

F O R E W O R D

The present number of OUR HISTORY discusses the relations between the trade unions and the Chartist Movement. Historians, in general, have tended to underestimate trade union support for Chartism and Chartist understanding of and sympathy with trade unionism. It is impossible, in a limited space, and when dealing with a limited theme to give an adequate treatment either of trade union history or of general Chartist development in this period. The available material has already had to be cut substantially, to fit within the limited scope of OUR HISTORY. Readers who are not familiar with the historical background are recommended to read Chap.2 of THE BRITISH LABOUR MOVEMENT by A.L. Morton and George Tate.

C H A R T I S M A N D T H E T R A D E U N I O N S .

Thomas Cooper, a journalist who had begun his working life as a shoemaker, once went to report a Chartist meeting in Leicester. Walking home with a group of Chartists after the meeting he was struck by the noise of stocking-frames which were still working although it was very late at night. He asked: "And what may be the average earning of a stocking weaver" and was told: "About four and sixpence". Cooper tells us: "That was the exact answer; but I had no right conception of its meaning. I remembered that my own earnings at a handicraft had been low, because I was not allowed to work for the best shops." Cooper replied: "The wages are not too bad when you are in work', but the Chartists said: "What are you talking about? You mean four and sixpence a day: but we mean four and sixpence a week." The anecdote is illuminating since it shows that besides the 'two nations' into which England was divided according to Disraeli's Sybil each of these was itself subdivided into groups which knew little of one another.

The weavers came to look upon themselves as a class of doomed men, who had been abandoned even by their fellows who had gone to work in the factories. At the same time the wages of the power-loom weavers were depressed by the existence of a vast army of domestic workers, since they knew only too well that if they asked for too much there were others to take their place.

There were of course groups of skilled workers in London and elsewhere whose standards were still relatively good, but they were a small minority of the working class and their position was very precarious. An apologist of the manufacturers was obliged to admit that male workers in the cotton mills reached their maximum earnings between the ages of 31 and 36 and female workers between 36 and 41, and few mule spinners were to be found at work after the age of forty."

These random examples are given in order to illustrate the point that the working-class during the industrial revolution was far from homogenous. The economic and social conditions of different groups of workers differed widely. It is important to understand this if the different attitudes to trade unionism and to Chartism of workers in different trades and industries at different times is to be properly understood.

Trade Unionism had ceased to be illegal in 1824. "From that day Labour became a power in England" **. Lord Melbourne, Home Secretary and afterwards Prime Minister in the Whig Government of the Reform Bill, wrote on 26 September 1831 to Sir Herbert Taylor, Private Secretary to King William IV: "When we first came into office in November last, the Unions of Trades in the North of England and in other parts of the country for the purpose of raising wages etc., and the General Union for the same purpose, were pointed out to me by Sir Robert Peel in a conversation I had with him upon the then state of the country, as the most formidable difficulty and danger with which we had to contend; and it struck me as well as the rest of His Majesty's servants in the same light".

The Trade Union Movement of 1830-4 was not a mere flash in the pan, but was the culmination of a series of struggles which had gone on since 1825, and had been preceded by earlier movements during the period of illegality. It is true that the General Consolidated Trades Union had been joined by many thousands of workers who joined such an organisation for the first and last time in their lives, but there was also a core of experienced trade unionists. The collapse of the Grand National Consolidated Trades Union gave rise to all kinds of defeatist moods. More deep reflection, however, showed that the real reason for the defeats of 1834 was the failure of the workers to gain political power, a lesson driven home by the savage sentences on the Tolpuddle Martyrs and the New Poor Law of the same year. This was not something which had been immediately grasped, for the rules of most unions forbade the discussion of political and religious topics. These rules had partly been designed to safeguard the unions at a time when even economic activities were illegal, but they were also a survival from the epoch when it was considered foolish and dangerous for poor men to concern themselves with politics. Only gradually was this prejudice broken down, largely as the result of the activity of such pioneers as William

*: Baines, History of the Cotton Manufacture, p.437.

** : Frederick Engels, 'Trades Unions' in The Labour Standard, 28th May 1881.

Lovett the cabinetmaker and Robert Hartwell, a compositor who survived to take a leading part in the agitation for the second Reform Bill of 1867. These leaders and others came together in the London Working Men's Association of 1836, which established contact with similar bodies throughout the country and drafted the document known as the People's Charter.

The ensuing twelve months were the scene of an ever-growing agitation, culminating in the meeting of the Chartist Convention in London and the presentation of the National Petition to Parliament. The petition was, however, rejected and the Convention was driven to consideration of the question of what was to be done next. The Chartist leaders had no precedents for their guidance, since there had never been an independent movement of the working class anywhere in the world. It is true that the previous ten years had seen two successful agitations, for Catholic Emancipation and for the Reform Bill, but the classes which had led them were now opposed to the Chartists. A section of the Chartists, principally in Wales, were ready to resort to arms, but this was hardly the attitude of the majority. The most effective policy seemed to be that of a general strike or "Sacred Month" such as had already taken place at Glasgow in 1820 and which had been actively propagated by William Benbow of Manchester since 1832. The Convention was greatly heartened by a letter from Newcastle dated July 12th, 1839.

TO THE SECRETARY OF THE CONVENTION - SIR, - I am instructed by the council of the Newcastle Political Union, to inform you that nearly all the colliers in the North are laid in with a stern determination on the part of the men not to commence work again until they have gained their rights. We have done all in our power to try to get them to wait for the commands of the Convention. The answer is, that they have waited long enough for aught they have to expect from their tyrants. They add, 'We are prepared to commence.' In fact, they have done so, for no sooner did the news of Dr. Taylor's arrest arrive, followed by that of Messrs. Collins and Lovett, than the strike commenced, and it has gone on increasingly until now. There are more than 25,000 pitmen alone on strike, besides the town trades, who are in expectation of your orders daily. It is earnestly requested that the time of strike be not delayed, but that it be put in force on Monday next, or the consequences in this district will be dreadful to contemplate; and if the Convention wish to retain the confidence of the people here, they must speedily act. In expectation of a speedy answer, I am, in haste, etc.

P.S. Since writing the above, I hear that ten more of the collieries have struck, with the aggregate amount of men - namely 7,000". *

Encouraged by this message, the Convention voted on July 15th to recommend a general strike to begin on August 12th and asked the

* Charter, July 21 1839.

trade unions to co-operate.

It was, however, soon obvious that this could not be carried out. Northumberland was exceptional in its militancy, and the "united trades" were not ready to take action. Nor was the Convention itself of one mind, since the strike resolution had only been carried by thirteen votes to six out of thirty members present, and not all the thirteen were from industrial areas. Under the circumstances the Convention thought it best on July 22 to rescind the call for a "Sacred Month" and to call for token strikes "of two or three days, in order to devote the whole of that time to solemn processions and meetings". The actual response was very varied. At Manchester a great meeting in the Carpenters' Hall addressed by the Owenite leader Lloyd Jones voted against the strike, but in Bolton there was a general turn-out and a demonstration on the Market Square which was dispersed by the police. In Northumberland and Durham several thousand miners struck but they were rounded up by the police and sentenced by the Justices of the Peace for breach of contract. On the whole the attempt at a general strike was a failure; it was followed by the abortive Newport rising and severe repression.

Out of the arguments which followed the events of 1839 there emerged a general agreement among Chartists that the old form of organisation handed down from previous movements was no longer adequate. Instead of a Convention, composed of delegates nominated by local Working Men's Associations and endorsed by mass meetings which might or might not be representative, a more centralised organisation was required, and this was provided by the National Charter Association set up at a delegate conference in Manchester in July 1840. This was the first labour party anywhere in the world, and in many respects set an example to future generations.

The organisation grew steadily, and an address of the Executive Council in February 1842 showed that 40,000 membership cards had been issued. Of these a large proportion were members of trade unions, though of course there were many trade unionists who were not Chartists and some Chartists who were not trade unionists. An account by one member says that "the tact which the Chartists have displayed in conducting their affairs was acquired in the same schools in which they learned their political and economic creed - the trade unions", but that "there is a rule in most Chartist Associations that those belonging to them shall join in no agitation but for the Charter." *

A new feature was that besides the ordinary "localities" or residential branches there were also "Chartist clubs" of workers in particular trades. Thus Spitalfields had its "silk weavers' locality" and Manchester the "Carpenters' Hall locality" composed of workers in the building trades. The most active organiser of this activity was Peter Murray M'Douall, a native of Newton Stewart in Wigtonshire who practised medicine at Ramsbottom near Bury. "The Doctor", says the Chartist historian Gammage, "was of an ardent fiery temperament, and though naturally possessing strong reflective powers, was impulsive to

* Leeds Times, January 1842.

the last degree, and by no means deficient in courage." More than any of the Chartist leaders he had an intimate knowledge of the life and problems of the industrial workers, and of the need to combine trade Unionism with the political struggle. This was the theme of his propaganda among the unions, both in his speeches and in the columns of "M'Douall's Chartist Circular and Trades' Advocate". His prestige is shown by the fact that he headed the poll for members of the Executive in 1841 and was again returned by an increased majority in the following year.

The harvest of 1841 had not been good and trade was now rapidly growing worse. There had been crises before, but no one could remember such a crisis as now developed. On March 25th, 1842, the number of paupers was officially returned as 1,427,187, and if the New Poor Law had been enforced literally the workhouses would not have been large enough to hold them. Colonel Thompson, a prominent member of the Anti-Corn-Law League, published an article on "the Siege of Bolton", prompted by a visit to the market place where minute quantities of meat were being offered for a penny. At Stockport so many workers had been evicted for inability to pay rent that one could see chalked on the walls "Stockport to Let", and similar scenes could be seen in other towns. What was significant was that the crisis had involved the skilled workers. Of 800 mule spinners employed in Stockport in 1835 only 140 were left in 1843, and outside the cotton industry matters were even worse. H. Ashworth, a prominent member of the League, estimated that 60% of the millworkers at Bolton were unemployed but the percentages for carpenters, bricklayers and stonemasons were 84, 87 and 66% respectively.* It is not surprising that the Chief Constable of Manchester reported, early in 1842, that many "tradesmen" were now in favour of the Charter, whereas few had been in 1839.

In July 1842 the Anti-Corn Law League held a Conference in London, at which speeches were made which might have landed a Chartist in prison. Not only did the mayors of large towns of the North rise in turn to state that if riots broke out they would not allow the military to fire on the crowd, but a speaker who called for the formation in London of a Committee of Public Safety to rouse the metropolis from its apathy informed the audience that a friend of his, a 'gentleman' had informed him that he was prepared, if the order was given, to assassinate Sir Robert Peel. Though the speaker could not approve of the suggestion of murder, he could not refrain from observing that on the day of Peel's funeral very few tears would be shed." It was generally believed that millowners were prepared to close their factories with a view to diverting the anger of the workers against the Government, and it seems that both the League and the Chartists were trying to find out one another's intentions.

* "Statistics of the present depression of trade in Bolton", in Journal of the Statistical Society, V (1842), 74.

** Morning Chronicle, July 5, 1842: Morning Herald, July 15, 1842. Anti-Bread-Tax Circular, August 11, 1842.

THE SACRED MONTH.

By this time the initiative had been taken by the workers themselves, in the form of strikes of the miners in Lanarkshire and South Staffordshire, which were the culmination of a long period of agitation and organisation. On August 13 the "Northern Star" published a letter from John M'Lay, secretary to the miners' union in the Glasgow district: "The average wages of the miners of coal and iron vary from 1/7^d to 2/5^d for putting out one-third or more labour than they did, one year ago, receive 4/-d a day for; and at the same time could, in many cases, get their money when earned, while now we go to our masters' store and take our labour in goods; or if the employer has not a store, he, according to his laws, makes us pay one penny for each shilling lifted before pay day". The Northern Star commented: "We are glad the miners, like other trades, have hoisted the banner of the Charter. In the principles of that invaluable document must centre all their hopes".

The decisive events, however, took place in the textile areas. At the end of July there had been some improvement in trade, but at this juncture three firms in Ashton and Staleybridge announced a further reduction in wages. In the words of Richard Pilling, leader of the Ashton weavers: "A room that would hold a thousand people was crammed to suffocation, and the whole voice of the meeting was that it was of no use trying to get up a subscription for others, but to give up. And that was just the way the strike began; it rose in a minute from one end of the room to the other: Whigs, Tories, Chartists, sham Radicals, and others".*

Deputations from the weavers persuaded two of the firms to take back the reductions but the third, Messrs Bailey and Co., told their workers "if this did not please them, they had better go and play a bit." This proved the last straw and on Friday, August 5th, the workers at Bailey's struck work and marched through the streets, cheering O'Connor, the Northern Star and the Charter. They were joined by the operatives from other factories and by the week-end the whole of Ashton was idle. Great meetings were held which were attended by shopkeepers and others as well as by weavers and a demonstration at Mottram Moor called for a general strike "until the Charter becomes the law of the land."

On Tuesday, August 9th, a great procession of several thousand weavers and miners marched to Manchester, where they met with a reception which was unprecedented, and perhaps not quite what they had expected. "The crowd was met on the way in Pollard Street by a group which included Mr. Maude, the stipendiary magistrate, and Colonel Wemyss, the commander of the military, supported by a troop of cavalry, a company of the 60th Rifles in reserve and the whole of the C division of police. This halted them for half an hour, and there was a parley between Mr. Maude and the leaders of the crowd, who told him that no violence was intended and that, if allowed to proceed, the crowd would follow a prescribed route. These assurances were

* State Trials, New Series, Vol 4, 1839-43.

accepted , the cavalry were withdrawn to allow the crowd to get away, and Mr. Maude started to lead the crowd on the way it should go. What followed might perhaps have been foreseen. The crowd broke up into small groups, and though soldiers and police denied to them certain obvious places of meeting, they managed to reassemble in an open spot near Granby Row. Here they were harangued by Chartists before they set about going round Manchester, turning out the workpeople. Their leaders had had told them not to pillage, and they did not do so, though they demanded bread from the shops. In one or two places there were tussles, and at one mill, that of Messrs. Birley, something like a regular siege took place. By Thursday it was calculated that nearly 130 cotton mills and perhaps as many dyeworks, machine shops, and foundries in Manchester were idle, affecting about 50,000 hands. The 'Trades' in Manchester supported the strike and the Chartists, and the authorities, told the mill owners that they could not be protected if they tried to restart their mills. Messrs Birley continued to work with about a third of their people, but they were blamed for doing so, and indeed were rebuked by a magistrate, Mr. John Brooke, for causing a disturbance. It was subsequently noted that Mr. Brooks was an eminent member of the Anti-Corn-Law League and Messrs. Birley were not members at all". *

On the whole, the shopkeepers and middle classes adopted a friendly or neutral attitude and opinion both at home and abroad was impressed by the fact that although one of the wealthiest commercial centres of England was in the hands of the workers for more than a week, there was no pillaging and hardly any disturbance.

Much of the success of the strike was due to the support of the skilled workers and above all of the engineers, a fact which has often been misrepresented by later writers. Prominent in the movement were Robert Robinson, Secretary to the Steam Engine Makers, and Alexander Hutchinson, Secretary to the Friendly United Smiths of Great Britain and Ireland. On the 11th a great crowd assembled outside Nasmyth's engineering works in Patricroft. In Gammage's words: "They gathered into a mass, and held a meeting, which was addressed by a person named Morrison. It was proposed that a deputation should visit the various works and request the hands to turn out; but an amendment was carried that the meeting should proceed in a body for that purpose. They accordingly proceeded to the works of Mr. Nasmyth, but found that the men had gone to breakfast; when they returned, a meeting took place between the two bodies. Those on strike requested the others to turn out. Morrison told them that although they might think they were well off, the distress would ultimately reach them, and that if they did not turn out quietly, they would bring such a force as would compel them. 'We are come' said one, 'We are come, like a clock, to give you warning before we strike; and you may consider that you have warning,' They were told by the foreman of the works that the men should cease working." On the same day the strike spread to Bolton, where the magistrates who were members of the Anti-Corn-Law League made no resistance, and to Stockport where there was a riot caused by an attempt by the strikers to demolish the workhouse,

* G.Kitson Clark, "Hunger and Politics in 1842", in The Journal of Modern History, Vol. XXV, No. 4. December 1953.

Everyone therefore was in favour of the strike but there was considerable difference of opinion as to its object. One section wished to see a strike for the Charter while another would have been satisfied with "a fair day's wage for a fair day's work, or more specifically "the wages of 1840". The matter was considered by the "five iron trades", in other words the United Trades Association, which had been set up at the instance of Alexander Hutchinson in 1840 to comprise the "Five Trades of Mechanism, viz., Mechanics, Smiths, Moulders, Engineers, and Millwrights" and which was the best organised group of workers in Manchester. They forthwith established contact with the other unions and on August 11th and 12th a conference of eighty delegates met in the Carpenters' Hall. The Conference decided to put forward the Charter as the aim of the strike but to seek endorsement from a wider area. They accordingly issued a manifesto which was printed in large red type and placarded on the walls of Manchester:

"Justice, Peace, Law and Order!

"We, the delegates of the various trades, having been duly and legally elected by our various trades, have again met in solemn conference, empowered by our constituents to watch over and to guard the interests of the people, do most earnestly implore you not to be led astray by the machinations of your enemies, but remain firm in your purpose to uphold your just rights, as set forth in the Carpenters' Hall on the 11th and 12th inst. We call upon you to be prompt in the election of your delegates to the great Delegate Conference which will be held on Monday, August 15.

"We most solemnly pledge ourselves to persevere in our exertions until we achieve the complete emancipation of the working classes from the thralldom of monopoly and class legislation by the legal establishment of the People's Charter. The trades of Great Britain carried the Reform Bill. The trades of Great Britain shall carry the Charter."

The conference assembled punctually on the morning of Monday the 15th and sat for two days, with Alexander Hutchinson as President and a certain Charles Stuart as Secretary. Thousands of workers lined the streets outside the hall and as the delegates from each town arrived they were greeted with resounding cheers. Credentials were carefully examined and the delegates proceeded to business. Many of them spoke at considerable length but it was evident that the partisans of a purely economic strike were very much in the minority. A telling speech was made by the delegate from Patricroft, who said that his constituents would not have been interested in an economic strike since they were amongst the highest paid workers in the country, but a contest for political liberty was an entirely different matter. On Tuesday morning the vote was taken, the most reliable account being that of the Northern Star of August 20th: "Of the eighty-five delegates, fifty-eight declared for the Charter; seven for making it a trades' contest; nineteen to abide the decision of the meeting; and one, the representative of the stonemasons of Manchester, stated that his constituents were individually for the Charter, but that he had no instruction from them as

a body, and could not therefore pledge them to any precise course of action." The resolution adopted was: "That this meeting recommend the people of all trades and callings to forthwith cease work, until the above document becomes the law of the land."

In the meantime the strike had spread far beyond Lancashire. For fifty miles around Manchester not a stroke of work was done except flour-milling and the gathering of the harvest, although in some places the strike committees allowed work in hand to be finished before closing the factories. There was very little violence but the strikers generally raked out the fires from under the boilers and removed the plugs to prevent them from re-starting, whence the movement was sometimes nicknamed the 'Plug Plot'. The scenes which took place were however unparalleled until the General Strike of 1926 and the "more looms" struggle of 1932. Columns of men and women marched from town to town, sometimes carrying heavy sticks and often singing hymns. The strikers from Burnley marched to Bacup and Todmorden and then crossed the Pennines into the West Riding where a general stoppage took place. On August 14th a great demonstration took place on Bradford Moor, and on the next day thousands of men and women, many of them badly clad and barefoot, marched to Halifax. Outside the town they were met by a party of troops. The Riot Act was read and the crowd was called upon to disperse. The soldiers called upon the women to "Go home", to which they replied: "We have no home! Shoot if you dare!" and struck up the "Union Hymn". Many arrests were made, but a further demonstration of 15,000 workers took place the following day, at which the women took a leading part and called upon the men to storm the prison." By this time the strike had spread from Aberdeen to South Wales and the mines were stopped throughout the country.

The Government was now thoroughly alarmed. They had of course plenty of experience in dealing with home-made plots and attempts at armed insurrection, but general strikes were without precedent, and they were greatly disquieted both by the spread of the strike and by the failure of the Manchester magistrates to cope with it. On Saturday, August 13th, the Prime Minister wrote to Queen Victoria: "Sir Robert Peel presents his humble duty to your Majesty, and is sorry to be under the necessity of troubling your Majesty so suddenly, but he is sure your Majesty will excuse him for making any proposal to your Majesty which the public service may render requisite.

"The accounts received this morning from Manchester with regard to the state of the country in the neighbourhood are very unsatisfactory, and they are confirmed by the personal testimony of magistrates who have arrived in London for the purpose of making representations to your Majesty's servants on the subject.

"A Cabinet has just been held, and it is proposed to send a battalion of Guards by the railway this evening. The 16th of August

(Tuesday next) is the anniversary of a conflict which took place in Manchester in the year 1819 between the Yeomanry Cavalry and the populace, and it is feared that there may be a great assemblage of persons riotously disposed on that day.

"Under these circumstances it appears desirable to your Majesty's confidential advisers that a proclamation should be immediately issued, warning all persons against attendance on tumultuous meetings and against all acts calculated to disturb the public peaces. It is necessary that a Council should be held for the issue of this proclamation, and important that it should arrive in Manchester on Monday." *

Parliament having been prorogued on August 12 the Cabinet could proceed without being troubled by fear of too much criticism.

The dreadful bogey conjured up by the Tory back-benchers of a coalition between the Chartists and the Anti-Corn-Law League obviously affected their minds, for they issued a warrant to the Home Office to open the letters of two M.Ps, Duncombe and Cobden, between August 18th and 20th. As regards Duncombe they probably did not find anything which they did not know before, but they must have been greatly heartened by reading a letter from Richard Cobden written on August 16th to his brother Frederick, who was then in business in Manchester and whom he suspected of being a weakling: "Depend upon it, nothing can be got by fraternizing with trades unions. They are founded upon principles of brutal tyranny and monopoly. I would rather live under a Bey of Algiers than a Trades Committee." **

Encouraged by the Government from the rear the Lancashire magistrates were now emboldened to act. The initiative was taken at Preston, where the employers had long been known for their consistent opposition to trade unionism. Ever since 1810 the cotton Spinners' unions had tried in vain to organise the town and as late as 1860 it was said: "applications for an increase in wages are sometimes granted elsewhere, in Preston never." It is not surprising that it was at Preston where the Mayor called upon the troops to fire on a procession of strikers, four of whom were killed. The Blackburn magistrates followed the example of Preston and immediately after the Manchester trade union conference had passed the Chartist resolution the police forced their way into the hall and gave the delegates ten minutes to disperse. On the 15th the troops had fired on the strikers at Hanley, where violent disturbances took place.

Despite the fact that the rank and file of the strikers on their own initiative had raised the slogan of the Charter neither the full-time Executive of the National Charter Association which sat in Manchester nor the editorship of the Northern Star in Leeds had shown marked initiative in the matter, and Campbell, the Secretary to the N.C.A, had gone to London for some purpose which is not clear. For some time past, the N.C.A. had been making arrange-

* Letters of Queen Victoria, Vol. I. pp 528-9

** Morley's Life of Cobden, 1903 edition, p.299.

ments for a national conference in Manchester on August 16th, the anniversary of Peterloo, to unveil a memorial to Henry Hunt and also to discuss questions of organisation, and everything had been going on quietly, according to plan. What happened is told by Thomas Cooper, the famous Midlands leader, who had left Hanley to avoid arrest and had walked to Crewe to catch the train to Manchester. He found a carriage occupied by Campbell and other delegates, and when the train drew into Manchester they were surprised by the absence of the customary cloud of smoke over the city, a phenomenon which was not seen again until 1926. "Not a single mill at work" said Campbell, "something must come of this and something mighty serious too." On arriving in the city they found it flooded with troops, and the problem of finding a meeting place was serious. The only help came from a minister of the Bible Christian church (an offshoot of the Swedenborgians), the Rev. James Scholefield, and the conference assembled on the night of the 17th in the Round Chapel at Ancoats, about forty delegates being present.

All thought of the original agenda was left aside and only one thought was uppermost in the minds of those assembled. After the reports from various places had been given, M'Douall, on behalf of the Executive, moved a resolution pledging the conference to support and extend the strike. This was Seconded by Cooper, full of excitement after his experiences in Hanley, in a fiery speech. He declared that a peaceful general strike was an impossibility and called on the conference to mobilise the people for revolt against the Government. The opposition to this came from Hill, editor of the Northern Star, who declared that the whole movement had been fomented by the Anti-Corn-Law League and that the Chartists should not fall into the trap. He only received six votes, but one of them was that of Harney, who had always been looked upon as a revolutionary of the extreme Left. The view of the majority of delegates was probably represented best by O'Connor, who supported M'Douall but did not endorse Cooper's arguments, on the ground that: "We are not here to talk about fighting. We are met to consider and approve the resolution of the trades." The conference passed the resolution and instructed the Executive to issue a manifesto which was drawn up by M'Douall and is worth quoting at some length:

"Brother Chartists - The great political truths which have been agitated during the late half century have at length aroused the degraded and insulted white slaves of England to a sense of their duty to themselves, their children, and their country. Tens of thousands have flung down their implements of labour. Your taskmasters tremble at your energy, and expecting masses eagerly watching this the great crisis of our cause

"Nature, God, and reason, have condemned the inequality, and in the thunders of a people's voice it must perish for ever. He knows that labour, the real property of society, the sole origin of accumulated property, the first cause of all national wealth, and the only supporter, defender, and contributor to the greatness of our country, is not possessed of the same legal protection which is given

to those lifeless effects, the houses, ships, and machinery which labour have alone created. He knows that if labour has no protection, wages cannot be upheld, nor in the slightest degree regulated until every workman of twenty-one years of age and of sane mind is on the same political level as the employer. He knows that the Charter would remove, by universal will expressed in universal suffrage, the heavy load of taxes which now crush the existence of the labourer, and cripple the efforts of commerce; that it would give cheap government as well as cheap food, high wages as well as low taxes, bring happiness to the hearthstone, plenty to the table, protection to the old, education to the young, permanent prosperity to the country, long-continued protective political power to labour, and peace, blessed peace to exhausted humanity and approving nations; therefore it is that we have solemnly sworn, and one and all declared, that the golden opportunity now within our grasp shall not pass away fruitless, that the chance of centuries afforded to us by a wise and all-seeing God, shall not be lost; but that we do now universally resolve never to resume labour until labour's grievances are destroyed, and protection assured to ourselves, our suffering wives, and helpless children, by the enactment of the People's Charter.

"Englishmen, the blood of your brethren reddens the streets of Preston and Blackburn, and the murderers thirst for more. Be firm - be courageous - be men. Peace, law, and order, have prevailed on our side; let them be revered, until your brethren in Scotland, Wales and Ireland, are informed of your resolution; and when a universal holiday prevails - which will be the case in eight days - then of what use will bayonets be against public opinion? What tyrant can then live above the terrible tide of thought and energy which is now flowing fast under the guidance of man's intellect - which is now destined by the Creator to elevate His people above the reach of want, the rancour of despotism, and the penalties of bondage. The trades - a noble, patriotic band - have taken the lead in declaring for the Charter. Follow their example. Lend no whip to rulers wherewith to scourge you. Intelligence has reached us of the wide spreading of the strike, and now within fifty miles of Manchester every engine is at rest, and all is still, save the miller's useful wheels, and the friendly sickle in the fields.

"Countrymen and brothers - Centuries may roll on, as they have fled past, before such universal action may again be displayed. We have made the cast for liberty, and we must stand like men the hazard of the die. Let none despond; let all be cool and watchful, and, like the bridesmaids in the parable, keep your lamps burning; and let your continued resolution be like a beacon, to guide those who are hastening far and wide to follow your memorable example. Brethren, we rely on your firmness. Cowardice, treachery, womanly fear, would cast our cause back for half a century. Let no man, woman, or child, break the solemn pledge; and if they do, may the curse of the poor and starving pursue them. They deserve slavery who madly court it. Our machinery is all arranged, and your cause

will in three days be impelled onward by all the intellect that we can summon to its aid. Therefore whilst you are peaceful, be firm; whilst you are orderly, make all be so likewise; and whilst you look to the law, remember that you had no voice in making it, and are therefore slaves to the will, the law, and the price of your masters. All officers of the Association are called on to aid and assist in the peaceful extension of the movement, and to forward all monies for the use of the delegates who may be expressed all over the country. Strengthen our hands at this crisis; support your leaders, rally round our sacred cause; and leave the decision to the God of justice and of battle."

Very little however was done to carry this resolution into effect. The Executive and the conference dispersed and O'Connor (who was not a member of the Executive) went to London where on the 18th he and Duncombe addressed a meeting in Lincoln's Inn Fields. The Chartists had in fact thrown the responsibility back on to the trade unions, which had no central body and had made no arrangements for organising the strike. Many workers had believed that the Anti-Corn-Law League was really on their side, and the fraternisation of the first two weeks had not prepared them for the repression which followed. The divisions among the Chartist leaders increased the confusion. Harney's attitude was bewildering to those who had idolised him, and many could only explain it by the supposition that he had been bribed by the Government, of which there is not the slightest proof. The real truth seems to be that his revolutionary ideas had been derived partly from reading of the French Revolution and partly from his contact with the unorganised silk-weavers and miners, but that he had no real grasp of industrial conditions. When speaking at Sheffield he was questioned on his attitude to the strike and said: "O'Connor is in favour of the strike and I am against it". Six unions in Sheffield voted for a strike and seven against, and as a consequence there was no strike. Nor does the subsequent career of Cooper suggest that he was a responsible revolutionary. The only Chartist leader who seems to have had a thorough grasp of the issues at stake was M'Douall, who by himself was unable to bring about a fundamental change.

By this time the inherent weakness of the strike was evident. The unions had entered the struggle without any funds, the Ashton weavers having only had 20/- in their treasury, and their credit was soon exhausted. Nor had the strike been effective all over the country. It was true that the fact that the small workshops in London, Birmingham and Sheffield had not been closed made very little difference, but a much more serious weakness was the failure to stop the railways, which were manned by a small group of hand-picked workers and where trade unionism was completely banned. This was of decisive importance, since the railway companies put their facilities at the disposal of the Government for the transport of troops. * This placed a tremendous weapon in the hands of the Government since the lines between the main cities had now been completed, which they had not been in 1839*

F.C. Mather"The Railways, the Electric Telegraph and Public Order during the Chartist Period, 1837-8 in History, February 1953.

In some places the strikers tried to tear up the railway lines and one electric telegraph was demolished, but the communications were too well guarded to be exposed to serious damage. The attempt to win over the troops which had been made by William Rider in 1839 was not repeated and they remained impervious to propaganda. It is true that many of the soldiers were Irish and had grievances of their own but O'Connell was able to boast that he had kept the Irish people aloof from the Chartist agitation.

The workers were thus forced to admit defeat and on August 20 the police allowed another trade union conference, which recommended a return to work, to take place. It has been claimed that this was all due to O'Connor: "Suddenly, a week later, when trades as far north as Aberdeen were considering joining the strike, he swung round. He denounced the strike in the Star, and declared he would stop it. It had failed in Manchester; it was bound to be defeated; it was an Anti-Corn-Law plot. The effect of this was to shatter a movement that was already weakening at the centre. The strike ended as soon as the Northern Star was put on sale." * This ignores the fact that the Northern Star merely endorsed the decision of the conference on August 20, and it also ignores a letter from M'Douall which was published in the same issue. M'Douall said that the occasion was not ripe for a revolution, because the middle classes were opposed to it and the workers themselves were divided. On the other hand the Chartists were bound to have supported the strike, since to have opposed it would have benefited the landlords while to have stood aside would have played into the hands of the League.

Nor is it true that the strikes came to an end automatically on August 27. It was not until September 26 that a correspondent from Manchester was able to report to the North of England Magazine that: "The turn-outs, with the exception of the Bolton spinners, have resumed their occupations without any advance of wages, in some instances, indeed, under a trifling reduction." This, however, was not wholly true, as a perusal of the Northern Star and Times will show. Thus in October it is reported that about half the employers in Ashton had taken back reductions in wages while the factories belonging to others were still stopped. In the Lothians many miners had secured the rate of wages paid before the reductions and were paying a levy to help those still on strike. Other miners in Scotland were still on strike in the spring of 1843, one of those who was victimised for his activities being Alexander Macdonald, who became one of the first labour M.Ps in 1874.

From the short-term point of view, however, the exhaustion of the workers led to a heavy defeat. On the whole the employers refrained from using their advantage to the extent that they did in 1926 and the spokesmen of the Anti-Corn-Law League claimed that there was very little victimisation. Repression by the Government was however, very severe, over 1500 Chartists being arrested, including O'Connon, the Rev. Scholefield, Richard Pilling, Thomas

* G.D.H. Cole and Raymond Postgate: *The Common People 1746-1938*, p.285

Cooper and many others. It is, however, significant that the first arrest of a prominent Chartist, that of O'Connor, only took place when the strikers had gone back.

With the consent of the other members of the Executive M'Douall, who was regarded as most seriously compromised, went into hiding and after many hair-breadth escapes succeeded in reaching France. On one occasion, says Cammage, "he was going into Manchester, and called at a house on the way, where he saw the Northern Star portrait of himself hanging against the wall; he was dressed in a short dirty working jacket, and a cap, and his graceful locks were turned up out of sight. He asked his hostess how she dared have the portrait of such a man in her house. Her reply was encouraging. Pulling off his cap, his hair fell down, and the woman recognised him at once. In order with greater security to continue the journey, he prevailed upon the woman, who was in her working dress, to accompany him; he could not, however, on this occasion escape the eye of one of the police whom they met on the road. The woman looking back after passing him the policeman beckoned her to him, and advised her to get her companion out of the way as soon as she could, for the next policeman they met might not be so friendly."

When the trial of the arrested Chartist leaders took place, O'Connor conducted his own defence. His object was to establish that the strike had not been prepared beforehand, that it had been of a peaceful nature and that it had been condoned by the Anti-Corn-Law League. On the whole the witnesses whom he called bore out his case whereas those for the Crown cut a poor figure, and some of the evidence elicited did not much tend to the credit of the League. When Richard Pilling gave his description of the sufferings of the operatives many persons burst into tears and the Attorney-General went out of the court in some embarrassment. The case against seven of the defendants was abandoned during the course of the trial and twenty-one were acquitted by the middle-class jury after a trial of eight days. The jury acquitted another sixteen defendants on charges of sedition and conspiracy but found them guilty on the fourth count: "That they tumultuously and unlawfully assembled together, and forced certain peaceable subjects to leave their occupations, with intent thereby to cause terror and alarm, and by means of such terror and alarm unlawfully to cause certain great changes to be made in the constitution of this realm."

Feargus O'Connor and fourteen others were found guilty on the fifth count: "that the defendants did endeavour to excite her Majesty's liege subjects to confederate, and to leave their several employments, and to produce a cessation of labour throughout a large portion of this realm." On this point however the learned judge expressed some doubt as to whether by law it was an offence and said that this was a point which must be decided by the Court of the Queen's Bench. In actual fact O'Connor and the other defendants were never called to appear in the Court of Queen's Bench and no judge was found to pronounce on the illegality of general strikes until Mr. Justice Astbury in 1926.

THE TRADE UNION REVIVAL.

The failure of the general strike caused a large section of the workers to lose faith in the Chartists and in political action generally. Thus on September 2nd 1842 a vote of censure was moved by the Manchester No. 1 branch of the Steam Engine Makers on Robert Robinson for his "impropriety of conduct during the Late Excitement" and four days later the rule was laid down that no member could claim donation benefit for being out of work due to "any Political or Popular Movement" though the Society did issue a circular asking for voluntary subscriptions to help those who were imprisoned or unemployed.*

But this type of reaction was by no means universal and the continuing Trade Union support for Chartism has been greatly underestimated, as has the degree of understanding of the trade unions shown by O'Connor. When trade revived and with it the trade union movement, the first initiative was taken by the miners. Although they had gained very little out of the general strike of 1842 it had been the first time in history when the miners throughout the country had taken part in a national struggle, an experience which was not repeated until 1893, and they had acquired a new confidence in their own strength. The date of the foundation of the Miners' Association of Great Britain and Ireland, the first national organisation of its kind, is November 7th 1842 (not 1841 as claimed by the Webbs)**. O'Connor displayed great interest in the union from its beginning and it was on his advice that the Association appointed the famous Chartist solicitor William Prowting Roberts as its legal adviser.

On November 23, 1844, O'Connor announced the removal of the Northern Star from Leeds to London and the change of its title to the Northern Star and the National Trades Journal. "In London" he wrote, "The Star will be the means of rallying the proper machinery for conducting the Registration Movement - the Land Movement - the National Trades' Movement - the Labour Movement - and the Charter Movement". From now on the paper was intimately linked with the trade unions and became the official organ of many of them. O'Connor wrote: "I invite you to keep your eye steadily fixed upon the great Trades' Movement now manifesting itself throughout the country, and I would implore you to act by all other trades as you have acted by the Colliers. Attend their meetings, swell their numbers, and give them your sympathy; but upon no account interpose the Charter as an obstacle to their proceedings. All labour and labourers must unite; and they will speedily discover that the Charter is the only standard under which they can successfully rally: but don't interpose it to the interruption of their proceedings." ***

* James B. Jefferys' The Story of the Engineers 1800-1945, p.22

** Statement by John Hall, the miners' secretary, 'Report by the Commissioner to inquire into the state of the population in the Mining Districts; 1847', p.14.

***'Northern Star, 16 November 1844.

At the same time he warned against the dangers of a narrow craft policy which would isolate certain sections of the working class. By this time a group of unions had come into being which were successfully pursuing a craft policy and were drawing away from politics and even from other trade unions. It must however be remembered that this tendency though growing was not yet dominant in the unions. The Webbs gave great attention to the unions which they have cited precisely because they built stable organisations, which survived and they did not give so much attention to the struggling societies whose proceedings are to be found in newspapers rather than in minute books. O'Connor was quite alive to the problem. "By union, and by union alone, can the 'poor oppressed' contend against the injustice of the 'rich oppressor'. And let not the printers, if well paid, suppose that any injustice against the tailors, if badly paid, will not sooner or later come home to their own doors! Let not the spinners, if better paid than the handloom weavers, lose sight of the fact that a 'surplus' of handloom weavers will constitute a reservoir for the masters to fall back upon, as a means of reducing the wages of the spinners. Let not the bricklayers imagine that a reduction in the wages of their labourers will not be followed by a reduction in their own wages. A blow successfully struck at one order of labour will as successfully wound all others." These sentiments were appreciated by the lower-paid workers and we read that when in 1843 O'Connor visited Aberdeen he was received by the United Bakers in their full lodge attire, consisting of 'rich pink muslin suits with splendid turbans.'

Two examples, from later years, may illustrate the continued trade union support for the Charter.

On April 10th, 1848, the day on which the Charter was once again presented to the Commons, John Bright also presented a petition from a delegate conference representing 6,000 Manchester workers which called for the Six Points of the Charter, a reduction in the hours of work, local boards for the regulation of wages and the abolition of primogeniture and entail.

Among the delegates to the last conference in 1858 which buried the National Charter Association were representatives of the London building trades, then preparing for the great Nine Hours' struggle, and of the West End Bootmakers. A historian tells us that: "The list of those who took part in the discussions did not include any prominent middle-class radicals but it contained many who worked in and with the Trade Union Manhood Suffrage and Vote by Ballot Association (formed in the summer of 1862) and the Reform League of 1865. Representatives from several London trade societies were present, including, in their private capacity, William Allan and William Newton of the Engineers".*

* John Saville's Ernest Jones: Chartist. p.68

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