In the North-east, where the Northumberland and Durham Permanent Benefit Society also started in 1862, its officials boycotted Lord Raynham's meetings. In Lancashire, diplomatic union leaders did appear on His Lordship's platform, paying lip-service to his scheme, but they kept the funds of their local societies securely under their own control. From bitter experience, Lord Raynham' learnt it was easier to get colliers to take their hands out of their pockets to clap than to pay 3.5d a week.

Relations between the British Miners' Benefit and local unions rapidly deteriorated. One of the Society's spokesmen declared, "if the concentration of the whole strength and resources of the miners of England under the most able, influential and economical management should happen, perchance, to deprive a few local agitators of their power of living off the labour of others, then it would not be a bad thing." ** Its advocates argued that the national

* Colliery Guardian. May 9, 1863

** The British Miner, December 27, 1862

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scheme would have benefits which transcended any a local society could provide, With three M.P.s as supporters - Lord Raynham, Col. Townley and Col. Stuart - the British Miners' Benefit could bring colliers' problems to the attention of the highest authorities in the land. It would thereby be able to secure improved safety regulations. Thus, the Society would combine prevention with cure; lessening the number of accidents while, at the same time, relieving victims of accidents that nevertheless did happen. Since this was something local societies could not accomplish they were contemptuously referred to as, "The Pitmen's Grave and Coffin Clubs".

But local unions insisted that they too were concerned with safety. To dispel misgivings on this score, many inserted a clause to this effect in their statement of aims. Moreover, against the pretensions of the British Miners' Benefit, they contended "that there cannot be better preventive measures taken by the London Council or by the seat of science than giving the miners power to choose their own inspectors out of themselves." * The local unions had intimate, day-to-day contact with colliers. At grass-roots level, they had the machinery to collect subscriptions which Lord Raynham's Society lacked. He discovered with chagrin that colliers were loath to remit monies to a far-distant and unknown organisation. This reluctance was strengthened by a feeling that the British Miners' Benefit was not their property. "They objected to the ship," a Durham miner explained- "because they could not have full command of it " **

The British Miners' Benefit never prospered. In March 1863, its secretary called for 5,000 members to get it on a secure footing. Whether it achieved this target or not, there can be no doubt that a Northumbrian leader was right in describing it as "a name without an existence." ***

"The British Miner" and its Editor

All this came as a bitter disappointment to John Towers, editor of "The British Miner". For he had hoped that the Society and the paper would jointly prosper. " They had the same outlook and the same problems. They both suffered from antagonism, bom of competition. In the case of "The British Miner", its rival was "The Beehive", a weekly journal after the same working class readership.

* The British Miner. January 31, 1863

** Ibid, January 24, 1863

*** Ibid, February 7, 1863

"The Beehive" devoted a long leading article to attacking "The British Miner" after it had published only one issue. In his first editorial, Towers had maintained that a natural harmony of interest existed between masters and men. Labour was dependent on capital. Hence, if there was a greater amount of capital, the volume of employment would also be greater. The capitalist's profits and the workman's wages increased proportionally. John Hales, for "The Beehive", disputed this view. In the past 50 years, he argued, the pace at which profits advanced far outstripped wages. He said Towers was wrong to condemn all strikes; many had been successful. Indeed, it was only through limiting the supply of labour, either by restricting entry to an occupation or by strikes, that workers' incomes could be advanced. Hales concluded by mentioning the dubious people, with lavish expense accounts, associated with "The British Miner". *

A month later, "The Beehive" made a second onslaught. It challenged Towers to say whether he thought the miners were getting a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. If so, Towers should say so. If not, he should say why his paper was doing nothing about it, "The Beehive" darkly hinted that its competitor was run by a paid stooge of the masters and favoured the industrial status quo. **

John Towers was certainly in a highly vulnerable position. He had never worked at a colliery. In these circumstances miners, who are generally a very clannish lot, would regard him with suspicion. "The Beehive"'s attacks merely served to confirm their misgivings, heightening Towers' sense of isolation and failure. In an editorial, on May 2, 1863, he expressed his despondency: "the Miner was established to protect the interests of the pitmen and miners of this country specially; but as they would not seem, generally, to desire an organ We resolve to devote ourselves, in future, to interests of the working class as a whole." ***

But Towers did not carry out his resolve. In the following few months the fortunes of "The British Miner" changed dramatically. Paradoxically, Towers' isolation from colliers created the conditions for his success.

* The British Miner, September 13, 1862. and The Beehive. October 11, 1862. The British Miner changes its name to Miners and Workmen's Advocate on June 13, 1863, and to Workmen's Advocate on June 17, 1865

** The Beehive. November 22, 1862

*** The British Miner. May 2, 1863

The need to secure readers and writers for his journal propelled him along a path he would not otherwise have taken. With so few contacts in the coalfields he could not afford to offend any of them. Everybody who sent in a contribution was sure that it would appear. So, gradually, pitmen began to see that "The British Miner" could become, for them, a means of expression. An impressive column of correspondence, averaging 50 letters a week by spring 1864, came from all parts of Britain, the authentic voice of the colliers, expressing their manifold grievances, many in angry and tortured tones. No attempt was made to edit or restrain correspondents. While Towers felt free to advance his own opinions in the editorial columns, the rest of the paper was written, almost entirely, by men with coal dust on their faces.

The transformation of "The British Miner" into being a genuine miners' journal was assisted by prevailing conditions. It coincided with an upswing in the coalfields with local unions being formed and discontent widespread.- Miners felt they needed a journal of their own. "The Beehive" could not fill this requirement. Its pages were open to all trades. For want of something better, "The British Miner" became the most widely read paper in mining communities,

John Towers versus Alexander MacDonald - two views of the New Union

It was through its correspondence columns that the proposal to form - or, rather re-form - a national organisation was initially mooted. In Lancashire; trade union activity had been expanding rapidly. The Wigan union first made itself viable, then helped build local unions in St. Helens, Worsley, Famworth and Kearsley. There was a greater membership and degree of cohesion than had existed in the county since the 1840s. Better organisation led to higher wages. Realising this, Lancashire miners thought even more benefits would accrue if they could achieve the same unity nationally as they had achieved locally. They had been sending collections to the men locked out in Scotland. So, through "The British Miner", they proposed that links between the Scottish and Lancashire miners should be put on a more lasting basis; that the colliers from other coalfields be encouraged to co-operate with them; and that their ultimate objective should be to call a general conference, * Immediately, this aroused discussion. A month later, in June 1863, the South Yorkshire Miners' Society proposed a national conference be held. As a preliminary, leaders addressed meetings on amalgamation in Yorkshire, Lancashire and other places. Letters on the subject regularly appeared in "The British Miner". And on November 9, 1863, delegates assembled at Leeds for the inaugural conference of the Miners' National Association.

* The British Miner, May 2, 1863

At the Leeds conference, in a confused way, two conflicting views on the role of the new organisation began to emerge. One school of thought harked back nostalgically to the 1840s. Then, the Miners' Association, led by men like Jude and W.P. Roberts, had been a powerful force throughout the land. It had strived to develop a centralised leadership, a high command to lead struggles for better pay and conditions. Its general stance had been one of open conflict with the owners. Significantly, most delegates at the Leeds conference thought they were merely reviving the old Miners' Association, not forming a fresh organisation. They continued to use the old name; only a dozen years later did a new title gain general acceptance. * The second school of thought, led by Alexander MacDonald, considered it imperative not to return to the 'forties but to learn lessons from them. The Miners' Association had been smashed by superior might. The same would occur in the 'sixties if they sought open confrontation. Indeed, MacDonald had journeyed to Leeds from Scotland, where the union had largely been destroyed in the lock out. ** "Therefore, said MacDonald; industrial disputes must be avoided. The full weight of union authority had got to be brought down on the side of preserving peace. Arbitration and conciliation should be used to settle differences. As an alternative way forward to the illusory one of strike action, MacDonald counterposed the need for improved legislation.

The two strategies necessarily involved differing tactics. If class war were to be fought, it ideally required high subscriptions, a pooling of resources, a large membership. If legislation were to be the objective, then membership; subscriptions and unity could be far less. More important was to acquire friends in Parliament. To do this, an appearance of ultra-respectability had to be cultivated. They had to disassociate themselves completely from the violent excesses to which miners were prone since these were liable to alienate public sympathy. Moreover, when legislation was the aim, it was easier and more convenient to have a small clique to speak on behalf of the membership, whose role, except for signing petitions and attending the occasional meeting, remained passive.

At the Leeds conference MacDonald won. He became President, and all the Association's national council were his supporters. To add to his success, the constitution was largely modelled along MacDonaldite lines. Yet, as so often happens, conference decisions are not the last word.

* R, Page Arnot, The Miners, Vol. 1, p. 45

** R, Page Arnot, The Scottish Miners, p. 46

John Towers, if anything, stood to the right of the union leaders. He opposed strikes (just as MacDonald did), but he also objected to trying to get fresh legislation. He argued that it was futile to get more Acts of Parliament when existing legislation, on such things as truck and checkweighman, was not being enforced. Formally, Towers' stance appeared to be ultra-conservative, In reality, the logic of events pushed him into a position where he constituted a serious challenge to MacDonald's policy of moderation.

The origin of their quarrel appears to have been personal. Towers did much of the preparatory work for the Leeds conference. He acted as secretary during the proceedings. Being an ambitious man, when it came to election of officers, he was not content with the secretaryship. He stood for president, and this seems to have been his undoing. MacDonald defeated him 44 votes to 3. Then, one of MacDonald's followers ousted Towers from the secretaryship by 25 votes to 4. Towers left Leeds with no standing in the organisation he had helped to create* But MacDonald's objections to Towers were not entirely personal. He disagreed with "The British Miners" policy of publishing all letters. These frequently attacked the coalowners or criticised union leaders; written in immoderate language, they were likely to lead to industrial strifes it was precisely this type of rank-and-file expression that MacDonald deemed to be the danger. He supported the much more restrained approach of "The Beehive" in preference to that of "The British Miner".

W.P. Roberts and Blaina

In January 1864, the quarrel reached new dimensions, as a result of a law case in South Wales, The workers at Blaina colliery felt aggrieved. They were not paid all their wages in coins of the realm. Moreover, they claimed they were being robbed: 30 to 35 cwts. of coal had to be hewn before the company paid them the wages for a ton,, A deputation visited the manager and asked, as they were entitled under the 1860 Act, for the right to appoint a checkweighman, The manager refused, and so the men were still more angry- They decided to have a one-day protest strike.- This led to sackings and arrests. in the middle of the night men were dragged from their beds; handcuffed, and taken 9 miles, through the snow, to Tredegar. There they were charged, under the Master and Servants Act, with breach of contract.

The South Wales local union approached W.F. Roberts to conduct the defence. in reply to the charge of Breach of contract, Roberts argued, first, that there was no contract; second, if there were a contract, when wages should have been paid in full; and third, that in the circumstances the men were justified in the course they took,. He placed great emphasis

on the owner's violation of the Truck Act and the Mines Regulation Act 1860: "I say, as a matter of law, that where the law gives protection to a contract, and one party refuses to grant that protection, the contract is broken." The presiding magistrate; however, ruled that the case was being tried under the Master and Servant Act; whether there were any other violations of this law was irrelevant to the matter at hand. But Roberts was undaunted. Time and time again, much to the anger of the Magistrate, he continued to bring up the issues of truck.

Roberts had many years experience of lighting such cases. His usual way was to indulge in a war of attrition, Large numbers of witnesses were called to make almost the same points* At Thornley, in 1843, in another case involving breach of contract, he was prepared to put 400 workmen in the witness-box. The advantage of this tactic is that; since owners discover prosecution involves wasting inordinate amounts of time and energy, they think carefully before they prosecute their workmen again. It also gives workers an opportunity to describe sufferings, elicit public sympathy, and use the court-room to expose the employers' iniquities,

In the Tredegar trial where the presiding magistrate was a friend and neighbour of the coalowner, Roberts realised he was in a hostile court. There were frequent angry scenes.* The magistrate accused him, on several occasions, of insulting the bench. Once he adjourned the case for, he said, self-protection. But then Roberts, in full fury, was a formidable foe. He told the court that "the present struggle was for the existence and continuation of that mighty domestic institution, the truck system. They called slavery in America 'the domestic Institution', and he heard the truck system had a similar title in South Wales,/' One of his witnesses, an orphan girl, Janet James, caused a sensation, when she said she had worked pushing coal-tubs around the pit-brow for more than two years:

"My wages have been 5s. 6d. and 6s. a week. During the whole time, I did not receive any money. I never received a farthing in money, but all the goods at the shop. The whole of my wages were swallowed up in shop bills for bread and tea, on which I lived". *

The truck shop held her responsible for her father's debts. Since she had no money, she had no prospect of repaying them.

After a four-day hearing, the magistrate found the accused guilty, and sentenced them to a day's imprisonments. As they had already spent a much greater time in prison, this meant immediate release. In triumph, they

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returned to Blaina. Roberts was the hero of the day,, He advised the union to go over to the offensive, to sue Messrs. Levick & Simpson for wrongful dismissal and also for Janet James' wages for the past two years. He told them that, not to go on with the case would be "the grossest folly you could possibly commits The combination of circumstances in the present truck cases is most favourable to your attacks" *

Undoubtedly, Roberts was correct. The revelations of Janet James' testimony aroused widespread indignation. Newspapers were loud in their criticism. Even the Lord Chancellor felt obliged to write to Roberts and ask him for a list of coalowners in South Wales who were both magistrates and broke the Truck Act. **

When the miners' national council met at Leeds in February they took a different view of the Blaina case. "The Council should be careful not to give encouragement to men to leave work without notice;" said one member. The general opinion was that the Blaina men had behaved illegally and with lack of cautions they did not want the Council associated with them in any way. Richard Mitchell, the secretary, wrote to the South Wales Union:

"The cast ought never to have been defended; it was one of those cases that cannot be defended successfully, because there is no defence. Two wrongs do not make a right; and if A violates the Truck Act, B is not justified in trampling the Master & Servants Act under his feet." ***

But John Towers, on the other hand, supported the South Wales miners completely, He thought they should fight to get their legal rights. When the Council refused assistance, "The Miners' and Workmen's Advocate" opened a public subscription. Concerts were held to raise money, street and public house collections made. W.P.Roberts published a pamphlet on the Blaina case at his own expense- It contained a transcript of the court proceedings. In a preface, Roberts explained what was at stake. He estimated Levick and Simpson's truck shop had 2,500 "customers" and gave the company a 9 per cent profit on wages - the equivalent of £10,000 a year.

* The Miners' & Workmen's Advocate, March 12, 1864

** Ibid., March 26, 1864

*** Ibid., February 20, 1864. The Lord Chancellor did nothing with the information supplied by Roberts. See Roberts testimony to Select Committee on Master & Servant Act (1866) Q1/11

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MacDonald's second ploy was to accuse Roberts of being motivated by monetary gain. He called him "a legal cormorant", "a greedy Manchester lawyer". This, too, was without foundation. Roberts had a genuine desire to help miners, even when it involved personal financial sacrifices. This is shown by his letter to the South Wales miners over the Tredegar trial: "I am myself perfectly willing to fight the case out for you, if you can find the money necessary for counsel's fees, court fees, journeys and witnesses. These will amount to from £70 to £100. As to myself, I require nothing. My reward will be the pleasure of serving you." *

MacDonald's third, and most important charge was that Roberts, through disregarding conferences and council decisions, was undermining the organisation. In reply, Roberts said he regarded MacDonald & Co. as unrepresentative. He openly preached rebellion against them: "Let these gentlemen be quick or I will jog them again. Public opinion is urging them on. Let them answer to the lash, or somebody will take the business out, of their hands." **

Roberts personified everything of the 1840s union that MacDonald detested. His advocacy of strikes; his furious denunciations of coalowners; his melodramatic court scenes; his Chartist background - all failed to blend with the image of respectability which MacDonald sedulously strived to cultivate - Roberts' appeal was always to the rank-and-file over the heads to the leadership. It was not only likely to lead to anarchy, thought MacDonald, but also disaster, He had to be stopped.

The New Union splits

The quarrel over W.P. Roberts and the Blaina case aggravated relationships within the union. Between the Leeds conference of November 1863 and the Manchester conference of November 1864, two rival camps emerged and the organisation split.

First move in this direction came at the national council meeting in February 1864. Besides refusing to support Roberts at the Tredegar trial, the MacDonaldites took steps to prevent him representing miners in other cases. Furthermore, Holmes (the treasurer) sought to get "The Beehive" adopted as the union's official organ. He said they could control what appeared in "The Beehive" whereas "The British Miner" published a mass of letters that

* Miners & Workmen's Advocate, February 27, 1864

** The Miners & Workers' Advocate, March 19, 1864

catalogue men's grievances. He thought that this was the wrong thing to do; the man's reports were biased and most coalowners were good employers. Holmes' move was blocked by delegates who said they had no mandate on the question. Nevertheless, it served as a notice to Towers that the council were seeking to undermine his influence and that of his journal.

Towers' response was to toughen his criticism of the council" He supported strikes against the wishes of the executive. He refused to publish a letter from MacDonald. As the half-yearly conference approached, his editorials emphasised the need for the appointment of strong delegations.. At the previous Leeds conference, 13 delegates had come from Yorkshire compared with only five from Lancashire and four from Durham. As a result, four Yorkshiremen sat on the council and the forthcoming conference was again to be held in Leeds. Discreetly, Towers omitted to mention that Yorkshire was solidly behind MacDonald. He also campaigned for W.P.Roberts to be invited to the conference.

At the Leeds conference, May 9 - 13, MacDonald again won. All the setbacks of the past six months were attributed to Towers. MacDonald claimed the attacks of the "Miners & Workmen's Advocate" had been slanderous and unjust. At the climax of his emotive speech, he said the paper was making the council's position untenable and its members offered to resign en bloc. Perhaps it was an astute tactical move: immediately conference re-elected them en bloc. On the W.P, Roberts' issue, an attempt from South Wales to get him appointed as the union's legal adviser was defeated 39 votes to 2, amid loud cheering. *

Undoubtedly, the second Leeds conference was a mighty defeat for Towers. He reacted by urging members to stop paying their subscriptions. The council was controlled by non-miners; they were friends of the masters; and should be overthrown by the rank-and-file. "Select from among yourselves to fill the offices that are to be filled." **

The large anti-Roberts vote can be explained by the way MacDonald manipulated the conference. In his history, "The Miners of Northumberland and Durham", Richard Fynes writes: "Towers and his party, who had been the means of establishing the National Association and the National Conference, were now prohibited from going into the conference room and from taking any part in the deliberations." (p. 239)

** The Miners & Workmen's Advocate, July 16, 1864

From then on, there was open warfare between the two camps. Each sent emissaries into districts controlled by the other side to foment disaffection. Vituperation attained fresh heights. A Towers' supporter, out to cause trouble in Yorkshire, was called "a lying troglodyte" while MacDonald was referred to as Sandy M'Doodle.

The July meeting of the national council expressed the fear that internal strife would wreck the union. After consulting the London committee, a body of well-wishers under the chairmanship of the Marquis of Townsend, it resolved to hold a special conference in September to determine which faction enjoyed the support of the mining community. It was an astute move for MacDonald. He could pose as a peace-maker, concerned with ending inner-union struggle. At the same time, a conference held in the near future was almost certain, because of his better organisation, to lead to his side's victory.

Towers' faction replied by holding its own special meeting at Leeds in August. It issued a declaration that disagreed with the calling of a special conference in September. Since, in the ordinary way, the half-yearly meeting would take place in November, to hold two conferences within such a short space of time would waste money. It also held out the olive branch to MacDonald, suggesting that with a long period before the conference, it would give a better opportunity to the national council and the "Miners' & Workmen's Advocate" to settle their differences amicably. Nevertheless, it still persisted in its criticisms of the MacDonaldites. The council was a self-elected body without a single working miner on it. The London committee was not properly constituted, and the Marquis of Townsend was reported as presiding at meetings he did not attend. *

Events were pushing Towers to a more thorough-going critique of MacDonald's strategy. His insistence on gaining legislative improvements, cultivating friends in high places, appeared to Towers as wrong and wasteful. The council, he told the miners, "were squandering your money and laughing at your credulity - today amusing you with a grand petition, tomorrow with a Royal Commission, the next with an account of interviews with My Lord This and Mr. Esquire the Other. The men who met last week at Leeds belong to you, and know the grievances under which you groan." ** Towers, like Roberts, was coming round to the opinion that the vital thing that differentiated their approach from that of MacDonald was their attitude to the rank-and-file and class activity.

* August 13, 1864 The Beehive.

The Miners' & Workmen's Advocate, August 20, 1864

** The Miners' & Workmen's Advocate, August 27, 1864

Clearly, Roberts saw this as the reason why he was not appointed legal advisers "They want a lawyer appointed by themselves - whom they may terrify and cajole, whom they can dismiss as they please rather than he should gain the hearts of the colliers - of the real men, the workers in the pits" *

It was to the ordinary miner that, quite unequivocally, Towers' journal addressed itself, It called upon them to boycott both the special conference in Manchester on September 20th and the council's petition to Parliaments No money should be sent to the national treasurer. And they should wait till the November conference to decide the points at issue.

To a large extent;, its message met with success. The Staffordshire miners stated their intention of boycotting the special conference. Quickly others followed their lead. MacDonald and his council arrived at Manchester to discover virtually no delegates there.

News of the cancellation of the special conference was greeted with jubilation. In Wigan, colliers' wives and daughters had a celebration songs, whose chorus was:

"The National Council has fallen,
The rule of the clique is o'er?
Their petition - a vile deception -
Well, we'll have such rubbish no more."

Everything now depended on the Manchester half-yearly conference, opening on November 8, 1864. Right from the start, there were stormy scenes. "The Beehive" said:

"The meeting, having opened by singing and prayer, a very long discussion ensued, mingled with a great deal of personality, as to the right of Mr. MacDonald to preside over the meeting. Several delegates appeared determined to summarily eject the President and Council, without even receiving their report or hearing what they had to say in defence of the charges which had been weekly circulated against them by the Miners' & Workmen's Advocate." **

Miners' & Workmen's Advocate, August 20, 1864

** The Beehive, November 12, 1864

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Stephenson; the Yorkshire representative of the Council, objected to the resolution to move MacDonald from the chair. He said business could only commence once delegates' credentials had been checked. Cheesman, of Durham; mover of the motion, said that was precisely why MacDonald should not be in the chair - his credentials were not in order.

Actually, MacDonald was on extremely shaky ground. He came as a delegate from Scotland, Yet, only one lodge in the whole of Scotland - the Hope Lodge of Linlithgow - had contributed to the union's funds. Other supporters of his had very tenuous connections with the mining industry. * Stephenson was a chemist, Miller a doctor from Dudley, Hickman a cobbler from Kildgrove, and Holmes a tallyman from Leeds. In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that a large amount of time was taken disputing credentials. The most hotly contested was Dr. Miller's. The South Staff's, miners made it plain that he did not represent them, and North Staffs. delegates threatened to leave the conference if he remained. Eventually, MacDonald got delegates to agree that he remain, although in what capacity was not clear, because it was important to press on with the next item on the agenda, a report by H.L. Beales, of the London committee.

Many delegates thought this a manoeuvre by McDonald to side-step the issue, and showed their disapproval by interrupting Beales. They suspected the London committee was pro-MacDonald.

It appears MacDonald played for time, leaving the crucial question of the conference, the election of officers, until the fourth day. By then, things were more favourable for him. The hostile South Wales delegates had stormed out. They had objected to attacks being made on the "Miners' & Workmen's Advocate" as well as the decision to disassociate the union from W.P.Roberts' legal work in South Wales. MacDonald had said, "Let us hear no more of the Janet James, the Blaina truck case. The very name Blaina stinks in the mind of every collier in England." **

At the same time as the opposition forces weakened, through South Wales defection, MacDonald was able to strengthen his own. It seems that he wrote to the Cleveland district and asked them by return to

* "The Cursed Triumvirate", as the Miners' & Workmen's Advocate described them, who ran the union were MacDonald, Holmes and Dr. Miller

** Miners' & Workmen's Advocate, November 19, 1864

give him written authorisation to appoint a delegate on their behalf. When it became obvious he was using this subterfuge to gain voting rights for Dr. Miller, representing miners whom he had never seen, there was uproar, "The Beehive" reported, "almost half the delegates rose to their feet and, amidst the greatest confusion, prepared to leave the room, urging that Dr. Miller, not being a practical miner, had no right to represent the Cleveland district ... One or two of the same party also endeavoured to close the conference by singing a hymn." But a MacDonaldite, George Brown, of Yorkshire, apparently used to hymn singing, was able to drown the others. Order was temporarily restored.

Normansell was appointed chairman during the election of officers. Election of president came first? The two proposed were MacDonald and Kimberley. The result: 19 votes each Whereupon Normansell gave his casting vote for MacDonald.

'This was the signal for a great uproar, accompanied by bellicose demonstrations, such as shaking of fists by some of the more excited, and it was suggested that the police should be called in, but not carried out. A number of delegates at once left the room, and it was not until after a considerable period had elapsed that order was restored. It subsequently transpired that a number of delegates had instructions from their districts to secede from the conference if Mr. MacDonald were re-elected.' *

The anti-MacDonald delegates went en bloc to the Swan Inn, Shudehill, where they drew up and approved the rules of the Practical Miners' Association, an entirely new organisation. Then, after two days' deliberations, they ended their business with a celebration at W.P.Roberts' house.

The rump remained with MacDonald. He had, at the most, delegates representing 14,321 members. These consisted of Yorkshire 3,624, Wigan 4,258, Kaarsley 2,500, Tipton 400, North Staffs 700, Scotland, 2000, and Shropshire 4,339. In considering these figures, it should be noted that in some places (e.g. Scotland) no subscriptions had been paid and that in other places (e.g. Wigan and Tipton) delegates of the breakway body contested the right of those who stayed to represent the membership. Truly, Towers could jubilantly announce: "Honesty, Zeal and Sincerity have signally triumphed over Slander, Calumny and Falsehood." **

* The Beehive, November 12, 1864

** At the next two half-yearly conferences, the M.N.A. only had delegates from Lancashire and Yorkshire.

Besides seceding with the majority of members, the Practical Miners also took a remarkable proportion of the veterans. Joseph Linney, of South Staffs, had an exceptional record of struggles a miners' leader in the general strike of 1852, a delegate to the Chartist convention of 1848, politically active in the 1850s, he still remained a leader in the 'sixties. Likewise Topping (St. Helens), J. Scott (Durham), D.R. Thomas and W. Williams (South Wales) were all prominent in the Miners' Association of the 1840s. The MacDonaldites had no such fund of experience. Only MacDonald himself and William Pickard, vice-president could claim to have distinguished themselves in the earlier union.

Localism and the collapse of the Practical Miners

Both national organisations appear to have been severely weakened by the factional war. The scurrilous stories, flung around by each side, had produced an effect. It stimulated the distrust with both unions; members tended to keep funds in their local coffers rather than send it to a national body. Localism and centrifugal tendencies were also furthered by the need to preserve unity, if possible, in the lodges. As many had supporters of both the Practical Miners and the Miners' National Association, the most diplomatic course, the line least likely to arouse dissension within the ranks, was to steer a course of strict neutrality, supporting neither national body.,

Another reason for not tearing themselves apart over the relative merits of MacDonald and the Practical Miners was that, in their enfeebled state, they could do little or nothing to assist a local organisation. It appeared to a large number that much could be lost when a local union became ensnared into playing the national game.

The Practical Miners were handicapped further by a prolonged and disastrous strike in South Staffordshire, one of their strongholds. It began in June 1864. The owners in Dudley and Wolverhampton decided to impose a wage cut: the workers resolved to resist. As there was still, at that time, a unified organisation, at least in theory, an approach was made to the Miners' National Association for help. But only a rebuff was received. Meanwhile, the strike spread to North Staffs and then, by September, to Oldbury. With a growing number on strike in the county, fewer remained at work to contribute to the special levies. Strike pay was only 2s. 6d a week, Many augmented this meagre sum by nightly poaching., Two attempts were made to negotiate a settlement. At the second, Lord Leigh called back the strike leaders individually after the meeting had failed to reach agreement. He offered each in turn £10 if they would try and get the men to return to work. None accepted. Lord Leigh called them "fools, fanatics and madmen." In reply; the union issued a declaration: "The miners have suffered, and are prepared to suffer, and, whatever the

consequences, they are determined to resist even to the death." *

The strike was still in progress when the Manchester conference, where the split occurred, was converted. Indeed, the bitterness of the Staffordshire men over Dr. Miller's credentials largely arose because he claimed to represent them while disassociating himself from their strike. The general attitude of the MacDonaldites towards industrial disputes constituted a major reason for the split. As the Practical Miners said in their first statement they wanted a strong centralised body, where the full weight of organisation could be thrown behind men in dispute: "We consider that the duty of a National Council embraces an inquiry into all cases of oppression, and not only render advice, but assistance. The late Council repudiate such an idea." ** Referring to the Staffordshire strike, they continued: "Twenty-five thousand men out of work; but the late Council would not interfere! Even sympathy, which would have cost nothing, was with-held?"

Kimberley, president of the Practical Miners, came from Oldbury. After assuming office, his first task was to journey to London, where he asked the London Trades Council for help. He received a cool reception. Delegates generally disapproved of the attacks at the Manchester conference on Beales and MacDonald, although Odger thought MacDonald had been unwise to remain as president with such a small majority. Nevertheless, the Trades Council decided to help. Ninety pounds was collected, but MacDonald persuaded them not to send it. He claimed it would not go to relieve distress: all of it would go into the pockets of that "greedy Manchester lawyer."

By December 1864, the Staffordshire strike was collapsing. Funds had virtually run out. Men, desperate with hunger, were drifting back to work. Those who still remained out expressed their anguish by rioting and blowing up mine installations. As a result, the authorities were resorting to mass arrests, and W.P. Roberts was doing what he could to defend the men.

Shortly after the Staffordshire debacle, the Practical Miners held their first conference at Chesterfield Market Hall, on December 26-28. Only 13 attended, and an appeal was issued "To the Miners of the United Kingdom." *** It appears to have met with little response. At the next

Staffordshire Avertiser, October 8, 1864

** Miners; & Workmen's Advocate, November 19, 1864

*** See Appendix 1

Conflicting conceptions continued to remain. In 1868, the strikes in Lancashire plainly showed that small, local unions, with very limited financial resources, were no match for the large coal companies that were beginning to emerge. So MacDonald's idea of a loose federation of local unions, only coming together to promote legislation, was challenged for a second time. The Amalgamated Association of Miners, led by Thomas Halliday, was formed in 1869. It aimed at creating a centralised leadership and large funds that could be used in strikes. Significantly, both these aims had been held by its forerunner, the Practical Miners. And it may be no accident that their support came from the same coalfields.

It is my opinion that MacDonald's role, and the beneficial effects of his policies, have been greatly exaggerated. He is credited by Page Arnot and the Webbs with being the main force behind organising the Leeds conference and the formation of the Miners' National Association. * But there is little evidence in contemporary journals to substantiate this claim. At the time, MacDonald was deeply involved in a trade dispute in Scotland. The owners, wishing to smash the union, locked the men out. While MacDonald usually cringed from any form of class conflict, in this instance preservation of the union and his position forced him to devote his energies to the struggle, and he appears to have had no time for organising the inaugural conference. He seems to have attended none of the preparatory discussions; most of the work was done by John Towers. It was only in March 1865, seventeen months after the national union had begun, that the Scottish miners paid their first subscription. ** Mad MacDonald really been such an active force in the formation of the national body he would have seen to it that the Scottish miners, for whom he was general secretary, affiliated before such a long period had elapsed.

Arbitration and class harmony

Nevertheless, there is no disputing that MacDonald, even if not prime mover in its formation, did have a considerable impact on its subsequent development. His policies became the dominant influence in mining unions throughout the 'sixties and 'seventies. The whole emphasis of his message was on achieving class harmony; to go on strike was the original sin. For strikes were wasteful, costly, involved suffering and social strife, endangered the well-being of the union, and were likely to alienate influential friends who could assist in getting legislation through Parliament. MacDonald told a Royal Commission in 1873, "I look upon strikes as the barbaric relic of a period of unfortunate relations between labour and capital." *** In a more enlightened age, differences between capitalists and workers could be settled amicably by arbitration and conciliation. Men would benefit from being able to work without interruption through strikes, although their wage-rates might consequently be less.

* R. Page Arnot, The Scottish Miners, p. 47. S & B. Webb, History of Trade unionism, p. 302

** The Beehive, March 18, 1865. The Scottish miners' first monthly payment was £12.5.6 This represented a membership of 2,756 at a penny a member.

*** Report of the Select Committee on the Scarcity and Deamess of Coal. 1873. Q.4915

Speaking of a recent arbitration settlement he was involved in making in South Wales, MacDonald told the Commissioners: "I believe that if they had had the ordinary means at Command, that is, going on strike, or going into dispute with the employer, they might have commanded a higher rate than they now have." * Despite the financial loss, MacDonald still approved of the settlement: "I only wished that I could accomplish the same thing in every mining district in the United Kingdoms." **

Arbitration boards usually consisted of an equal number of employers' and workers' representatives with an independent chairman.. They gave the appearance of being quasi-judicial bodies, making decisions impartially on the merits of each case. Unpalatable decisions were thereby made more acceptable to workers. Even so, severe tensions could arise, especially when leaders had been a party to unpopular decisions. A Northumbrian coalowner stated that when Normansell, the union official, had to adjudicate in arbitration cases, "19 out of 20 he had to decide against his own men." ***

The philosophy underlining this approach was enunciated by Thomas Burt, M.P., when he said the Northumberland Miners' Association "all believe that the burdens that press upon the coal trade could be removed by co-operation rather than contention. With this in view, they supported every reasonable proposition of the coalowners, however unpopular this might make them with the men" **** Burt went on to say that four of the five recent decisions went against the men.

What this had meant was that the Northumbrian miners had been subjected to a series of wage reductions. Their faith, both in arbitration and their leaders, was becoming very strained. It must have been even more galling when MacDonald reminded them that the elaborate machinery, so efficient in its reduction of their wages, was actually costing them money to maintain:

"The miners of Northumberland had spent thousands of pounds in supporting the principle of arbitration; and, if they followed the wise advice of their leaders, instead of smokeless chimneys and desolate homes, there would have been a continuation of the happy

Report of the Select Committee on the Scarcity and Dearness of Coal, 1873.
Q4915

** ibid., Q4923

*** Ibid, Q7561.

****T. Burt Letter to Wigan Observer, December 28, 1877

"state of things which have existed between employers and employed in Northumberland for the past 12 or 13 years." *

MacDonald was speaking at the 1877 Durham conferences. It was held at a time when discontent rumbled through the Northumberland coalfield and thousands of men stopped work against an arbitration decision.

At the Durham conference, Burt made a highly significant statement, showing the new relationship growing up between the leadership and the membership. Two busts of pioneers of the movement - Hepburn and Jude - were being presented. Burt seized the opportunity to contrast the situation in the 1830s and 1840s with the present days

"At the period of Hepburn and Jude, it was more difficult than it has been since,. The leaders had to face oppression and contumely, a hostile public opinion and a hostile press; but perhaps Jude and Hepburn had one encouragement which the leaders of the working class did not possess in so great a degree, they had not the hostility of the men they took the lead of." **
My emphasis RC)

Many instances of such enmity can be given. For example, William Brown, a union official in North Staffordshire, advised his men to accept a long-term contract. But they refused. They went on strike - and gained twice the amount. "I suffered a great deal of abuse," Brown confessed to the Select Committee. ***

Likewise in Lancashire: J. Evans, owner of Haydock and Edge Green colliery, told the 1868 Royal Commission on Trade Unions how William Pickard had approached him in an attempt to devise an acceptable formula to get the men back to work. He asked, "Will you yield half an hour or anything to show signs of giving in?" I said,, "Mr.Pickard, if you were in my place, would you do so?" Pickard admitted he would not; I said that was my answer, too. So empty handed, Pickard "went out of our office and went to the men and tried to induce them to go to work. I believe that they abused him very much, and told him that he had been bribed by me." ****

* Wigan Observer, June 1,1877

** Wigan Observer, June 1,1877

*** Report of the Select Committee, 1873. Q7542

**** Royal Commission on Trade Unions, 1868.
Q15225

Whether bribery did take place or not there can be little doubt employers began to realise the benefits to be gained from having this type of trade union official. So, once employers had come to concede the right of workers to be organised, then it became of the utmost importance to have a MacDonald at the helm rather than a W.P.Roberts. Wage claims would be more moderate; the chance of conflict less, In the coal industry, seasonal factors and trade conditions caused considerable fluctuations in demand and hence in the price of coal. Since wages amounted to about 60 per cent of total cost, any appreciable drop in coal prices had to be passed on to the miners. From experience, owners discovered that colliers more readily accepted the case for wage cuts when it came from one of their own officials instead of from the employer himself.

But it was not simply in settling disputes over pay that employers began to realise the value of union co-operation. Assistance was sought when owners wished to introduce new working arrangements. For instance, George Elliott told the Select Committee he had collieries of the same size in Durham and South Wales. One produced 2,000 tons to only 1,000 tons at the other. He attributed this to the Welshmen's objections to double-shift working. In his Glamorgan colliery, he had the expense of pumping and maintenance for a mere 50 hours labour a week. "I would rather look," he said, "to the influence of men like Mr. MacDonald and those who are representatives of the men in overcoming the prejudice, because it is very strong prejudice in South Wales against this system." *

The men's objection was partly based on the disruption to family life that two-shift working would involve. They also thought it would increase the hazards of mining; the second shift would arrive to find the air befouled by the activities of the first. Since in those days ventilation was often primitive, there was some substance in the men's fears. Yet, the owners expected union officials to re-assure the men. This did not apply simply in this particular case but generally. Especially after serious accidents, when miners' morale was low, owners found union leaders* help invaluable. William Pickard said, "I may say that some of the employers wished me to go to their collieries to see the position of their workings, in order that I might create confidence in the men, and that they might go there for employment." **

Furthermore, union leaders strived to inculcate a new general attitude in the workers, one that was an asset to employers, who suffered from the irregularity and unreliability of their workmen. Miners were told

* Report of the Select Committee, 1873 Q7542

** Ibid, Q4062

by their officials to be thrifty and temperate., They were told to stop the prevalent practice of being absent from work after each pay-day. Their leaders told them they must no longer indulge in "unauthorised Saints' Days" - Saint Monday, Saint Tuesday and Saint Wednesday - as collieries remained idle, with capital equipment unused. Such practices were unfair to their employers, who lost money because of the indolence of the men.

Hearing such remarks, coalowners could not fail to be impressed. Granted they would probably rather have workers without any organisation whatsoever. But in most coalfields, hard-fought battles over many years had shown it was impossible to wipe out trade unionism, A stage of industrial development had been reached where it became virtually certain that men would be organised. So trade unions had to be accepted as a fact of life, a detente made with them? the best made of a bad job. The value of MacDonalidism was that it showed employers, once they had become reconciled to the existence of trade unions, that everything was not on the debit side. Tangible benefits; in the form of higher profits, could be derived from the co-operation of Capital and Labour. MacDonalidism did not push wages up; it preserved industrial peace.

In a frank and perceptive letter, the M.N.A.'S national executive warned employers of the dire consequences of upsetting; existing relationships;

"Before they reject arbitration, however, we ask them to believe what ought to be a lesson of experience, viz., that the defeat of a great Union - assuming any attack made was successful - would not necessarily be destructive of fighting power in the men. It is our experience, and it ought to be remembered as a portion of theirs, that some of the bitterest, the most prolonged and the most damaging struggles between employers and employed have been carried out in England by workmen not in the Union beyond such Union as was improvised for the occasion.,, In fact, the employers' triumph would simply break up into a large number of smaller bodies what was previously one large general body. Local officers would thus become heads of separate divisions of the army of labour. The most serious responsibilities would disappear, and a kind of guerilla warfare would be carried on - now here, now there - far more hurtful to the employers, and it may be said more seriously injurious to the industrial interests of the country, than any difference that can arise in connection with organisations on a large scale." *

Address to the Coalowners by the Executive Committee of the Miners' National Union, March 31, 1877.

Here is the basic rationale of MacDonald's appeal to the employers. "Have me," he is saying, "or the consequences will be far worse for you."

The Real Position of Checkweighmen

When it is realised that the official trade union attitude was one of co-operation with capital, fresh light is shed on otherwise perplexing events. For instance, take the question of checkweighmen. The traditional view, first expounded by the Webbs, was that the workers were aggrieved, in many places deliberately inaccurate weighing machines were used to rob men of part of their wages. They were not fully paid for the amount of coal hewn. Often this led to strikes. In 1859, the whole West Yorkshire coalfield was paralysed by a dispute over weighing. The following year Parliament passed the Mines Regulation Act. A clause empowering colliers to appoint checkweighmen was deleted by the House of Lords. When the bill returned to the House of Commons, after a tremendous battle it was re-inserted in Section 29. For the first time, miners could appoint and pay their own checkweighmen. The significance of this, according to the Webbs, was that it gave each miners' lodge a full-time official. "The checkweigher has to be a man of character insensible to the bullying and blandishments of manager or employers. He must be of strictly regular habits, accurate and businesslike in mind, and quick at figures. The ranks of the checkweighers serve thus as an admirable recruiting ground from which a practically inexhaustible supply of efficient Trade Union secretaries or labour representatives can be drawn." *

There was some, but not the entire, truth in the Webbs' version. It left too many questions unanswered. How is it that a Parliament, where aristocratic and business interests predominated, passed this clause if it would do so much to strengthen the power of organised labour? Why did colliery owners not campaign for its repeal? A generation before Lord Londonderry and other North-eastern coalowners had gone to extraordinary lengths to persecute the leaders of the Miners' Association, some of whom died of starvation. Why were they so much more tolerant in the 1860s? And then why, if having a checkweighman was tantamount to having a union organiser at each colliery, was the miners' union membership so low in 1860, 20 years after the passing of the clause? It was probably less than in 1863.

The mystery thickens when one considers the Mines Regulation Act of 1872, which strengthened the powers of checkweighmen. Far from resisting this

* S. & B. Webb, op-cit,, p. 306

move, Members of Parliament who were coalowners actually supported the measure, John Lancaster, M.P., vice-president of the Mining Association, the employers' national organisation, declared that he would move it, but eventually R. Fothergill, M.P., the chairman of the South Wales Coalowners' Association was responsible. Now there were few more vehement opponents of trade unionism than Fothergill. Three years later, in 1875, he bankrupted himself smashing the Amalgamated Association of Miners in South Wales. Likewise with Lancaster, a director of Wigan Coal & Iron Company, he was not renowned for his love of trade unions. In 1865, he threw a checkweighman off the pit-brow at Kirkless Hall. Brandishing a piece of wood, he tore the weighmen's clothes and shouted, "I will hang thee here if I can,t get thee off." * At a colliery at Whelley* Lancaster had another checkweighman carried off the pit-bank by the police, put in jail, and then arraigned before the magistrates.

At first glance, it may seem Lancaster's conduct was at variance with his support of the checkweigh clause in 1872. In fact, it was quite consistent. The reason why Lancaster behaved so wildly at Kirkless Hall was precisely because he attached such importance to the post of checkweighman. It was important to see that the wrong type of man did not get the post.

Owners realised that mining, by its very nature; was a dispute-prone industry. Besides fluctuations in demand and pricey working conditions - the amount of dirt in the coal, the slope of the seams,, the degree of difficulty in hewing - all were constantly changing and continually sources of potential friction. Since disputes were bound to arise, employers had to ask themselves: is it better, in times of trouble, for the men to be led by embittered extremists or by a checkweighman, whose moderation came from day-to-day contact with the management?

Many safeguards existed under the Act to see that coalowners had a tight rein over whether a checkweighman should be appointed and, if so,, who. First, if it were deemed impractical or uneconomical to introduce weighing, owners could continue to pay by measure. Colliers who wanted a checkweighman had to indicate so clearly. This left employers free to influence the men's decision, threatening them with the sack should they decide wrongly. In this way, the management of Burnley collieries prevented the appointment of checkweighmen until the turn of the century. ** It could always send a petition

* Wigan Observer, May 6, 1865

** T. Ashton, Three Great Strikes in the Coal Industry, Vol. 2, pp. 248-9.
The Burnley dispute over weighing was finally resolved in
1902

to the Home Secretary, signed by all its workmen (on pain of dismissal) showing that, they did not want one.

But this was not the attitude of most employers. They understood that as production at their collieries became larger and more complicated, definite advantages accrued from having regular contact with a spokesman for the men. Of course they wanted a spokesman who was, in their eyes, reasonable and responsible. The Mines Regulation Acts gave them this opportunity. It stated that a checkweighman had to be selected from among the workers at the pit. Therefore if anybody who the owner through undesirable looked like being elected, he had only to be sacked before the elections took place.

Once elected, checkweighmen were subjected to a lot of pressure. In the overwhelming majority of instances, if the employer refused to grant him facilities to do his job, the courts would side with the employer. * So the ultimate sanction of the coalowner - the right to dismiss - on which the maintenance of industrial discipline depends, applied in practice to checkweighmen. Their whole outlook was coloured by this fact. Far from being, as the Webbs say, "insensible to the bullying or blandishments" of employers, checkweighmen's own self-interest pushed them into a highly conciliatory position. They had to preserve industrial peace; otherwise their own jobs were in jeopardy. For if men struck, they were deemed to have terminated their contract. Once the dispute ended, a checkweighman would have to be appointed from among whosoever the owner decided to re-engage. And, if the previous checkweighman had played a prominent part in the strike or antagonized the master prior to it, his chances of getting employment were remote..

Need to keep on good terms with the master vitiated the checkweighman's other preoccupations. As the law provided that, once it was decided to appoint a checkweighman, all the men at a colliery were compelled to pay into a special fund for his wages, he was under no compunction to increase union membership; automatically, his wages were paid. If he oothered himself swelling the union's ranks, he was likely to compound his personal troubles. Members would probably question him and interfere with the way he operated. Also, the master annoyed if he saw workers gaining organised strength, might be tempted to sack him. Far better let the union remain a small body, controlled by an elite of checkweighmen, than let it venture, under rank-and-file control, into the stormy seas of industrial conflict.

* Normansell v Platt is one of the few cases in which the court upheld the checkweighman

The introduction of checkweighmen had a tremendous impact on the development of mining trade unionism. It took away the cutting edge, the militancy, from the established machinery. Instead of having leaders who truly reflected the opinions of the members; the reflection became that of a distorting mirror. At local level, checkweighmen helped to lay the foundations for the policies MacDonald was pursuing nationally.

Diffrentiation within the working-class: The division between leaders and led.

What was happening was that, instead of head-on class conflict which would be so damaging to the industry, owners had come to realise the value of a polarisation within the working class, a differentiation that resulted in miners' anger often being expressed against union leaders rather than the employers. In the industrial sphere, it was an application of the principle of divide and rule, a principle that had become so useful in the empire-building in which Britain was at that time engaged.

The cleavage between leaders and rank-and-file expressed itself materially, financially and socially. At the top of the pyramid was MacDonald, a friend of Lord Elcho, one of Scotland's biggest coalowners. When he became an M.P., MacDonald was in the habit of sitting next to Lord Elcho in the House of Commons, and frequently he was invited to champagne breakfasts and other social functions with His Lordship. * Re told the 1868 Royal Commissions "I think that there is not a body of 600 men in which more kind-hearted men are to be found than are to be found in the House of Commons." **

MacDonald liked moving in exalted circles, although he came from a humble background. Starting in a Lanark pit at the age of 8, he began to work at 1 or 2 a.m., only to finish at between 5 and 6 p.m. In the first mine where he worked, MacDonald recalled "there were some 20 or more boys besides myself, and I am not aware at this moment that one is alive except myself." *** At his second pit there were 20 to 30 boys and girls employed and, to the best of his knowledge, only one survived. "They died as miners. Not one of them rose from the grade of miner that I am aware."

* Earl of Wemyss and March, Memories 1818-1912, cited by R. Harrison Before the Socialists, p. 119. The Liberal politician, A.J. Mundella described MacDonald as "this bad fellow who is Elcho's Limited". (W.H.G. Armytage, A.J. Mundella, p. 69.)

** Royal Commission on Trade Unions, 1868. Q.15,431

*** Ibid, Q.15,264

This makes MacDonald's own development even more remarkable. For while his fellow workers were dying in misery and poverty, MacDonald was able, in some mysterious way, to make a modest fortune through business speculation. When it is remembered that his trade union activity made tremendous calls on his time and energy - by 1868 he claimed to have Addressed 1,600 meetings, answered 17,000 letters and travelled 230,000 miles - that he was able to amass a private fortune seems all the more surprising.

Equally strange is how William Pickard, vice-president of the M.N.A. acquired his money, In 1862 he was a working miner, without enough money to support his wife and family. * Yet, a year later, he was boasting that he was working for the union - it was then in financial difficulties - for nothing since he was a property-owner. **

Whether MacDonald and Pickard gained their fortunes through personal thrift, as payment for services rendered to the employers, or through the death of some rich relative, it is only possible to speculate. But whatever the source, its effect was to give them a different outlook to the men they were supposed to represent. For when they acquired shares in coal-mining companies they inevitably aroused the hostility of miners.

"His interests are not ours" said a handbill distributed in Wigan about Pickard. "How can he be furthering our interests by becoming a large shareholder and a director of a colliery in North Wales, receiving as such 3 guineas for each attendance and getting good pay from us at the same time. Look also at his position. A director of a colliery. A shareholder in one of the largest collieries in this neighbourhood. The possessor of a handsome and costly pile of building called 'Park View', but which should be named 'Colliers' Folly'." ***

Lower down the union ladder, the same process was in evidence. Local leaders and checkweighmen were more affluent than the average collier. Their incomes were higher and less subject to fluctuations resulting from wage cuts or bouts of unemployment. Many of them augmented their salaries by being small shopkeepers. And from their relatively privileged position, they developed an outlook different from, and sometimes opposed to, the men they were supposed to represent.

Pickard's recollection in Wigan Observer, October 22, 1864

** Ibid, October 10, 1863

*** A handbill published March 27, 1880. Wigan Broadside Collection, Vol. 1.

The growing gulf between union leaders and the workers can be most vividly seen during strikes, such as the dispute in Lancashire in 1681. Then, the leaders did not dare to venture forth to meet the men they "represented". The union headquarters was invaded by angry strikers, out to denounce traitorous officials. Attempts by checkweighmen to speak at strike meetings were greeted with "Purr him off the cart" and "Thou'rt sweetened by the masters". *

At a typical strike meeting, the chairman complained:

"There had been several delegate meetings called together, but he thought that those who had attended had not represented the true heart of the men. (A voice: "They have not") They had been self-elected delegates, pick-sharpeners, checkweighmen and shopkeepers. (Hear, hear and laughter)"

Then the next speaker, Noah Stringfellow, grumbled because the time of delegate meetings and what transpired at them was kept a secrets

"Had their delegates ever given notice at what time they would meet them, and given them the choice of selecting a delegate of their own choosing, and had they ever asked them what their opinion was that they might represent them in honesty at their next delegate meeting? ("No, No", "They never have", "Never") Had they after their return held meetings and informed them regarding particulars of the business transacted? ("No, No") Very well, then, he moved a vote of censure be passed upon the delegates for not complying with the duties of representatives" **

The Lancashire strike of 1881; which reverberated around the coalfield for three months and involved 50,000, was unofficial. It was as much directed against the union leadership as the coalowners. The men complained that, while the union had a little over 1,000 members, no attempt was made to recruit new members; that the union did not represent their feelings; and that Pickard, "the miners' agent", was in the pay of the masters. In fact, the strike was a rank-and-file response to 20 years of MacDonaldism in the county.

* "Purr" is a Lancashire term meaning to kick

** Wigan Observer, February 5, 1881

It has been pointed out that the introduction of conciliation and arbitration in British industry was accompanied by a new phenomenon - the unofficial strike. * When union spokesmen reached agreement with employers, it was frequently at the expense of disagreement with its own membership, who felt impelled to resort to self-activity in an endeavour to further its interests.

Probably it is fruitless to ask when was the first unofficial strike? But what, perhaps, can be said is that in a conflict-ridden industry like coal-mining, the tendency towards unofficial activity seems to have been more pronounced than in most other industries. The plethora of strikes and lock outs posed class issues more acutely. Hence it became possible to see, earlier than in most other occupations, the different responses to conflict situations. The divergence of interests between leaders and led became apparent in coal-mining sooner than elsewhere.

For a variety of reasons, historians have tended to disregard or play down the role of unofficial movements and strikes. Many writers, like the Webbs, have no ideological sympathy with men who challenge established union hierarchy. To them, such men are dangerous. They are part of the trade union underworld, whose deeds are best interred with their bones. Circumstances themselves assist in this burial work. Unofficial movements sprout up hither and thither; their records are fragmentary; they are less likely to be preserved. It is far more easy for the historian to go to official records than to delve in the nether regions. Most trade union histories are official histories. They are financed and supported by the official trade union machine; otherwise it is doubtful whether they would be published. **

V.L. Allen, The Origins of Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration. International Review of Social History, Vol. DC (1964), p.250: "Conciliation worked only where the union leaders were willing to endorse the wage reductions suggested by employers and then it was only operative at the top negotiating level. William Crawford, who accepted a wage reduction of 10% for the Durham miners in May, 1874, had to contend with unofficial strikes by colliery mechanics. When, early in 1874p the Scottish coal-owners demanded a 20% wage reduction, Alexander MacDonald advised the miners to accept it. There were vociferous protests. Unofficial strikes were frequently called against adverse arbitration awards; indeed this period saw the beginning of unofficial strike action."

** Phillip Unwin, of Allen & Unwins "I can only tell you, however, that we probably have more experience in the publication of Trade Union histories than any other firm and I cannot at the moment think of a single one which would have covered its expenses if we had been dependent upon the general sale through normal book trade channels." Letter to R. Challinor, December 10, 1965

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Yet, at least in studying the coalminers, the tension between the leadership and the rank-and-file is one of the most vital factors in reaching an understanding of how the movement develops, MacDonald and the militants - the lap-dog or the lion? Did one get a lump of sugar through begging like a well-trained poodle or a hunk of meat by showing the lion's fangs and being prepared for bloody struggles? That was the question.

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